

From [*Education Follies: four decades of tilting at windmills for no apparent reason*](#)
by Jeff Lee Byrem, (c) 2016



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Standardized Tests: Opt Out or Not?

During the four-plus decades that I have been involved with Education, I cannot think of a time when parents have had such a significant opportunity to influence educational policy. If you are a parent in a state that provides the opportunity to have your child opt out of state testing, doing so along with other parents—or not doing so—can have a dramatic impact on whether or not children will continue to be subjected, ultimately, to the pressures created by high stakes testing.

Before a parent makes a decision regarding this matter, it is important to consider two key things.

One, there are consequences for a school if the number of children being opted out causes the testing participation rate to fall below 95%, and two, any parent

considering opting their child from testing should understand why standardized tests should not be used as they are currently being used to rank and sort students, teachers, schools, and districts.

If you are a parent or just an interested citizen, I encourage you to read the key facts that follow, which were taken from Alfie Kohn's piece, [*Standardized Testing and Its Victims*](#). If what you read inspires your activist self, you should read Kohn's book, *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools*, before you start making signs!

Here are the key facts from Kohn's article that every parent should know:

Fact 1. "Our children are tested to an extent that is unprecedented in our history and unparalleled anywhere else in the world...Few countries use standardized tests for children below high school age—or multiple-choice tests for students of any age."

Fact 2. "Non-instructional factors explain most of the variance among test scores when schools or districts are compared...four such variables (are the) number of parents living at home, parents' educational background, type of community, and poverty rate..."

Fact 3. "Norm-referenced tests were never intended to measure the quality of learning or teaching...The main objective of these tests is to rank, not to rate...not to gauge the quality of a given student or school."

Fact 4. "Standardized-test scores often measure superficial thinking...as a rule, it appears that standardized-test results are positively correlated with a shallow approach to learning."

Fact 5. “Virtually all specialists condemn the practice of giving standardized tests to children younger than 8 or 9 years old.”

Fact 6. “Virtually all relevant experts and organizations condemn the practice of basing important decisions, such as graduation or promotion, on the results of a single test.”

Fact 7. “The time, energy, and money that are being devoted to preparing students for standardized tests have to come from somewhere...Anyone who doubts the scope and significance of what is being sacrificed in the desperate quest to raise scores has not been inside a school lately.”

Fact 8. “Many educators are leaving the field because of what is being done to schools in the name of ‘accountability’ and ‘tougher standards’...Prospective teachers are rethinking whether they want to begin a career in which high test scores matter most.”

One final contribution from Kohn’s article is a quote from then Senator Paul Wellstone (Democrat, Minnesota); I offer it here because I think it still rings true:

Making students accountable for test scores works well on a bumper sticker, and it allows many politicians to look good by saying that they will not tolerate failure. But it represents a hollow promise. Far from improving education, high-stakes testing marks a major retreat from fairness, from accuracy, from quality, and from equity.

There is an additional, conceptual problem I have with the use of standardized testing.

For six years, I was an assessment specialist in a Delaware school district, and in that role I oversaw the development of proprietary, end-of-course exams for high schools in the district. The underlying principles behind these exams were the principles that underlie standards-based educational practices.

For over a quarter century, standards-based education has been endorsed by state statutes as the approach educators must pursue when teaching our children; yet, the actions of politicians and educational leaders betray their failure to understand...

*THE SORTING OR RANKING OF STUDENTS IS CONTRARY TO
THE PRINCIPLES OF STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION!*

For those who may not know, standards are written descriptions of what all students should know and/or be able to do. Teachers are expected—by statute—to design instruction that leads all students to mastery of designated standards. The "Common Core" has been a ping pong ball paddled between Progressives and Conservatives, but the discussion is NOT about whether or not teachers should be basing instruction upon specifically identified things that students should know and be able to do; rather, the Common Core debate has been about what entity should decide what the standards will be.

The problem facing educators and policy makers is that the assessments needed to determine mastery do not lend themselves to sophisticated statistical analysis. Let's look at the following Pennsylvania standard for 8th graders as an example:

Sidebar: in Pennsylvania, what follows is called "Eligible Content," which means it is something that, ostensibly, could be assessed by a high stakes test.

Distinguish between a scientific theory and an opinion, explaining how a theory is supported with evidence, or how new data/information may change existing theories and practices.

As someone who has written test items for a testing company, I can tell you that it is impossible for a student to "explain" anything by answering a multiple choice question. Choosing one of four or five options is not an explanation. Explaining is an

action that a student must take to make clear to an assessor an idea, a solution, or a problem. The above standard explicitly requires an explanation, not a choice.

The only way to accurately assess the above PA Eligible Content would be to expect students to distinguish in writing between a scientific theory and an opinion, as well as to write an explanation of how a theory is supported and how theories are impacted by new information. This standard describes a very important expectation that all citizens should be able to fulfill.

Written (or oral) assessments are employed in effective standards-based classrooms by teachers who understand the importance of aligning instruction and assessment with a designated standard, but the cost associated with the process of analyzing thousands of written student responses for dozens and dozens of standards is prohibitive for state departments of education.

It is sad to say, but cost *is* one reason our children are being subjected to the burden of high stakes testing in their current form. Another reason is the unforgivable ignorance of too many policy makers who do not understand the incongruity of using tests in a standards-based educational environment that are designed to sort and rank students. A third reason is the understandable unfamiliarity of parents with the inappropriateness of making high stakes decisions using tests designed to rank and sort students, and in a social context, silence can and is often interpreted as consent.

Whether or not standardized tests continue to be used in the current manner depends upon the will of the people. I doubt that clamor in the form of protests or a barrage of emails would influence politicians to pull the plug on standardized testing, but a critical mass of parents simply opting their children out of testing could send a loud message that departments of education could not ignore.

If you are a parent, you may wish to give this matter some thought.