Tested: How High-Stakes Testing is Impacting Ohio Education

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The nation is currently at a pivotal point in education. Parents are demanding more accountability for teachers and the public as a whole wants to see that children are performing at levels similar to, if not greater than, the rest of the world. In order to determine where kids are at academically, they must be tested so that they can be evaluated alongside their teachers. However, standardized assessments have become far too important in schools. Teachers are forced to teach to the test and spend weeks preparing for standardized tests (Nelson). If their students do not perform well enough, it reflects badly upon them and in some cases even affects their pay. Not only do students and teachers lose valuable time that could have been spent as instructional time, but local school districts take a blow in the form of thousands of dollars each year due to standardized testing (Nelson). There is no need to waste the limited time and resources of school districts on a deluge of high stakes tests.

Standardized testing does have a place in the world of education. National assessments allow us to truly understand the progress that our children are making, providing the public a way to keep the system accountable. If left completely unchecked, our society would run the risk of producing people who are not living up to their intelligence and potential. However, the current hold that testing has on the education system is far too tight and restricting. Standardized tests have surpassed their purpose as a whole and must be reduced to some degree in order for the education system to still maintain value.

The majority of the recent testing initiatives that have been integrated into the American education system, such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, have been policies of the federal government onto the states. These sorts of top-down policies are quite a new trend within American education. Traditionally, American education has been a relatively decentralized institution, with the federal government actually having little influence in terms of policies on education compared to other nations (Ingersoll). These testing policies go against this grain, actively using the leverage that the upper levels of education administration have to get the results they want from the lower levels, namely using extra funds to promote higher test scores. As it remains, the current system leaves the greatest amount of power in the states’ hands, with school districts within each state following suite to the state’s policies with very little to no dissent. In the state of Ohio, House Bill 74 would seem to support this. Race to the Top is a purely optional program put in place by the federal government which the state of Ohio has decided to participate in, implementing the Common Core Standards and PARCC testing within its school districts. HB 74 is an initiative by the state itself to limit the requirements put into place in part by Race to the Top, showing that each state does have the ability to affect change in education within its own borders.

An issue arises when you consider that the vast majority of people holding a high position within education (the federal government, state government, and even local school boards) have no experience or training in the education sector. This leaves great potential for educational policy-makers to ignore the expertise of those who spend every day in the profession of teaching, yet still find themselves very uninfluential on educational policy. Teachers have, in general, shown disdain for the amount of time spend on standardized testing, as evidenced by the American Federation of Teachers’ study showing the detriments of devoting such large amounts of time to this (Nelson). As we will argue later in the paper, by advocating for HB 74, we are in part representing a very large portion of educational structure who seem to have very little power or representation within it.

Testing policies in the past within American education have garnered fairly bipartisan support. Education is an issue within politics that everyone can get behind, and a politician who could make a profound positive effect on it would leave a renowned legacy. An example of this was in 2002, when No Child Left Behind was signed into law in the wake of the World Trade Center tragedy, uniting the public under a fight for intelligence. Not only did this testing policy provide politicians with a righteous crusade to take up, but policies such as this and Race to the Top have inherent alignments with the beliefs of both Republicans and Democrats. For Republicans, high-volume and high-stakes tests appear to make education into more of a free market system. These tests provide tangible metrics with which to record growth and performance of students. Those who perform well on the tests are able to be recognized and rewarded, while teachers can also be held accountable for the scores of their students. Democrats would most likely associate a set of national standards and tests, on the surface, with educational equity (Spring). Teaching every child the same curriculum to take the same tests should, in theory, make everyone’s educational experience much more level across the board.

More experience with and understanding of the outcomes of nationally standardized testing, however, has also elicited much bipartisan criticism very recently. From the Republican perspective, this testing heightens the influence of the federal government on people’s everyday lives (Spring). H.B. 74 may appeal to this perspective as a way to limit this federal government involvement by doing away with a portion of the time spent preparing for these national tests. As for the Democratic perspective, putting so much importance on and spending so much time on the standardized tests has actually shown to heighten inequalities in education among certain demographics. H.B. 74 counteracts this by, in a way, undermining the importance of these tests.

Additionally, the general public opinion on PARCC testing is currently one of negativity. As far as we are aware, speakers in front of the state congress have largely been in favor of legislation supporting the removal of PARCC testing, with most notable exceptions coming from the people who created PARCC. The most prevalent goal of the politicians listening to these testimonies stays the same; re-election. If not only a congressman’s constituents, but also the congressman’s own party generally show such negativity to the current form of high-stakes testing, then it would seem extremely logical for this congressman to attempt to make changes to this system. The effect of this could especially be felt by Democrats, as teachers’ unions have historically made up a large portion of their supporters. These unions have made it known how negatively they feel about current high-stakes testing models, so cutting them back could yield loyalty towards those responsible for this.

