

# Two Cheers for Standardized Testing, 6(2)

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## Abstract

This paper is addressed primarily to those educators skeptical of or outright hostile to the regime of standardized testing facing schools, children, and teachers

The central theme of the paper is that standardized testing today is often used to attack or punish educators and/or schools, but that educators should not on that ground oppose testing; it is the use, not the test, that we should oppose. The tests, I will argue, are potentially liberating tools that can enhance both equity for the poor and democratic governance in general.

I also argue that the harmful effects attributed to testing are (1) not the consequence of testing at all, but evidence of educational difficulties that long pre-dates the tests, and (2) if tests do follow from the tests in some sense, they do not do so inevitably.

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## Two Cheers for Standardized Testing<sup>1</sup>

Standardized testing is one of those issues that seems to allow for no middle ground. Advocates for testing seem to see it as a necessary (and sometimes, apparently, a sufficient) condition for true school improvement. Those who oppose testing are portrayed as self-serving radical and/or incompetent educators who fear that the tests make public their inadequacies and irresponsibility.

On the other hand, many opponents of testing portray the whole idea as un-American and anti-democratic, as well as anti-educational. On this view, testing distorts the curriculum by making teachers focus on trivial and discrete tasks amenable to standardized tests ("teaching to the test"). It also is classist and racist, discriminating against poor children, and especially against poor children of color. These are criticisms that come predominantly from the left (FairTest, University Testing/Bias). Others oppose testing because of their fear of government control over the content of the curriculum that would come with national tests ([Burron, 1994](#); [Zlatos, 1993](#)). Finally, the excessive amount of testing takes time away from instruction, both the time given to preparation and the time administer the tests ([Kohn, 2002](#)).

There is some truth in both positions. However, both overstate their cases. What follows does not claim to be a report of research. It is a reflection on testing based on my own experience, the role of education in democracy, and the realities of politics.

Before I begin defending tests, let me first acknowledge some real shortcomings of tests and testing. To begin with, the basic criticism that the tests are reductionist in content and often trivialize education is true beyond critique. Standardized tests are constructed on a reductionist, simplistic, and decidedly non-intellectual view of education.

A distinction is necessary here. There are two testing regimes in place, not one. It is important to distinguish between *norm-referenced* and *criterion-referenced* standardized tests.<sup>2</sup> The two have different strengths and weaknesses, though both are referred to as "standardized" tests, which is what I will do in this paper. However, though accurate, there is a danger in using the term "standardized test" without discriminating between kinds; it may cause us to make incorrect assertions when critiquing particular tests. The faults and virtues of the one kind of test are not necessarily the same as of the other.

Norm-referenced standardized tests (e.g., Iowa Test of Basic Skills [ITBS], or Scholastic Aptitude Test [SAT]) are tests where student performance is measured against performance *norms* defined by the performance of a statistically representative sample of students taking that test. This is the sort of score that is reported in percentiles, deciles, stanines, or some other such measure that *ranks* the students against each other. On such a test, only ten percent of the students will be in the top decile — at or above the ninetieth percentile. One-half the students will be below the fiftieth percentile; that is the meaning of "fiftieth percentile." A consequence of using norm-referenced tests is that when a score is converted to "grade-level" form, which it almost always is, the score designated as "grade level" is the fiftieth percentile. This means that one-half the student population is below grade level, which the public often perceives as "failing."

When we know a student's (or group's average) norm-referenced score, we know where that student stands in the reference group but little about what the student (or group of students) actually knows. In a group of students who do not know very much about a subject, one can score in a very high percentile with relatively little knowledge. Conversely, where a subject has been heavily emphasized in school and learning is advanced in the group as a whole, a student can know a great deal about a subject and wind up with a low percentile score.<sup>3</sup>

The other sort of standardized test is criterion-referenced. The difference between these two sorts of tests is not so much in their content as in the way the scores are reported (though criterion-referenced tests currently tend to be somewhat less reductionist than norm-referenced tests). In criterion-referenced testing, student performance is measured against clear standards of performance — criteria, not each other. One consequence of this difference is that on a criterion-referenced test all students can (and should) be successful.

