




The 24/7 GIFT
SHOP NOW & SEE DETAILS »
While supplies last. Quantities limited. Offer may vary.

ESTÉE LAUDER
Available at Macy's and macys.com

[Print](#)

What Do Tests Test? A Commentary by Howard Gardner

SHARE ARTICLE

Howard Gardner, the John

H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs professor in cognition and education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the "father" of multiple intelligences theory, weighs in on the issue of high-stakes testing in this



commentary. "We must proceed cautiously before we place students' minds and hearts at risk with tests of dubious quality whose meaning can be over-interpreted and whose consequences can be devastating," writes Gardner.



A few years ago I sat in on a discussion in Chicago where local political and educational leaders crowed over rising scores on a standardized test for public school children. I broke in to ask some questions: Was it not true that whenever a new version of a test was adopted, scores quickly dropped? And wasn't it the case that scores recovered over the next few years as students and teachers became accustomed to the test?

The group conceded that this was indeed the pattern. The city's test had been administered a dozen times by then. It was obvious that students were not learning important skills; they were learning how to take a certain kind of test. The testing tail was wagging the academic dog.


The Chicago story could be replayed across the country. Most states have adopted new academic standards, and many are beginning to ratchet up standardized testing, too. Kentucky introduced new exams eight years ago that are far more demanding than the Chicago ones, but has

rescinded them under pressure from parents and teachers because the scores at some schools have remained stubbornly low. Virginia and Massachusetts have had disappointing yearly results with their new testing.

Early next year, fourth graders in New York State will have to take a new reading and writing test that differs considerably from the previous format. Rather than the old multiple-choice approach, two-thirds of the new three-day exam involves writing critiques and personal essays. The aim is to promote analytical writing skills as well as reading proficiency.

But already a number of teachers are reportedly afraid that they'll be judged by the performance of ill-prepared students, and parents have expressed concern that their children's scores will be considered in applications for gifted programs and selective middle schools.

Should such new tests be embraced as a necessary medicine or are they yet another useless exercise in the perennial struggle to improve public education? It is a mistake to polarize the debate: there are good and poor ways of conducting tests. It makes more sense to ask what we are trying to achieve and then to make decisions accordingly. With any proposed test, I always ask four



Are High-Stakes Tests the Answer?
Are standardized tests, especially high-stakes tests that link grade promotion and graduation, a Band-Aid to fix what is ailing schools? Many think tests are a way to make educators -- and students -- accountable. Others disagree, saying one test is just that -- one test, only one indicator of what kids have learned. Share with us your opinions about high-

questions.

- Does it focus on something indisputably important?
- Does it test the desired skill directly, or does it use other methods as an index of the student's proficiency (for example, testing students' "writing ability" by asking them to choose the best-written of four sample passages)?
- Are teachers prepared to help students acquire the required skills, and do they have the necessary resources?
- Could students who do well on one test do well on a different sort of exam that presumably tests the same skill?

stakes testing on our -- [Are High-Stakes Tests the Answer? message board.](#)

The New York test seems to do well on the first two criteria. No one doubts the importance of being able to write analytically about what one has read or to compose a personal essay. It is a significant advance to ask students to write freely, rather than simply to edit or critique a passage.

As for preparedness, however, legitimate questions have been raised about whether New York fourth graders have the background to fill in blank pages under timed conditions and whether teachers know how to prepare children from families that do not stress reading and writing.

"Educators and parents should value the development of knowledge and skills that go beyond a single test."

-- Howard Gardner

This brings us to the fourth and most crucial question. Whenever a new exam is introduced, there is a temptation on the part of teachers to "teach the test." It might now seem far better to teach students how to write a personal essay than to ask them multiple-choice questions about a passage. Yet it is possible even with essay tests to teach students to do well through mimicry rather than through real writing skills.

Here's how this might work in New York. Teachers could instruct students that a personal essay must have three paragraphs, each with a different topic sentence; that the first paragraph must begin with an opinion ("I strongly believe that"); that the second paragraph must include two vivid images, and so on. Undoubtedly, fourth graders could learn to write such an essay.

But what would happen if they were then asked to write a letter or a response to a newspaper article? Would they do any better than children who hadn't been taught the essay-writing techniques? Educators and parents should value the development of knowledge and skills that go beyond a single test. High performance should be an incidental result of strong general preparation.

Soon most states, including New York, will be mandating so-called high-stakes tests in many subjects at several grade levels. We must proceed cautiously before we place students' minds and hearts at risk with tests of dubious quality whose meaning can be overinterpreted and whose consequences can be devastating.

Yes we need rigorous academic standards, but we must also give youngsters models when it comes to developing the most crucial skills: love of learning, respect for peers and good citizenship. That is what they need most to pass the test of life.

This Op-Ed commentary was originally printed in The New York Times. It is reprinted here by permission of Howard Gardner.

Check out these other stories in Education World's Are High-Stakes Tests the Answer? series:

- [Should Standardized Tests Determine Who Is Held Back?](#)
- [Are High-Stakes Tests Punishing Some Students?](#)
- [Some Teachers, Students, Parents Say No to Tests!](#)
- [How Important Should One Test Be?](#)

Education World®
Copyright © 2000 Education World

Please check out our featured articles this week:

- [America's Freedom Documents!](#)
- [Great Sites For Teaching About... American History and Culture](#)

07/06/2000