

**Standardized Testing and the No Child Left Behind Act:
A Failing Attempt at Reform**

By: Sarah E. Holmes

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Professor P. Lynn Whichard

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Testing has changed in many ways since it first appeared with the beginning of public education led by Horace Mann. Standardized testing is the most commonly used and well known method of testing used in the United States as well as numerous other countries in the world. It is used to determine student achievement, growth, and progress. However, standardized testing was not always used for the exact same purposes it is today, nor was it as important and as heavily relied on by our school systems as it is in today's world. The purposes of standardized testing have gone from an equalizer of opportunity to a tool of segregation used to separate by not only intelligence, but socio-economic status, wealth, and privilege. In 2001, when the No Child Left Behind Act was created there was such a great emphasis placed on standardized testing that it is now crucial to the success of American students to critically examine the testing system and correct any flaws that may be present.

The NCLB Act has become a major part of public education reform by striving to meet one major goal: reaching 100% proficiency of all groups of students in America by the year 2014. This goal will not be easily attained and may not be possible to be achieved at all unless there are corrections and revisions made to the act and the way the programs are enacted in schools across America. Education is a major part of the success of our country and with an Act like this being such a dominant force in education it needs to be as close to perfect as possible. The No Child Left Behind Act created by President George W. Bush in 2001 has caused several major changes within public schools regarding funding, testing, and the reporting of test results. Despite the negative effects the Act has caused, with the use of individualized testing (less emphasis on standardized testing) and different regulations regarding funding, the Act could help schools achieve the goals they were intended to meet.

History

Origins of Standardized Testing

When Horace Mann developed a test to administer to a group of students in the 1800s, his intentions were to make judgments about how the student was doing at their current level and determine if they would be capable of advancing to a higher level. The student's success on the test had no negative repercussions but rather served a simple purpose of answering a question: should the student remain at their current level or proceed to the next level of academic difficulty and intensity (Edwards, par. 3). These tests were a necessity at that time because the idea of public education was still being adjusted and developed and these tests were the only means by which student progress could be measured.

In the early 1930s when James B. Conant, president of Harvard University, decided to develop a test for admissions, he was searching for a reliable and objective way to measure student achievement without taking into consideration who the test taker was or what background they came from. According to Kevin Finneran, editor of Issues in Science & Technology, Conant believed that through administering the same test to all applicants for admission, factors such as family wealth, which private or elite academy the student may have attended, and any benefits their attendance would bring to the university would be removed from the decision making process (41). While his colleagues believe this would provide a real rationale for excluding those they did not particularly want entering Harvard, they were soon proved wrong as those from humble beginnings began scoring very high on tests and ultimately earning acceptance into the university. By removing the outside factors that were a huge influence on admissions, especially at more elite and prestigious institutions, chances and opportunities were given to typically underprivileged, minority students. This test was eventually

adapted to become what is now the Scholastic Aptitude Test or better known SAT (Edwards, par. 10). As standardized testing became more popular and commonly used, the government took notice and began developing ways to improve testing within public schools.

Creation of No Child Left Behind

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was a part of the “Great Society” proposed by President Johnson in 1965. The goal of the Act was for the government to supply aid for underprivileged children in schools in order to improve the performance of these students and elevate them to the same level that the more privileged students were achieving at the time. This Act introduced Title I, which mandates programs for schools with high populations of students from poverty-stricken homes. Head Start (the most common pre-school program) and bilingual programs were large components of Title I as well (Mycoff 36). This was the first major educational reform proposed by a president.

In 1994, the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) reauthorized the ESEA and began making efforts to analyze student scores but had no real consequences for schools that were performing poorly. Redirecting the focus to actual test scores was a major step in improving education in America and was more than likely the motivational factor and idea behind the next and current step taken in education reform (Mycoff 36). In 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act. This Act combined the goals of the ESEA and the IASA but rather than just setting goals, NCLB laid out consequences for schools that couldn’t meet the goals and provided specific funding for programs to motivate schools to meet goals. In addition to providing a list of specific consequences, the Act also created a plan of action for schools as well as programs to help fix problems, or keep them from ever occurring. While

standardized testing has been utilized for many years and in many different institutions, it has never carried the weight that it does today. With the average of 500,000 mistakes made each year on college admissions tests, if the system remains solely dependent on tests, the number of mistakes will become more detrimental to a student's future success (Glovin 21). The margin of error increases the importance of a balanced measure of student achievement and growth.

Identifying the Problem

Four Pillars of No Child Left Behind

The four pillars of the No Child Left Behind Act are the basic elements of the Act and what it was intended to improve upon. They are: accountability for results, unprecedented state and local flexibility and reduced red tape, focusing resources on proven educational methods, and expanded choices for parents. They were designed to improve upon the most recent event in educational reform, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, which spent more than \$130 billion dollars to improve public education since 1965 and still had not completely closed the achievement gap between different groups of students ("Fact Sheet", sec. 6). These pillars became the law for educators across America in 2001 when the Act was passed. Since then, the effectiveness of each pillar has been heavily questioned.