The case I want to make, that standardized testing deserves two, but most definitely not three, cheers, is grounded in three different arguments: political realities, requirements of democratic governance and justice, and pedagogical effects. Most of this paper will focus on the second of these arguments, and the briefest treatment will be given to the political realities. What follows is largely situated in the political context of the United States, but many of the educational issues raised by standardized testing are germane to educators in other countries as well.

### **Practical Politics**

The political argument in favor of making peace with testing is that the fact of testing is with us, at least for the foreseeable future. Opposition to testing is an untenable political position. It is futile for educators to oppose standardized testing, whether norm- or criterion-referenced, on the grounds that testing results in poorer quality education. The public perception is that the quality of education is already poor and that testing will both provide the evidence of this poor quality and serve as the prod to improvement ([National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983](#)). Educators need to become players in the political game, working to improve, not stop, testing. We can only become part of the conversation if we stop marginalizing ourselves with quixotic battles against giant windmills. It is we, and the children for whom we can and should be effective advocates, who get ground up.

The bad news is that we are stuck with imperfect tests. But that is not the sort of bad news that should surprise us in an imperfect world; everything is imperfect. If we are politically effective we can work to improve them. We guarantee marginalization to the point of irrelevance if we take the position that we cannot test children until we have perfect tests. Such a position is as cynical as are the attacks on public education. Fortunately, there is no reason to take such a stance. For the good news is that tests can and should contribute to the democratic governance of schools. This is the point I will argue in the next section.

### **Democracy and Testing**

I want to argue first that tests are compatible with and may be required for the democratic governance of schools. I then want to examine that principle in particular conversations about equality and curriculum content. In what follows I take it as relatively uncontroversial that democratic governance of schools is a good thing, though that is not entirely true. Right-wing critics, such as John [Chubb and Terry Moe \(1990, p. 2\)](#), for example, argue quite clearly and unabashedly that the problem with public schools is just exactly that their governance is democratic, and that is why they cannot solve their problems. I have no idea how to respond to this argument. If one is opposed, on principle, to democratic governance of schools, then it does no good to point out that his or her "reform" recommendations are anti-democratic. Chubb and Moe take as one of the virtues of their position that they would remove schools from the caprice of democratic control in favor of the discipline of the market.

However, assuming one believes in democratic governance, then this requires information. Part of the information necessary is some measure of student learning, some response to the question, "How are you doing with our children?" This is what tests are supposed to provide. Let me be clear: they do not do it well. My belief, however, is that doing it not well, but doing it as well as we can, is better than not doing it at all. As public servants, I think we owe the community as much information as we can provide about how their children are doing in our care.

Whose children are these? I think this is a more complicated question than it appears. One's initial reaction is that the children in my class are the children of their parents, and that the parents have the right to insist on — and to receive — the kind of education for their own children that they deem best. There is some truth to this, but it is not the whole truth.

Another answer is suggested by the casual speech of teachers. Teachers speak commonly and almost universally of "my class" and "my kids." This is clearly a metaphorical expression, and yet it expresses a sort of truth, also, as do all metaphors.

There is yet a third answer to this question, the most complex of the three. And that is that the children in our schools are all of ours, that they are the shared responsibility of the community, and that their education is a communal responsibility. This is not to say that the parents do not have the primary responsibility for the rearing of their own children; as both a parent and as a teacher, I believe that they do. However, it seems to me that the purpose of schooling is not to fulfill the needs, wishes, or desires of the parents, nor of the children themselves. We do not say this loudly, clearly, or often enough. The purpose of schooling is to prepare children for full citizenship in their society. And this is not a decision to be left to each of us individually; the future shape of the society is properly a communal decision, which properly makes decisions about education communal decisions.

To the objection, "Wait a minute. This is *my* child we are talking about!" the proper response is, "Not exactly." Democratic society-shaping and educational decision-making, it seems to me, ought to operate the same way that democracy in general operates. We can each make up our own minds about how we ought to live together. We can argue our positions in the public forums as much and as loudly as we please. We can do all in our power to convince others that the policy we prefer is the right one. What we cannot do, what democracy demands that we not do, is ignore the communal decision once it has been made. We can try to change it, but in the meantime we must live within its bounds.

