

High Stakes Testing Pros and Cons

High stakes testing has become the norm in schools since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, mandating that students pass standardized exams to move up in grade or graduate from high school. The pros and cons have been weighted heavily by parents and educators alike—with many left wondering whether or not implementing testing standards have hurt or helped students. Within the past decade most states have adopted standardized statewide testing programs to measure student achievement—and there's more at stake than just grades.



"High-stakes" testing can potentially deny your child a high school diploma or force your fourth grader to repeat a year in school. These consequences, coupled with the fact that these new standardized achievement tests are often poorly understood by students and parents, can cause anxiety in even the best test-taker. What's the purpose of all of that preparation—and panic?

The first thing to keep in mind is that standardized tests are neither good nor evil—according to Mike Haykin director of learning support for the Seattle Academy of Arts and Sciences. The pressure can be overwhelming, Haykin says, but parents and kids need to keep a couple of things in mind. First, you need to understand that these tests were designed to track academic progress for the benefit of your child—if teachers know what areas need work, they can better help each individual in the classroom. Second, you'll need to understand that tests aren't an absolute measure of a student's intelligence. Tests measure how well students know how to take tests—and how well test-taking skills are being taught.

So don't despair during the countdown to the big test—and keep in mind these pros to high stakes test taking:

- High-stakes test results can be used to help teachers create a learning plan based on your kid's needs—helping her in the long run. Look at your child's test results as a tool for progress, not as a judgment on ability or intelligence.
- Data from statewide testing is almost always publicly available. As a parent, you can look at these results to see how well, or poorly, your child's school is performing. Access to this information will help you make more informed decisions about where and how your child will get the best education.
- High stakes exams can cause anxiety, but yearly testing and frequent practice tests can help kids improve their test-taking abilities over time. Your child can benefit by learning how to handle pressure, and developing the skills and strategies necessary to meet the school's—and her parents'—expectations.

However, there are definite drawbacks to high-stakes testing. Experts admit that prepping for standardized tests can take away from the subject areas that are not tested, including those that foster creativity. The Common Core organization, an educational advocacy group that has raised concerns about the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on the classroom, did a survey in 2011 that showed many schools had cut way down on subjects like art, music and history since high-stakes testing started. Teachers and experts see the following as serious detriments caused by high-stakes testing:

- High-stakes tests cause any subject that isn't math or language arts to be pushed out of the classroom. Subjects like science, social studies and the arts are sacrificed to make time for more test prep. Lynne Munson, president and executive director of Common Core, says that subjects outside of math and language arts are actually part of the federally mandated core curriculum for public schools. When other subjects are abandoned, Munson says, "We are denying our students the complete education they deserve and the law demands."
- Pressure on teachers can clamp down on creativity and innovation. Thanks to pressure from the government, teachers often feel compelled to "teach to the test," resulting in less flexibility to tailor lesson plans to individual students or class groups. Less freedom and innovation can also mean unhappier teachers and higher classroom turnover.
- Increased pressure on parents and students is counter-productive. Munson makes a distinction between constructive pressure—the kind that motivates students to do better—and pressure that stifles learning. "If the pressure isn't clearly linked to student learning" Munson says, "if it's just pressure for pressure's sake and not encouraging students to take their learning seriously — then the pressure is not constructive."

The "No Child Left Behind Act" requires that school districts create annual report cards on test results and school progress and that they make this information available to the public. The report cards include test results, information on how your school compares to others statewide and much more. Contact your local school board, or visit your school district's website for report card information.

All tests have pros and cons, but in the end a test is just a test—not the end of the world. As a parent, you should be aware of the benefits and drawbacks of high stakes testing, but not limited by them. If you think that art or music education are as important as the core subjects, then be a vocal advocate for these subjects in your local school. Testing or no testing, school boards and teachers listen to parents and their concerns, so stay active and stay involved.