Problems with Accountability

The accountability pillar imposed new requirements on both the tests being administered to students and the way in which results are reported and shared. Under the NCLB Act, schools

and districts are required to produce annual report cards showing the student improvement (or lack thereof) on standardized tests for every school year. These report cards are intended to be distributed to students, parents, and communities so that everyone, parents in particular, can be well informed of what is going on in their child's schools. In addition, this pillar briefly mentions that ultimate goal of the Act, that all groups of students improve their performance on test scores, thereby closing the achievement gap between students and ultimately reaching the goal of nationwide proficiency at grade level by the year 2014 ("Fact Sheet", sec.6).

Another pillar in the Act is about focusing on teaching methods. These pillars go hand in hand because the accountability pillar is about closing the achievement gap and the pillar about teaching methods provides the means by which the gap will be closed. In order to accomplish the goals of the Act, certain programs had to be set in place to promote growth and increased testing success. One of these programs is the "Reading First Initiative". This initiative is designed to ensure that every child can read by the time they are supposed to exit the third grade. To supplement the efforts of teachers, six year awards were dispersed to schools with children that were considered "at-risk" of not being able to meet the reading competency requirements. This initiative alone has accounted for more than \$900 million in federal funding. Although third grade is a very young age, there was also the Early Reading Initiative that focused on the reading capabilities of pre-school aged children ("Fact Sheet", sec. 8). The emphasis on putting reading first is a major factor in improving test scores because reading skills have a large impact on all other skills, especially when it comes to standardized testing.

Setbacks for Teachers

The NCLB Act has placed a large burden on teachers and school administrators by more than simply requiring additional testing. By the year 2005, all teachers were required to be

“highly qualified” as determined by the stipulations found in the Act. Those requirements state that all teachers must hold a bachelor’s degree, must obtain full state certification, and demonstrate a mastery of the core academic subject they will be teaching. More than \$2.8 billion dollars has been used to enhance teacher quality programs at schools across America (“Fact Sheet”, sec. 4). While this is very beneficial to students that need to be taught by intelligent professionals, it affected many older, veteran teachers who’d been teaching and teaching well for many years that failed to meet one of the requirements. Overall, this requirement may have been frustrating for educators, but is truly better for student success in the long run.

The real problem teachers are having with the Act is the emphasis placed on standardized test scores. Many believe that because there is such great pressure for students to receive a certain score or show the amount of growth required that curriculum has become too narrow and focusing only on getting through the test and less on real learning. For teachers, that creates stress to meet requirements on time and have to decipher through material and decide what will be on the test and what will not be on the test, ultimately choosing what’s “important” enough to teach and what is left out. This issue is putting a strain on teachers everywhere. Choosing to teach what a teacher knows is important but may not be found on a test, may affect student scores which will in turn reflect negatively on the teacher. This dilemma leads to problems with teacher retention which consequently leads to problems with schools finding and keeping highly qualified teachers, a downward cycle that puts many schools in chaos.

Increased Flexibility with Funding and Testing

With any great change in education, there has to be an enormous amount of funding involved from the state and national governments. The government had been providing funding

before the NCLB Act but never before did states have the flexibility to decide how to distribute and use these funds. Now, school districts have the power to transfer up to 50% of funds received from the federal government to Title I funds or to any positive programs such as teacher quality grants, educational technology improvement incentives, and safe and drug free schools programs. With the flexibility given to school districts rather than to state boards of education, there is no requirement stating that these transfers must be approved by the state. The control being given to districts makes them more independent and enables them to respond in a timely manner to the individual needs in that particular district without having to overcome any obstacles or time delays (“Fact Sheet”, sec. 7). Unfortunately, with so much emphasis placed on testing, much of the curriculum budget in schools has gone to test preparation materials rather than resources intended to enrich a student’s learning.

Another facet of flexibility given to states is the power to design and develop their own tests. David Hursh, Associate Professor in the Warner School of Education at the University of Rochester, warns that this means that there is no way tests can accurately be compared across states because despite the fact that all tests are considered “standardized” they can be designed in any way the state chooses. Not only do the tests differ, but because the material and tests are allowed to vary, the state also gets to decide the level of achievement and growth that they consider to be “proficient” or “adequate” (299). If students across states are held to different standards then the idea of tests being standardized is slightly blurred because the definition of standardized states that the test administered is the same. The discrepancy is created when all students in the country are expected to meet a standard that is based on a percentage of growth and not actual content learned because if one state sets a higher standard than another, depending

on how the students score on the tests, it could appear that both states are at the same proficiency level even though one state is being tested on less rigorous curriculum.

