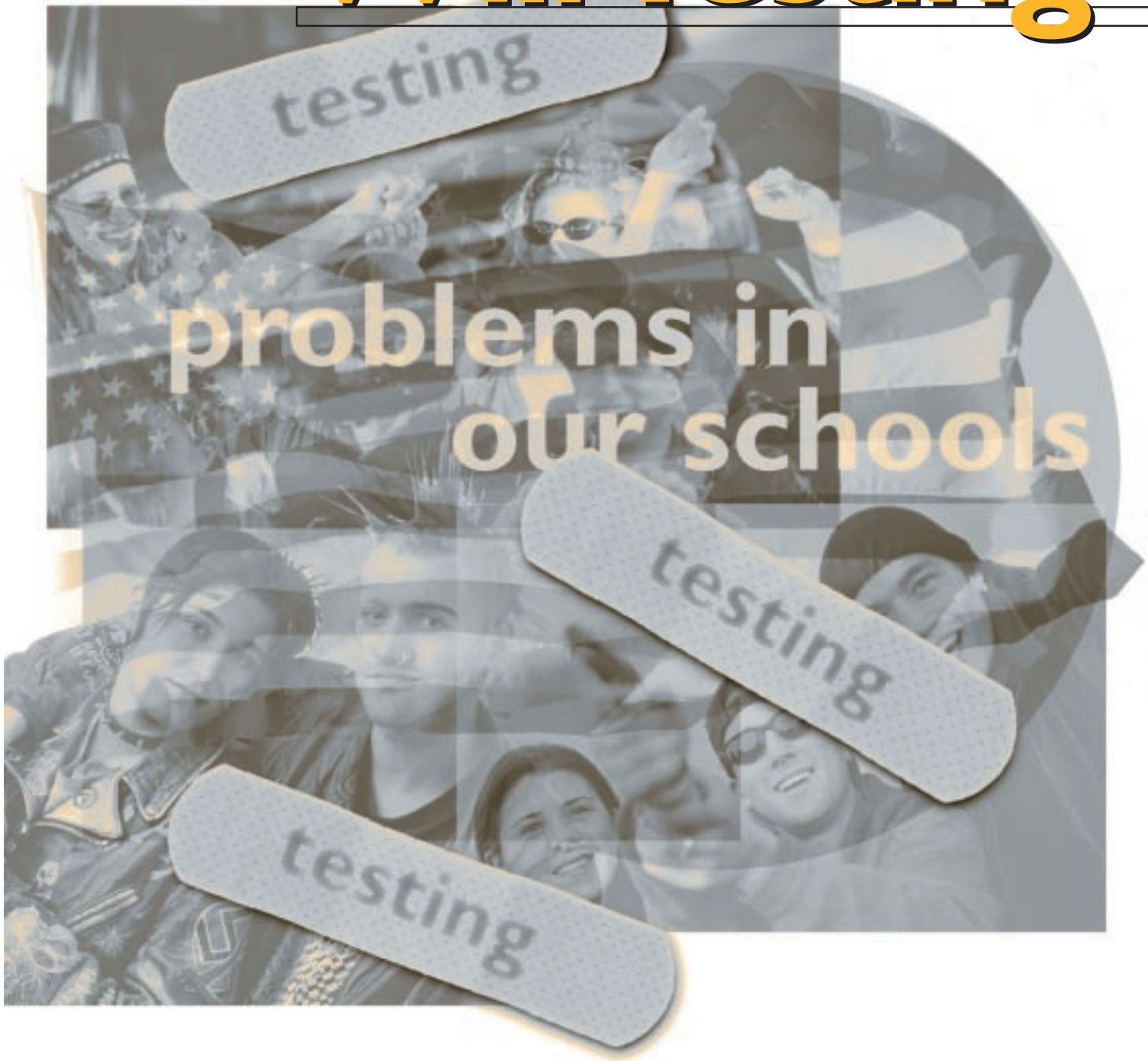


Will Testing



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Solve Our Schools' Problems?



By David James

As Americans, we're drawn to simple ideas and simple solutions. How many fad diet authors have made millions on the "lose weight with no sacrifice" motto? We want easy solutions to deal with heart disease, to quit smoking, to make money on Wall Street. We spend billions of dollars annually on quick fast food meals. Casinos are popping up in nearly every state with the lure of easy money for no discernible work. It's an American trait, this desire or belief in a single, painless solution to complex and often daunting problems.

I am reminded of this as I listen to our latest President's educational agenda. On January 25, 2001, at an elementary school in Washington, DC, President Bush said that testing is crucial "to determine whether or not children are learning." His solution is more testing. It is appealing to many because it's simple. It's easy. Test students every year to make sure scores are improving, standards are met, and that students are learning. Document it. Publicize it. Penalize staff who work at schools unable to improve test scores. In the business world, this plan is akin to the 'produce and make a profit or get out' mentality. How could any reasonable, red-blooded, competitive American be against testing and accountability in schools?

Most Americans aren't, and that's the problem. We want to believe that instituting something so routine and common like yearly testing will miraculously provide the solution to the complex problems in our schools. Unfortunately, there are no such easy answers. Our schools have problems with teachers, principals, superintendents, coaches, school boards; schools have problems with building equipment, racism, unions, gangs, local politics, overcrowding, textbooks, guns, security, funding, drugs. Many of our students come to school poor and hungry, abused—either mentally, physically or both, from single family homes, speaking different languages, without love, without confidence, without skills, without hope.