Now, one might argue that education is different. The education of *my child* is a unique sort of public policy issue, just as the bond between parent and child is unique. Because this is my child, I have rights in this matter that are not properly constrained by democratic decision-making. But surely, if this argument were valid, it would be at least as valid with respect to war, allowing me to withhold my child from service if I do not approve of the cause, or if I just wish to keep my child safe. It would be just as valid with respect to any policy that affects tax and spending (that is, just about every policy) where I could say: this is *my* money and I will not pay taxes for purposes of which I disapprove. However, democracy does not allow me my own tax policy, my own foreign policy, my own death penalty policy, or my own education policy. Parents are part of the democratic process of decision-making about education policy, even a special part, but they are only a part. They are as bound by the decisions of democratic process as anyone else, even in matters that concern them and their children.

The same is true for teachers. Teachers often argue that outside control of the curriculum demeans them, disempowers them, deskills them, deprives them of their professional authority and autonomy, and reduces them to the status of mere functionaries and employees ([McNeill, 1988](#)). These claims seem to me to misunderstand the nature of our particular profession. We are not independent professionals steeped in arcane knowledge about materials, the law, or the workings of the body or mind. Teachers are culture workers, charged with the responsibility to foster in children the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make democracy possible. Just as these things are not determined by the children's parents apart from community and society, they are not determined by the professional experts. The nature of society in a democracy is properly shaped in the commons, not in private, nor by the market; it is properly the work of the people communally rather than individually, and not the experts ([Covaleskie & Howley, 1994](#)). Part of the culture work of schools is to reflect the current society and shape the future one, which is why the battles fought around curriculum issues are fought so bitterly. But political fighting is the proper way to decide such issues in democracy. To argue otherwise is to say that the most important task of governance, deciding the basic agreements by which we should live together and the shape of the future of the society, is not a fit subject for the messy business of democratic politics. I do not believe this is so.

As culture workers, teachers are professionals whose expertise is put at the service of the democratic will. It is our job to prepare students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions proper to democratic life as established through the democratic process. Teachers have a role in the formation of the consensus. They are, after all, experts in teaching

and have given, we hope, serious thought to the nature of childhood and what is appropriate curriculum as children progress through school. But the force of "appropriate" here is somewhat attenuated; it means appropriate to the intellectual, emotional, and social development of children. It does not mean appropriate to the democratic project; that is no more for teachers to decide than for carpenters. Teachers, just like everyone else, have a positive obligation to be involved in the public discussion about education. And they have the responsibility to speak authoritatively on matters in which their professional competence qualifies them to do so. However, their professional skills are not those properly exercised in a state of autonomy, but are placed in the service of the democratic polity. This is not a diminution of professional identity, but a reflection of its true nature.

In any event, schools and teachers are properly held accountable. This means that there must be a way for *A* to know how the school is doing with *B*'s child, even if *A* has no children of her own. Now privacy rights are also part of this, so *A* does not have any right to know specifically how *B*'s child is doing, but she does have a right to know how the schools are doing with children in general. The schools are accountable not only to the individual parents, but to the community as a whole.

Further, the states fund the schools, and states have the authority and responsibility under the U.S. Constitution and the individual state constitutions to regulate education in the state. The state has a compelling interest in the quality of the education of its children, as a matter of both practicality and principle. The practical responsibility follows from the fact that the state funds a large portion of the cost of schooling and has an obvious interest in the economic well-being of its citizens. As matter of principle, if the state regulation of the school is to be meaningful, then the state must have information about how the schools are doing. In political terms, the state has an obligation to all concerned to make sure that the tax dollars spent in support of a state system of education are well spent. Partly as a matter of practicality and partly as a matter of principle, the state has an interest in the preservation of social order and the maintenance (some might say the creation, or at least the enhancement) of democratic governance. Schools are partly responsible for bringing children into social and political membership, which makes the content and quality of schooling a compelling state interest.

Finally, the federal government, while it has no specified constitutional role in the United States, clearly has an interest. Once again, its interest in education is both practical and rooted in democratic principles. Practically, there is the economic concern again. The national economy is to some extent affected by the quality of education. But there are far stronger matters of principle involved. As with the state, there is the question of preparation for democratic citizenship. As a nation, we ought to be concerned about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of those who become our fellow citizens. Finally, there are equity issues that affect both state and federal government. If education is a necessary part of preparation for citizenship and for life in the society, then it is critical that there be no discrimination in education.