Meeting Standards

The requirements have been explained and the question remains, how is all of this determined? The answer is found within the Adequate Yearly Progress goals (AYP). In an article published on the Public Schools of North Carolina website, AYP is described as being determined by student scores on standardized tests beginning with reading and math for third through eighth graders. In high school, algebra I and English I tests are incorporated with the 10th grade writing assessment to make sure that students are remaining on track (“Opening”, par. 1). Failing to meet these goals carries serious consequences. Any school failing to meet AYP must immediately take corrective action to avoid sanctions. With the implementation of the annual report cards, parents should be aware of the fact that their child’s school is not meeting state requirements. Once the school has failed for two consecutive years, parents are made aware of their option to transfer their child into a different public or charter school in the district to which the district is responsible for providing transportation (under NCLB, this option is also given to parents of children in schools that are notoriously and repeatedly violent or dangerous). If by the next year the school has still not met the AYP goals, the district is forced to supply Title I funds for each individual poorly-scoring student. These funds provide around \$500 to \$1,000 for supplemental help for the individual student such as after school tutoring (“Fact Sheet”, sec. 6).

Unfortunately, the need to meet the requirements is so great for educators, occasionally irrational or inappropriate decisions are made. For example, in one Texas high school the graduation rate had been slowly declining over a period of several years. Once the NCLB Act

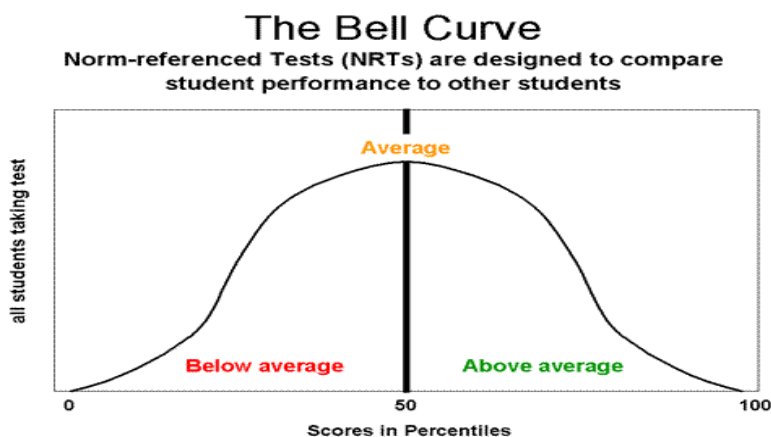
was passed, the school had to decrease their dropout rate in order to maintain local control over their school. After attempting to implement programs that showed little to no positive results, the superintendent had the principals alter student records. For students that had dropped out, the reason for leaving was changed to “transferred to another school or district”. After demonstrating a “successful” drop in the school’s dropout rate, the school was awarded with a National Award for Excellence (Hursh 302). The need for improved testing and overall school success outlook has placed so much importance on meeting standards that the real issues are not being addressed. In addition to the school’s issues not being addressed, many feel that the NCLB Act diverts attention away from bigger issues that need to be addressed such as housing issues, a multitude of healthcare problems, and the difficulty in finding well-paying jobs, etc (Hursh 306). Due to the correlation between socio-economic status and student test scores, if these problems were rectified, there is a good possibility that the achievement gap between previously under-privileged students and high-achieving students would be closed.

NCLB’s Narrow Way

The goals of the No Child Left Behind Act consist of many admirable ideas for improving America’s education system. Helping high poverty areas and low achieving students would certainly be a step in the right direction as far as straightening out our schools. However, despite the innovative ideas, the execution of the Act has all but crippled its ability to evoke change. The biggest issue in the classroom is the narrowing of curriculum and achievement of genuine academic goals due to such a focus being placed on doing well on tests (Hawley 176).

What is Standardized Testing?

Standardized testing is such a huge concept that there are many different forms. Two major classifications of testing are norm-referenced and criterion-referenced testing. The difference between the two is that norm-referenced tests are given to students to compare and rank them. On these tests, there may be information that was never intended to be learned, but is still included to see if students know anything above their grade level. These test takers are often called “sample groups” because they are used solely as a basis of comparison between the individual student and a representative group of their peers. When the results are placed on a graph, they produce a curve design, as shown below:



The graph shows how results, by using the Bell Curve, are not compared to standards but to other students to find out what percentile they find themselves in (Mitchell, par. 14).

While in the other category, criterion-referenced testing consists of tests that only test the material that is expected to be covered in class. Criterion-referenced tests also do not compare students to each other but are mainly used to gauge a student’s progress on similar tests over time. The only problem with that theory is that not all students are good test takers and those tests are the major, if not only, tool used to measure student growth (Mitchell, par.19).