In the mind of a politician, the concepts behind reductions of standardized assessments may be tough ideals to sympathize with. Politicians’ careers are driven by numbers (votes, percentages, money, etc.), so they may be reluctant to cut back on testing that could potentially help them win elections varying on student success and growth and may never completely do away with high-stakes testing models. H.B. 74 actually accommodates this mindset very well. The bill does not do away with all of the current tests, but simply lessens the time spent preparing for them and cuts back on the high volume of these assessments. The fiscal benefits alone of the bill would be appealing to any politician looking for numbers that will reflect positively on them. It appeals to the constituents who are unhappy with the current high-stakes testing methods by allowing for more traditional instruction time, while also keeping some testing to provide politicians with metrics they can cite as their own success.

Given the gravity of the situation both politically and educationally, there is much at stake within education regarding standardized testing and the possible avenues that could be taken. A variety of constituents, including teachers, politicians, testing companies, parents and children, all have a stake in regards to standardized assessments. Each of those groups have different interests and are affected in extremely different ways by the current standardized testing system as well as any potential changes in the state of Ohio.

Politicians gain some benefit from standardized testing. The nature of elections means that if officials do not demonstrate some sort of tangible success throughout their time in office, they are less likely to be reelected. Because elections are always in the back of politicians’ minds, they may feel pressured to implement tests that produce quick, easy to present results in order to boost their votes. That pressure may also cause politicians to act hastily on any new ideas, no matter the quality, so that he or she may be deemed a “reformer” (Obama and Duncan Are Wrong About Charters 2). Politicians also receive a lot of political pressure from large corporations to create policy.  Often, financial support for a politician’s campaign is given in the hopes that it will influence policy-making.

However, with all of the benefits that come to politicians with more testing, politicians can also benefit by reducing the amount of time because they can boast that they are fighting for more learning time as opposed to test preparation. The reduced testing would also not interfere with the ability to hold the students and teachers accountable because with more efficient and effective ways of testing it would still be possible to check on the progress educators are making. It should also be noted that, compared to the general population, a much higher proportion of legislators come from law or medical backgrounds or some other form of graduate school. Admittance to any of these programs require success on a high-stakes assessment. If the average politician has experienced success in a high-stakes model, it seems quite possible that they would feel more open to a similar system being projected onto the public education system.

Testing companies, such as Pearson (the company that created the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC) would not stand to benefit at all from a reduction in standardized testing. Inherently, they would oppose any legislation that would decrease testing because they benefit from their tests being used and from increased amount of testing. While these organizations may have been created with student success in mind, these companies and businesses function on a financial basis for survival. No matter how much they claim to have childrens’ learning as a priority, it will always fall second to receiving a profit. Because of this, testing companies such as PARCC would take big hits financially if testing time was decreased and testing time was minimized, as their products would be used with less frequency.

Parents would not benefit *directly* from having less tests or testing time. They are not the ones who are being tested. However, they do have to watch helplessly as their children are put under increasing amounts of pressure to perform well on these high stakes tests. The children themselves go through rigorous preparation regimes so that the school can reflect student growth and adequate teaching. That places extreme stress on them to perform as well as emphasizing test scores as the true sign of intelligence. Some of the tests students take now determine if they can move on to the next grade or even graduate. Although it is important to check that the children are learning at the correct pace, outcomes with that much magnitude can result in unhealthy amounts of anxiety on students. With a decrease in the amount of tests and testing time that students go through, there would be less preparation time and less stress on the kids. This would allow the children to focus more on understanding in the classroom and less on the regurgitation of facts and formulas for tests. In conclusion, the students would be under much less stress and the parents would find comfort in knowing that their children are not under such extreme pressures to memorize what is going to be on the test.

Teachers themselves experience little benefit from increased testing. They lose valuable instructional time that could be spent actually teaching students in order to prepare them for the high stakes tests that are constantly being thrown at them. This situation creates multiple problems in the education system. Because the public is so eager to ‘hold teachers accountable’, when students score lower than projected teachers take the brunt of the blame, even if they are experiencing less instructional time with which to actually teach the students. Merit pay is already a controversial issue and with the increase in emphasis on teachers preparing students for the tests it becomes even more unfair to teachers. The system becomes increasingly unfair to students because they do not get their teachers’ full efforts in the classroom due to the teachers’ divided attention between actually teaching and preparing for the test. In one district teachers lost a month and a half in the heavily tested grades due to testing (Nelson). In the long run, a total reduction of standardized testing and regulated teacher evaluation loosely based upon test scores would greatly benefit the teachers.