I rather cheerfully concede the point raised by critics that testing is a political event far more than an educational one. But as a political event, it needs to be celebrated, though perhaps not with unbridled enthusiasm, for what it is — one of the messy and perhaps unfortunate, but nonetheless necessary, ways that we gather the information that we need to shape education policy. Now it will be argued, and argued rightly, that this information is misused. It is used both dishonestly by enemies of public education who know better and foolishly by poorly informed people who do not ([Bracey, 2002, Chapter 3](#); [Berliner & Biddle, 1995](#)). It is used often to advocate policies that will hurt the poor or the handicapped, such as when statistics are manipulated to make it appear that per-pupil expenditures make no difference in the quality of education provided to children, or that schools today do not measure up to the schools of some long-gone golden age ([Rothstein, 1998](#)).

What seems clear is that, when the community, state, and federal governments, acting according to democratic procedures, decide that schools should be teaching *X*, then those governmental units have not only the right, but the responsibility, to see whether *X* is in fact being taught. That the data available are misused is due as much to the inertia and inactivity of the American citizenry generally as it is to the manipulation of data by "special interest groups." In the United States today, conservative groups are more involved politically, and therefore are more effective, than progressives are. This is not the fault of conservatives, but of progressives. If educators and progressives lament the control of school boards by "right-wing reactionaries," perhaps in future school board elections more voters will follow the election, and perhaps even vote.

How do these principles apply to issues on the ground? I want to briefly examine two issues: the content of the curriculum and the question of equity.

Who should decide what gets taught to children in schools? This is an easy question in general, but difficult and at times nasty in particular. The general answer is that the community, through the agency of state and local officials, should make this determination. This is part of what makes public schools public (not "government" schools, but

public ones). In particular circumstances, this is difficult to apply, however. What happens when it is clear that the democratic process yields a clearly wrong answer, as in the case of school boards deciding that Genesis should replace Darwin and the study of geology in science classes?

Here again, I want to suggest that the solution to political battles is in the political arena, including the courts if necessary. Where the creationists make the better case in the public arena, they will win the political battle. The temptation is strong simply to trump that process with the declaration of experts, but that seems dangerous and is not obviously the way to more democratic governance. If a small core of creationists can stack state and local school boards, it is only because the mass of people do not vote in those elections, which enables so small a minority to win control.<sup>4</sup> But the answer seems not to be to stifle those who are very active in order to protect the interests of those who are inert. The proper democratic response is greater involvement by those who want science taught in science class and who understand the difference between science, pseudo-science, and religion. If creationists demand equal time on the grounds that it is not fair to do less, scientists and science teachers need to be able to explain in clear language why this is not so. If they cannot do so, the science education of the next generation will suffer. The stakes are indeed high, but to circumvent democracy out of desire for the right outcome is, well, to circumvent democracy.

Given that the public, at least in general (and also, I think, in tough cases), has the authority and the right to decide through the democratic process what we will teach to their children, does it not follow that they have the right to monitor whether we are in fact teaching it? And if this does follow, then there must be a means to do so. This is where testing comes in. Now at this point it is sometimes conceded by the critics of testing that teachers do have an obligation to make information about students' progress available to the parents. This is surely true, but hardly sufficient for reasons given above. It is not just the individual parents to whom we answer, nor is it just the local curriculum that guides practice. There are state and national interests as well, and interested parties at the state and local level. For this reason, something more than an individual progress report is necessary. Stakeholders far away from the individual school and altogether unknown to the individual child are also entitled to know the disposition of their tax dollars and the preparation of their fellow-citizens. This requires more than a teacher telling parents that Susan's math skills are fine, but she is having difficulty in reading.

Further, there are differences in schools and in standards from one district to another. "Fine" in one school or district is not the same as "fine" in another, often not even close. The economic and socio-cultural differences between school districts in this country mean that there are also substantial differences between education in one place and education in another, even nearby, place. This is even true within states, where state curricula are supposed to guide the education of all children. Thus is it that testing provides the state a way to know to what degree the children in each district across the state are being given the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that the people have decided through their representatives children should be taught. Without some sort of standardized testing, designed and administered at the state level, democracy is without feedback and information about the attainment of educational goals — goals, we need to remember, that have to do with the sort of society we will be in the future.

