



Why Educational Testing is Necessary

By Ze'ev Wurman

Nations invest enormous sums of money in their elementary and secondary education—on the order of two to four percent of their Gross Domestic Product. This is as much as, or even more, than their investment in national defense. Consequently, it's only natural that they are interested in finding out how effectively this money is spent. Furthermore, in recent decades the educational attainment of country's population was statistically linked to its economic success, a link that necessarily will only strengthen in the future as our society becomes even more dependent on technology.

Educational testing or, more properly, the *results* of educational testing, are an essential metric for evaluating the quality of the educational system and for informing the public and policymakers about what is and is not functioning as planned. Furthermore, individual students are necessarily interested in their own educational performance, as are parents in the performance of their child, so they can realistically evaluate the chances for the student's future educational progress as well as their future career path, whether in academia or the workplace.

To provide such metrics educational testing must be valid and objective. Valid in the sense that the results reflect the actual knowledge and skills that schools are supposed to impart to their students, and objective in the sense that they are accurate in their scoring and untainted by irrelevant considerations. Addressing the validity of a test is in the hands of content experts who create the test items. Addressing test objectivity is a matter of the testing process—the uniformity of its administration and of its scoring; in other words, its

standardization. Hence the common expression “standardized test,” which encompasses all those features and allows test results to be compared across schools and across time.

Other educational testing exists too. For example, teachers routinely assess the progress of their students by administering classroom tests that they generate themselves or lift from textbooks. These so-called formative tests are invaluable for the teacher, yet they may be neither objective nor even valid, and their results certainly cannot be compared across different schools and classrooms or over time.

While almost all teachers support formative in-class testing, many resist external objective testing. In that they are often joined by school administrators, and sometimes even by politicians. The reasons for such resistance are pretty obvious: objective test results often conflict with a teacher's own perception of his or her students' achievement, and no administrator or politician enjoys seeing disappointing results that they might be forced to explain to an unhappy public.

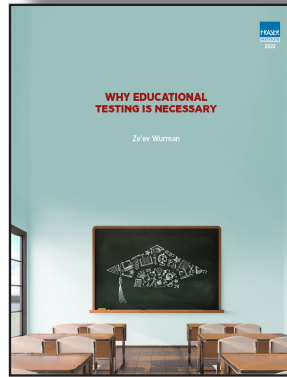
This report describes educational testing in some detail, argues for the importance of test standardization, and offers evidence of its objectivity particularly when contrasted with the evidence of grade inflation in public schools. Further, it documents its salutary effects on student achievement contrary to the cliché often whipped out by testing opponents that “weighing the cow doesn’t make it fatter”—actually, it seems that it does, notably when there are significant stakes associated with the results of the test to schools and particularly to students. In the same vein the report also addresses other common, straw-man fallacies that test opponents often bring up, such as that testing necessarily narrows the curriculum.

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The report concludes that well executed, valid, and objective educational testing seems irreplaceable as an oversight tool for politicians and the public and as a way to guide improvement for students and schools.



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