Standardized testing can bring positive changes within a school or classroom setting. It helps teachers focus on clear objectives in their curriculum and guides them through the material

that should be covered. Test preparation can be a very stressful time period both for students and teachers and when teachers work together to achieve a common goal it is extremely beneficial to the student. Yet however beneficial standardized testing may be, like anything else it has its downsides. Many believe that the pressure to succeed and prepare for standardized testing actually negates natural learning and tends to force students to only learn of pay attention to key points that may appear later on a test. Also, the psychological development of young children is not ready to be subject to standardized testing (Edwards, par. 23). Despite this fact, standardized testing requirements under the NCLB Act state that testing begins in the third grade and continues in math and science until eighth grade.

Proposed Solution

Changing Everything

Value-added assessment is not a new concept. Originally it became popular in Britain and after research and improvement it was introduced into American school systems. In a value-added system, student achievement is recorded and charted. Using data from past scores, a “trajectory” of future scores is produced. This projection shows the scores a student has gotten and based on those scores comes up with a goal that the student should attain if they remain academically on track, focusing mainly on inputs and outputs. This system appears very scientific and even names the student as the “control” and the scores as the “variables”. Achievement in this system is attributed, in great part to educational settings and climates (Misco 12). Value-added assessment focuses entirely on individual student success and improvement. In this system, there is no purpose for a comparison between students therefore there is less pressure on students to fit into a certain percentile or pressure on teachers to have every student

at the same level. Value-added assessment puts less emphasis on tests and all emphasis on learning and increasing the quality of learning.

In addition to switching methods of assessment, it may be necessary for some teachers to make adjustments to their instructional methods. Teacher quality is a major component of the NCLB Act and it is imperative to student success that all educators be prepared to lead a classroom. For these reasons, it is necessary to require that teachers plan ahead by developing goals before the school year ever starts and working together to reach these goals (Benton 26). With the improvement of teacher quality and testing methods there should be a great change in the world of education and an obvious improvement in the quality of learning for all students.

Disadvantages

In the value-added assessment system, factors such as socio-economic status, parent education, and even how many books are in the home, etc. are not parts of the equation in projecting student growth. These factors are considered to be “controlled” because they are a part of the test scores that have been recorded and are from that point forward considered a part of the past. While that “equalizes” things in a sense, it also doesn’t take those factors into consideration which may be helpful in evaluating a student (Misco). Another downside to this method of testing is that it is only effective if the tests are true indicators of educational value, meaning that if the tests are not appropriately designed, they will not show true growth, just as standardized tests, if not designed for the material to be learned, will not show accurate progress. Also, value-added assessment is not intended to be the sole or major measurement tool of teacher quality. The reason for this is that no one can really show proof of the exact source of student achievement (Kennedy 62). For example, a third grade teacher could have taught something that

is very beneficial to a student the next year in his fourth grade class. If value-added assessment is the only measure of teacher quality, the fourth grade teacher would be credited for the third grade teacher's effective teaching.

Advantages

One major advantage of value-added assessment is that it is entirely student specific meaning that teachers know the strengths and weaknesses of each student and can respond to those needs rather than trying to change their entire curriculum just to boost test scores. Additionally, this data is helpful for parents to be capable of making well informed decisions about the well being of their child (Misco 12). With this system, parents are able to see more clearly how their child is responding to the educational setting rather than how the entire school may be responding. Also, after discovering that a student is succeeding or not succeeding, teachers will be more able to respond to the student's needs before being rushed into preparing for a test at the end of a course or year.

The most appropriate way to solve the problems found within the NCLB is to keep most of the provisions already laid out by President Bush but to incorporate a more personal style of evaluating a student's growth and achievement. The only way that true learning and growth can be measured is by integrating multiple methods until one almost perfect and extremely successful method of measuring student achievement is developed. It is important that the method takes more into consideration than a few test scores because not every student can perform at their best on a test. Test anxiety effects many students and prevents them from showing how much progress they have actually made or all that they have learned. By

incorporating all of the advantages of each system, disadvantages will be eliminated allowing a nearly flawless testing system to prevail.

Recommendation

Through the implementation of teacher quality improvement programs and the utilization of more accurate and personalized testing styles, American education will see positive changes. Testing will become a true measure of learning rather than a “one size fits all” way of testing retained knowledge. Teachers will be more capable of meeting individual student needs and will thereby improve each student’s quality of learning.

Conclusion: There must be Change

The No Child Left Behind Act is a wonderful step in the right direction towards improving the state of education in this country, however with a few revisions and less emphasis on the importance of standardized testing, it could become even better. Standardized testing is just too much of a simple solution that no longer meets the needs of the people. Though it may require more time and effort, personalized education that benefits the individual student will undoubtedly lead to the improvement of the quality of education in this country.

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