This brings us to the second and related issue: educational equity. One of the strongest objections to the regime of testing is that the tests discriminate against minorities, who consistently score lower than whites on almost all widely-used standardized tests. If true, this would be a damning charge against tests, regardless of what other arguments one could muster on their behalf. Now, while it is obviously true that minorities — and poor rural whites — do worse on our tests than do their better-off white peers, it does not follow that it is the tests that do the discrimination, at least not in the invidious sense of that word. The possibility of increased educational equity is enhanced if the tests are used to demonstrate what we all know and try to ignore or deny: we educate poor children and children of color less well than we educate wealthy and middle-class white and suburban children. The tests make clear the educational deprivation we inflict on the poor.

It is argued that these tests seal the fate of many of these children, that the tests make clear the extent to which many of the poor are unprepared for higher education or well-paying jobs. And in this sense, they do reinforce the anti-democratic consequences of the systemic educational inequities. But again, even without the tests, poor children would be denied equal educational opportunity and preparation for later life. What would change without tests is that we would have no hard proof of the fact that the money we spend educating the rich is well spent; it results in better education for the rich. And it enables us, if we care to take the trouble, to make the argument that it would be money well spent on the poor as well, and that democracy demands that we do so. The logic of this argument against standardized testing suggests that, if we can conceal the evidence of our educational neglect of the poor, they will not suffer from their deprivation ([Kozol, 1992](#)).

There is lot of idealism in what I have written so far. I talk as though democracy is a reality, that the decisions made through the democratic process are in fact democratic in substance and reality, not just in form. I do not believe this.



Democracy is not very healthy right now.<sup>5</sup> While preserving the forms of democracy, we have slid into what seems more realistically described as oligarchy. Social and political life today is shaped not by democratic principles, but by capitalist ones. The aphorism that captures our political culture today is "Money talks," not "One person, one vote."<sup>6</sup>

However tempting it might be, it seems unlikely that we will invigorate democracy by replacing democratic procedures with either the dictates of educational experts or the amoral direction of the market on such fundamental issues as the substance of democratic education. What we do still have are the forms and processes of democratic governance, which means quite simply that we have the option of making democracy work if we are ready and willing to do so. Special interest groups are effective precisely because they do the work of democracy: they organize, they publicize, they keep informed on the issues and on the voting records of public officials, and they vote. Democracy is more like washing floors than brain surgery; most people can do it, but it requires a willingness to work. Most of us do not care to put that much effort into government. We would rather leave that to elected officials and pursue our private interests in between elections. This means that when an election comes along and the campaign of thirty-second spot commercials begins, we will vote not for the person whose voting record (of which we are likely to be ignorant) is one of which we approve, but for the person who puts on a good front and seems likeable. However foolish this seems as a way for a people to govern itself, it does at least preserve the means of correction; we the people can engage in real politics whenever we are ready.

It is sometimes argued that the data we have are so far deficient from what we need that ignorance would actually be an improvement. The claim is that the tests are fundamentally flawed and so distort teaching in reductionist ways that actually work against education as an intellectual exercise, that they require a concentration on rote learning and "basic skills" ([Kohn, 2002](#)). It is this objection I wish to consider next.

### Educational Effects

The most common and potentially damning complaint about testing is that it actually lowers the quality of education, penalizing "divergent thinking," creativity, and intellectual work in general. By forcing teachers to "teach to the test" and focus on the discrete skills of the test, standardized testing prevents teachers from helping students grow intellectually and emotionally ([Kohn, 2002](#)). It distorts the process of schooling and denies children the opportunity for proper development and age-appropriate experiences while placing them under unwarranted and potentially damaging pressure to do well on these "high stakes" tests. If any of this were true, it would convince me to oppose testing. But it is my experience that these things are not true.

