

## Don't let testing undermine choice

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Tests are an important and perhaps necessary part of schooling. When used properly, they help teachers assess student progress, show students where they need to improve, and provide parents with crucial information when deciding where to enroll their children. What frustrates parents and teachers is when achievement on standardized tests becomes the primary purpose of schooling, rather than an aid to learning.

testing and choiceMandating that private schools participating in school choice programs administer the state test can also stifle innovation and diversity and drive schools away, thereby limiting the choices available to families. Fortunately, the private sector can provide less rigid and more comprehensive forms of accountability that will empower families to make informed choices.

### The Benefits and Limitations of Testing

Tests can provide valuable information, but the misuse of testing can have significant unintended consequences, particularly when the tests are transformed from diagnostic tools into cudgels. As the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Robert Pondiscio wrote recently, the "data from tests are some of the most valuable intelligence we can access in the struggle to improve our education system."

However, he cautions, misusing that data can distort the system:

[T]he moment you set out to trigger corrective actions and interventions using tests (which are, after all, designed merely to measure student performance), you are fundamentally shifting their function from providing evidence of student performance to something closer to the very purpose of schooling. This is precisely what has been occurring in our schools over the last decade or more. When parents complain about over-testing, what they are responding to is not the tests themselves—which take up a vanishingly small amount of class time—but the effects of

test-and-prep culture, which has fundamentally altered the experience of schooling for our children.

What standardized tests measure is important, but it is far from the sum total of education. An overemphasis on that which can be easily measured can come at the expense of those things that cannot be easily measured, if at all. Parents expect their children's schools to teach them to be literate and numerate, but they also want them to develop good character, become good citizens, acquire an appreciation for the arts, and so on. These are all important components of a child's education. Parents are understandably frustrated when a "test-and-prep" culture crowds them out.

Moreover, several recent studies found improved test scores were only weakly correlated with important student outcomes, like attainment or future earnings, casting doubt on the effectiveness of standardized tests as proxies for overall school quality. As Prof. Jay P. Greene of the University of Arkansas explains:

Schools that produce the largest achievement test gains are not necessarily the ones that produce higher graduation, or college-attendance rates. And sometimes schools with unimpressive achievement gains make significant contributions to attainment and annual earnings when students join the workforce. I used to think that this couldn't be possible. All of these happy outcomes had to be aligned. They just aren't. [...]

The problem is that the high-regulation approach needs achievement tests to be correlated with all of these other good outcomes. If they are going to pick the school choice winners and losers based on test scores, then test scores need to be strongly predictive of other things we care about. People have been very slow to accept the fact that test scores are only weakly correlated with later life outcomes because it would be so convenient if readily available and relatively inexpensive test scores could capture something as complex as school quality. The fact that they don't throws a monkey wrench into the entire high-regulation machinery.

Used properly, testing provides vital information to students, parents, and educators. But we should be cognizant of the limitations of testing and make sure that the tests are serving student learning rather than the reverse.

### Educational Choice and The Role of Testing

Testing mandates can also undermine the effectiveness of educational choice programs by stifling diversity and innovation. When the state attaches consequences to performance on tests — particularly tests aligned with the state curriculum standards — those tests drive what is taught, when it is taught, and sometimes even how it is taught. That narrows the educational choices available to parents and students in two ways.

First, the mandate puts significant pressure on schools to teach subjects at the same time and in a similar manner. A school that taught subjects in years that they are not tested or taught them in a

manner that is not aligned with the test would be putting its students at an unnecessary disadvantage. That creates a powerful incentive to conform.

Second, such mandates drive down school participation in school choice programs. A recent American Enterprise Institute study found that states with lightly regulated school choice programs had much higher rates of school participation than highly regulated states. Nearly every private school in Arizona is willing to accept tax-credit scholarship students while only about one-third of Louisiana private schools are willing to accept voucher students due to the program's regulatory burden.

Not only does overregulation limit the educational options available to low-income students, it may even reduce the quality of the options available. Better quality private schools that have little trouble filling their seats are less likely to accept vouchers if they decide — as two-thirds of Louisiana's private schools did — that the regulations are too burdensome. By impeding the proper functioning of the market, regulations intended to raise quality may have the unintended consequence of lowering it.

Moreover, the move from school choice to educational choice further complicates the relationship between choice and testing. Although it has limitations, using tests in a few subjects as a proxy for quality in a school generally is sensible. But when a student with an education savings account receives English instruction online, math instruction from a tutor, history classes at a local community college, and science instruction through a homeschool course, the tests cannot serve as a useful proxy.

State testing mandates threaten to stifle diversity and innovation while failing to provide accurate assessment of potential education providers. We need a more flexible and comprehensive system to assess instructional quality.

### Choice and Accountability

It is essential to a functioning market that parents have the information they need to make good decisions about their children's education. Rather than a single, government-imposed system of evaluation, parents would be better served by the existence of multiple institutions and platforms providing competing standards.

As I explained in the Fordham Institute's recent "Wonk-a-thon," private certifiers, expert reviewers, and user reviews can assess instructional quality in ways that are more nuanced, and meaningful to parents.

Expert knowledge: The market can channel expert knowledge through private certification, as is offered by Underwriters Laboratories and Good Housekeeping, or through expert reviews, like those made famous by Consumer Reports and Zagat. Similar organizations could certify or review educational products and services.

User experience: Technology has made it easier than ever for end-users of products and services to provide reviews. Amazon, Angie's List, Yelp, and other websites allow consumers to rate the products or goods they used and share their experiences with other potential consumers. A similar platform for education providers could provide a much richer picture of the value a school, tutor, or educational product provides than testing alone.

Policymakers in Nevada are already contemplating how to create a Yelp-like platform for education savings account holders to rate the educational products and services they have purchased.

Moreover, with their pre-existing relationships with both scholarship families and private schools, scholarship funding organizations\* are well positioned to help provide parents with information they need.

There is no single best way to educate a child or to measure educational progress. Rather than top-down testing mandates that risk undermining educational choice, policymakers should make room for market-based solutions that promise to provide a more flexible and comprehensive approach.

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