               In our research and experience, we have also found that most teachers are opposed to the current trends in the testing culture of our education system, not just for themselves but for the students they teach. Many of these teachers see the increase of high stakes testing as a hindrance to the education of their students, rather than a benefit. According to a 2013 report from the American Federation of Teachers, students can spend between 60-110 hours a year in high-stakes test preparation alone (Nelson).  This incredible amount of preparation stems from two key causes. The first is the sheer amount of testing occurring. A report from the Center of American Progress from 2014 found that students in the 3rd grade through the 8th grade took an average of 10 standardized tests a year, with some students reaching a high of 20 (Lazarín). While some form of national benchmarking may indeed be an important tool for the country to use, the number of different examinations that these young students must take to show what they have learned detracts from the actual time allotted for them to learn.

           The second factor that creates such a high amount of testing prep is the weight and importance associated with many of these standardized tests. It is not by accident that these tests are referred to as “high-stakes”. The pressure that students and teachers alike face with these tests is enormous. The testimony provided to the State House on House Bill 74 by Jaime Boysel illustrates this well. As a school counselor at Possum Middle School in Springfield, OH, she was able to share some of the experiences her students have had in regards to the pressures of the PARCC testing. One of the most striking points she shared was the stories of “kids throwing up and sick in the office refusing to go home because they are terrified that they will not finish the 'test' in time and get a failing grade” (Boysel). Kids know that tests throughout their academic careers determine how those careers will fare, and the pressure associated with that can have tangible and physical consequences on them.

           If the time spent preparing for and taking these standardized tests were beneficial to the student, it may not be viewed as such an issue. However, most teachers seem to feel that this is not the case. Lori McDonough, a 6th grade math teacher at Harrison Middle School in Harrison, OH, shared with us some of her issues with the current testing culture. A 25 year veteran teacher that has been named her school district’s Educator of the Year, Lori shared that she and her fellow teachers no longer have the time or freedom to allow students to discover answers themselves or learn to think creatively. The deluge of oncoming tests require a frantic pace during their instructional time, and often leaves no room to ensure students are processing or enjoying the material. She shared a story with us where an 8th grade math teacher in her building, after seeing nearly all his students fail their previous math tests, borrowed Lori’s 6th grade math textbooks. He shared with Lori that after just a week of using the 6th grade materials, his students were engaging with the class again and for the first time all year were both learning and excited to be in class. Unfortunately, Lori felt that most teachers were afraid of taking this step, hoping rather to just plow through as much material as possible in the hopes that students could simply memorize correct answers for tests, rather than taking the time to truly understand material (McDonough).

           This brings up yet another issue of the testing culture from the teacher and administrator’s perspective: teacher evaluations. These high-stakes tests put incredibly pressure on the teachers to cause their kids to succeed. While this accountability sounds good on the surface, so many variable factors influence a class and their performance on tests that are outside of a teacher’s control. Furthermore, this pressure to have students perform on tests means that only testable outcomes are incentivized to be taught by teachers, which leads to teachers ignoring the actual academic progress of students while focusing on their ability to simply regurgitate answers on a test. While the PARCC claims to be designed to require deep thinking and processing of a material, we feel that timed, pressured test scenarios will always encourage testing strategy and last-ditch memorization that do not equate to true understanding of material.

           Our minimum request of the Ohio legislators is to pass House Bill 74 and make it law for our state. HB 74 is a bill that would take steps to curb some of the issues that currently revolve around the issues of standardized testing. Among its key provisions are a three hour per assessment limit on elementary assessments and a three hour per year for end of course high school examinations. Additionally, the bill requires the Ohio Department of Education to develop a table of assessments that can be used for multiple purposes; for example, a reading test that can be used to identify gifted readers as well as meet the third grade reading guarantees. By limiting the length that a test can be, and condensing what currently takes multiple assessments into a single assessment, HB 74 will guarantee that the overgrowth of high-stakes testing is curbed, and help to turn the tide back towards educating our students instead of solely testing them. The bill would also directly eliminate the Geometry and English Language Arts II end of course examinations for high school students, in addition to the mathematics diagnostic assessments in first and third grades and the writing requirements in the first, second and third grades. These reductions will still keep strong diagnostic assessments in place while eliminating some of the excess testing that students currently experience.

           There are other aspects of the bill that do not directly affect test time or volume. The bill would require the Ohio Department of Education to review the amount of time that goes into the current teacher evaluation system, with the stated goal of reducing this time. An effort to reduce the paperwork burden on administrators would be beneficial to the school system at large. Elsewhere in the bill, there are items that address bringing more local control to the types of examinations being used, and prohibiting multi-state consortia from designing new standardized tests to fit the new three hour time frame; we do not have a stance on these issues. Finally, there are items in the bill that address the student academic growth component of a teacher’s evaluation system, such as the Value-Added progress dimension. As we mentioned earlier in the paper, we do not feel that student assessment scores correlate well to teacher success and provide motivation for schools to poorly educate our students by emphasizing test results over true learning. These items in House Bill 74 do not appear to bring any closure to this issue; however, the bill as a whole contains enough important items that, at a minimum, we will ask the legislators to support its passage.