My experience is that, to the extent that this state of affairs follows from testing, it also requires unnecessarily bad decisions made at the level of district office, building principal, or classroom teacher. The core of my argument here is to claim that, although reductionist and anti-intellectual teaching can result in acceptable test scores, that is neither the only nor the best way to obtain them. Further, the argument that the current regime of testing is the reason we have so much of this type of teaching leaves unaccounted for the fact that John Dewey was decrying the same faults in schools one hundred years ago, long before the current regime was in place. Before that, Mark Twain gave us a picture of the same sort of classroom. Indeed, as Dewey made clear a century ago, part of the reason we see so much reductionist and by-rote teaching is that, in the first place, that is just the way it has always been done. In the second place, this sort of teaching is easier than the more intellectually demanding methods advocated by [Dewey \(1916/1944/1966; 1938/1963\)](#) and exemplified by people like Vivian Paley.<sup>7</sup> The evidence is that these sorts of higher-level skills were never taught, or only rarely, and that the sort of class community created by teachers like Paley have never been very common.

[Dewey \(1938/1963\)](#) spoke of the two dimensions necessary for experience to be educational: it must have interactivity and continuity. It must, in other words, connect the children to their broader world (interactivity), but it must also and equally connect to what the children already know and what they will need to learn in the future (continuity; what we see in scope and sequence charts). Dewey's point was that, while traditional education is flawed because of its lack of connection in favor of continuity, much of what went (and goes) under the label progressive education (what we today are more likely to call child-centered education) is equally flawed for its failure to retain continuity in its search for interaction.

The bad news about testing is that it rewards the sort of traditional teaching that ignores interaction, that isolates the student in the classroom following a dull and uninspired curriculum. The good news about testing is that it penalizes the sort of breezy, pseudo-progressive "child-centered" education Dewey found so common and so distressing. The other good news is that it also rewards the truly rich teaching that engages the child in learning tasks that connect the child to her broader world, build on what has gone before, and prepare for what is to come. Under the current testing regime, such teaching is rare, while traditional teaching is common, but that has long, perhaps always, been true.

Good teaching is difficult, demanding, and time-consuming and requires a great deal of knowledge not directly related to one's own field of study.

My experience teaching in, consulting with, and now visiting schools is that the classrooms where the teachers are engaging students with the disciplines of the curriculum in a way that is exciting and age-appropriate (the teachers who are closest to Dewey's model of a progressive teacher) are also those whose test scores are among the highest in the school. Admittedly, this is a non-representative sample, but it consists of dozens of schools and hundreds of teachers. There are less exciting and less interesting teachers whose students perhaps score well, but this is my point: one may teach badly and get good test results, but if one teaches well, one will also get good test results.

My daughter currently teaches in the second grade of an inner-city school where her students face both state and city tests in addition to the usual battery of national norm-referenced tests. Test scores in the school are consistently below national means, and the possibility of state takeover looms in the near future.

Against this background, she shared with me last year that, with the exception of five recent transfers, all the students in her class had scored at or above grade level on the nationally normed standardized test used in her district as one measure of student achievement. Three of her students scored perfectly on the test. I have for years been telling my students, on the basis of my own teaching experience, that one could teach well from the curriculum and the test would take care of itself. If the students are learning what they ought to be learning, they will score well on the tests of that content. I was anxious to learn if this was also my daughter's experience.

I asked her, first, to what did she attribute the success of her students? She replied that she makes clear to her students that she will not accept failure from them. She added that with that goes her own willingness to do whatever it takes to make sure that they achieve what is expected of them.

I next asked the important question: Do you teach to the test? I was not surprised at her answer: she refuses to look at the test before its administration. She teaches the curriculum assigned but does not teach to the test. The test measures what the students know, and they are learning to read and do arithmetic, which are the main tasks for primary students. It is not a lifeless exercise constricted by the test, but a learning experience preparing them for further learning.

One might contend that the skills measured at this grade are the sort of discrete reductionist skills that are far from defining a rich educational experience. And that is surely true enough, but if the teacher goes no further than this, it seems less a condemnation of the test than of a seriously deficient professional practice. The task is to blend student engagement (interaction) with a focus on the curriculum (continuity). Either one is easy to do by itself; combining them is difficult. There are few teachers who do that well. But that is not something that is caused by the tests, it is caused by the difficulty of the task and far predates testing.

Further, and this is perhaps the strongest point, suppose that it is true that testing, by focusing on the mundane and the "basics," does force teachers to do the same, at least part of the time. Would that then be grounds to oppose testing? I am not sure that it would.