The litany of school problems is as complex as the problems within our society. Of course, schools are reflections of society. Students, teachers, and staff cannot escape the influences and pressures from the outside world. The culture created through television, music, business, film, fashion, sports, and politics has a direct impact on all people. Does anyone really believe a yearly testing requirement will be enough to solve the multitude of school concerns and better prepare our children for the future?

Needless to say, testing has a very important role to play in education. Simply exposing students to planned learning experiences does not necessarily mean students are, in fact, learning. As the grandfather of curriculum design, Ralph W. Tyler, states in *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, “evaluation then becomes a process for finding out how far the learning experiences as developed and organized are actually producing the desired results . . .” (1949, 105). The evaluation plan, however, is created *after* the curriculum, not before. The testing is a by-product of the learning experiences, not the impetus for learning. Evaluation serves as a guide for teachers to identify strengths and weaknesses in the teaching and curriculum, not to punish students nor schools. This whole notion of testing and evaluation seems lost in the current national debate.

There are three primary flaws with our President’s educational initiative. First of all, researchers unanimously agree that tests are imprecise measures at best. No one person nor agency has ever developed a 100 percent reliable and valid instrument. W. James Popham, former professor and test expert from UCLA, writes, “Policymakers assume that a student achievement test measures what a school has taught. In fact, it doesn’t” (as cited in Miller 2001, A15). Studies have shown that test scores for students taking variations of the same test differ based upon the student’s attitude, sleep patterns, breakfast, health conditions, and home climate, to name a few. In his article “Standardized Testing and Its Victims” in *Education Week*, Alfie Kohn notes that a study “of math results on the 1992 National Association of Educational Progress found that the combination of four variables (number of parents living at home, parents’ educational background, type of community, and poverty level) accounted for a whopping 89 percent of the difference in state scores” (2000, 46).

In addition, we are more cognizant now that students have different learning preferences. Ask any teacher and he or she will confirm this: students learn differently. Some do well memorizing; some are comfortable with paper tests; others excel at group projects. Some students can verbalize their understanding of ideas and concepts while others can apply their knowledge to concrete, practical problems, but have very little theoretical understanding. Each student has strengths and weaknesses that shine or darken depending upon the method of testing used. The sad fact is that federally mandated standardized testing of this magnitude will, by necessity, focus on the lower levels of cognitive domain, reward (in John Gardner’s terms) students strong in linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences, and basically ignore the substantial problems within schools.

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Secondly, high-stakes tests ultimately lead to a “teaching to the test” syndrome. Alfie Kohn notes that test scores go up when states impose mandatory achievement tests because teachers get better at coaching students on technique and the previous years’ test questions. The tests measure superficial thinking, Kohn writes, and the “results are positively correlated with a shallow approach to learning” (2000, 46). Even Ralph Tyler, way back in 1949, noted that artificially imposed testing “may become the focus of the students’ attention and even of the teachers’ attention rather than the curriculum objectives set up” (124). Education professor Robert L. Linn from the University of Colorado at Boulder suggests in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that mandated score increases are evident “because teachers take a few years to hone their test preparations, not because instruction is perpetually improving” (as cited in Miller 2001, A14). Is this an educational dynamic we as a society want to encourage? Is this kind of evaluation the foundation of a healthy, just, and thriving national education policy?

Lastly, using tests for such high-stake decisions about student promotion and school funding is a misguided practice (“One Test” 2000). Using a single yearly measure “violates everything we know about measurement,” says education professor James Scheurich from the University of Texas at Austin (as cited in Miller 2001, A16). Kohn and Tyler, along with the National Research Council, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the American Psychological Association, among others, all echo the same sentiment loud and clear: it is inappropriate to use the results of a single test as the basis for making important decisions. Even some of our more enlightened politicians like Senator Paul Wellstone from Minnesota is on record saying, “Far from improving education, high-stakes testing marks a major retreat from fairness, from accuracy, from quality, and from equity” (as cited in Kohn 2000, 47).



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Some advocates for high-stakes testing argue that schools need to prepare students for the real world. In my 25 years of work, I have never had to take a paper and pencil test to secure a job, to do a job, to keep a job, or to be successful at a job. Who takes tests at work? Of course, a few professions—doctors and lawyers most notably—must pass tests to practice, but that in no way guarantees competency. Real work world success depends on being resourceful, working well with others, solving problems, researching, communicating effectively, compromising, being creative, and learning new skills. Out there in the real world, success does not depend upon passing a multiple choice test.

On some level, everyone knows that passing a test does not necessarily equate to deep, meaningful learning. I can only speculate on the number of tests I’ve scored well on through the years whose content I forgot the very next day. Ralph Tyler notes that true education changes human behavior—actions, skills, attitudes, thoughts. True education is generally not found on scantron test questions that can be easily tabulated. Let us remember that tests are tools in the teacher’s little black bag. Tests help teachers assess how well they are teaching. Tests were never intended to be the one-and-only yardstick to determine student learning; it is a grave mistake to think so.

Whatever solutions are possible, our educational system must deal with issues of funding, educational research, politics, parenting and home environments, teacher training, assessment, technology, institutional leadership, community and business alliances, accountability, human services, and local economics. Testing alone will do very little to change the true nature and productivity of our schools.

This is not what Americans want to hear, but it’s that simple.