           In addition to benefiting the education of students, we feel that the bill also brings fiscal responsibility to the state government. The elimination of the two high school end-of-course exams will save the state roughly $3.5 million per fiscal year alone. This sum will be offset initially by other costs incurred by the bill. Limiting the current PARCC assessments to three hour per assessment will require the Ohio Department of Education to make some changes to the current assessments. If the ODE cannot adjust the current assessments effectively, they may need to develop new assessments. The estimated cost of this would come to between $7 and $10.5 million. The bill also delays the requirement for schools to be able to administer assessments online, requiring the Ohio Department of Education to pay for more paper tests. This would incur the department a cost of around $1.1 million. However, given the reduction of the high school exams, the passage of this bill would start saving the money in the FY 2017-2018 biennial.

This will help to stop the growing trend of money being spent on testing. The previously mentioned study conducted by the American Federation of teachers found that in grades 6-11, an average of $600-$1100 was being spent per pupil on standardized tests (Nelson). While we recognize that these results were limited to just the two sample districts used in the study, if these results are at all representative of the population at large, it represents an exorbitant sum for a district. This is money not being spent to educate students but rather to quantify that education, and in many cases we feel that the money being spent on these tests are actively hurting the quality of the education received. While it only represents a start in the right direction, HB 74’s new provisions would likely save local districts money as well as the state government, and so represents a tangible way for legislators to be financially responsible towards their constituents.

While we advocate passing H.B. 74 at a minimum, we will also suggest a few amendments to the bill to make it further benefit the students in our education system. While we fully support the three hour testing limit as a long-term solution, we will recommend delaying the start of this limit until the 2016-2017 school year. Because of the nature of these limitations, the current PARCC assessments being used to assess Common Core standards will need to be altered. If the tested cannot be changed in a way that keeps them as valid and reliable assessments, new tests may need to be developed. In either scenario, we feel that it benefits the state to use an additional year to research and develop the new or altered tests that will fit within the new testing limits. This will limit the burden on local school districts, who just this year experienced change to the new PARCC tests. It will also allow a year of data to be collected from the current PARCC tests; while we support their eventual reduction, the information this year can still be valuable if the current PARCC tests are to be altered.

A second amendment to H.B. 74, or perhaps an entirely new piece of legislation that we would recommend, is an alteration to the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System, or OTES. Currently, the system has 50 percent of teacher evaluations based on local administrator and peer observations, with the other 50 percent coming from student growth measures such as the value-added measure. As previously mentioned, we do not feel that evaluating teachers based on student test performance is beneficial to the students. We would propose an evaluation system that more heavily favors local observations from administrators and peers or former teachers. H.B.74 already proposes research into lessening the burden on administrators in the teacher evaluation process; we recommend pursuing this avenue heavily and using freed time to allow administrators to spend more time in classrooms evaluating their teachers. This measure would bring more local control to the evaluation process, allowing for context and nuances to play more heavily into the evaluation system and encouraging teachers to seek not just students that can answer test questions but students that can maintain the information they learn.

While these amendments would improve the bill, we ultimately feel that the culture of standardized testing needs to be overhauled. In the future, the best outcome we can see for the education system would be one that does not rely solely on standardized testing. Instead, we would propose a system where students are evaluated not just by one measure, but by several different types of evaluations. One of the best ways we feel that a student can be evaluated is with a student portfolio: an assemblage of various different student projects and activities. A portfolio allows for a variety of different measures to be included in a students evaluation. While this can and should include standardized test scores for national benchmarking, it can also include social service engagement, creative work, demonstration of vocational skills, and other aspects that relate to a holistic education.

The benefits of a system like this become clear when considering the five goals of education: civic, emotional, cognitive, vocational and social development. When only using standardized tests for evaluations, we find it hard to believe that a student’s civic or social development can truly be assessed, but a portfolio or similar system allows for a broader assessment. The individualized portion of these evaluations will also help to bring a student’s interests and passions into the equation of their evaluations. Our current system of standardized testing does not highlight a student that is truly passionate in a vocational program or in music, but does not perform as highly in traditional testing situations. By allowing a student to have a say in what they are evaluated on, the student becomes empowered to take a vested interest in their own education, which can only benefit their actual education in the process.

Ultimately, each student has individual needs and desires. While we respect the necessity of benchmarking and comparing the education of students across our nation, the scales have tipped too far into a one-size-fits-all approach for evaluating our students. If we can move our nation back to a system that treats students as unique in their evaluation, we can come closer to delivering to our students the education they need and deserve.

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