To see why, let us look at the issue from the perspective of policy-makers. Policy-makers face a fundamental choice in forming and implementing policy. They can, on the one hand, choose to make policies that will allow the greatest freedom and allow the highest levels of achievement by the most talented teachers and their students. Under such a regime, the very best students with the very best teachers will excel, but the less talented students with the less talented teachers will suffer and learn little. It makes no sense to simply say, as some do, well, then, let us get rid of the bad teachers and replace them with good ones. While such a policy looks good from the vantage point of the suburbs (where most of those who think it is a good idea live), the stark fact is that there is a shortage of even bad teachers to work with the poor, both rural and urban. As baby-boom teachers retire, it will be increasingly difficult to staff our classrooms, especially under funded urban classrooms, with qualified teachers.

Policy-makers often seek to avoid disaster, not to achieve perfection; policies are shaped in such a way that the minimum acceptable performance level is set, and then student achievement is measured to see whether everyone is reaching at least these minimum goals. The danger is that the "floor" of minimum competence will become the "ceiling" to which too many are content to aspire. But we should be clear here: when that happens, it is more the fault of the teacher, student, parents, and/or community than of the minimum standards. There is nothing that says we must stop when we have reached minimum competence, and it is an odd critique of testing that assumes this to be the case.

We might wonder why so many teachers assume that I can only teach a required curriculum in an uninspired way, and then must teach nothing else. We so often construe this issue as a battle between inspired teaching that is not focused on the content of state and local curriculum documents, on the one hand, and insipid teaching of required content, on the other hand, that we seem to forget that there are teachers in every district who do the professional thing: they teach the curriculum with style and grace and wisdom and humor, preparing their students for the tests and for life.

The argument about testing is often conceived as a conflict between excellence and equality, and in some sense it is. Opponents of testing argue that the floor becomes a ceiling and that testing therefore limits and prevents excellence in education by equalizing down. Supporters, on the other hand, argue that testing is the means to make sure that minimum competency is met by all students. On this view, one cannot have an educational system that fosters excellence and equity at the same time. I think, however, this is really a conflict between different conceptions of systemic excellence. What is the nature of the excellence being pursued? Is that system excellent that gives its teachers the sort of freedom and independence that allows its stars to flourish, teachers and students alike, while limiting the oversight that would call lesser teachers to account? Or is systemic excellence reached when all students reach a certain level of mastery and all teachers reach a certain level of competence? If by "excellence" one means the latter rather than the former, then testing may indeed be a prod toward excellence as well as equity. Much depends on what is done with the test results and how they are used to educate the communities about their schools. Note also, as indicated before, nothing stops the teacher whose students have achieved this mastery from going further.

Tests are imperfect, and democracy is often messy. However, we should resist the temptation to place ourselves above and beyond democratic decision-making, citing our professional status and/or knowledge to privilege ourselves to impose policies we are unable to persuade our fellow citizens to accept. We should also resist the temptation to use testing as an excuse to teach badly.

Educators and their allies are losing the political battles around testing by opposing the current tests without offering realistic ways to allow the larger society and our respective communities to hold us accountable for the effects of our efforts. This makes no sense politically, but, more than that, it is a violation of our responsibilities to democratic governance and a betrayal of the democratic mission of our public schools.

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### Notes

1. I would like to thank Charlie Webber and the two anonymous readers whose suggestions helped make this a better paper than the one originally submitted.
2. There are also non-standardized criterion-referenced tests, most commonly, teacher-made tests. Similarly, there can be non-standardized norm-referenced tests, such as a teacher-made test where grades are assigned on a "curve." These are not the sort of tests under consideration in the battles around "testing" as an "educational reform," nor are they the subject under discussion in this paper.
3. That there has been a strong historical preference toward the use of norm-referenced standardized tests suggests that perhaps we are more interested in the competition implied by comparisons than in the achievement of students on their own terms.
4. The control so won may be fleeting. Consider the recent events in Kansas, where the religious right won control of the state school board and removed evolution from the state biology syllabus. In the following election, the candidates who had supported that move were defeated.
5. This was originally written prior to September 11, 2001. It seems as accurate today as then.
6. This move to capitalize democracy is perhaps most advanced in the United States, but there is certainly evidence that other democracies are learning how to give more influence to wealth.
7. Any book by this wonderful model of the professional educator shows the work that is required to make the vision of Dewey a reality and the richness of the intellectual life in a class so conceived and organized.

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### Author Notes

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