

# Integrating Standardized Test Preparation and the Middle School Curriculum

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*The author presents the history of standardized testing and discusses the controversial nature of the subject. After analyzing the progress in quality of more recent tests, the author provides many practical methods to incorporate "teaching to the test."*

One of the most important challenges of the teaching profession revolves around standardized testing. Unfortunately, text books used in teacher preparation programs cover briefly, or not at all, this troublesome topic. Whether a university has an actual middle school teacher preparation program, a single course dedicated to the unique issues of early adolescence, or only elementary and/or secondary programs, teachers need to understand that there is no "grace period" during which they may experiment with student preparation for standardized tests without being held responsible for the results. The expectations of administrators, districts, and states concerning score attainment and improvement may lead to excessive pressure in the classroom. The discussion that follows contains information that will help both preservice and inservice teachers understand the functions of standardized tests and how to prepare students to do their best.

The majority of standardized tests ask students for quick responses, most often in multiple choice format, and rely heavily on memorized bits of information. Authentic assessment tasks, ones that test mastery of concepts and ideas central to the discipline, would be preferable to most educators (Shepard, 1991). In 1989 the Carnegie Foundation released Turning Points, a definitive document for middle school educators. Seven years later, Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century, was published. This 1996 document was the culminating report of the Carnegie Foundation's 10 year middle school education study and it reiterated the recommendations of Turning Points. Both documents emphasize that memorization

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of large quantities of information must yield to an emphasis on depth and understanding of subject areas and the connections among them. After years of effort to put the Carnegie principles in place, middle school educators are continuing to recognize and address the unique needs of early adolescence. Thus, in our middle schools we have both Carnegie wisdom (emphasizing depth and understanding) and state mandates (emphasizing memorization and specific skills) vying for our loyalty. But does it have to be one or the other? Looking closely at the current quality of tests available and considering sound instructional preparation practices, the answer is an emphatic NO.

Since there is intrinsic value in standardized test content and skills, and consequences from the scores achieved, shouldn't we teach the material that will be tested? What teacher would consider administering a test and basing student grades on the results without first presenting the material? This is often exactly the case when it comes to standardized testing. Ongoing controversy is engendered, regardless of the level of preparation.

Our federal government and most state legislatures recognize the need for a system of accountability that measures the quality of teaching by the level of student achievement. Education, like any organization or process, needs measures of accountability. Organizations become effective through an ongoing, self-renewing, and often painful, process of assessment and evaluation leading to subsequent reform. Middle school education should not be exempt. If we want education to improve (be reformed), a method of accountability needs to be in place. This need for accountability is a compelling justification for standardized testing. Standardized tests fill the need by providing states with measures that are cost effective and relatively easy to administer (Hymes, 1991).

We need to get a handle on standardized tests and carry them, not as excess baggage, but rather as luggage filled with essentials for each student's journey through lifelong learning. By doing so, our approach becomes positive and useful. This is crucial considering that the results of the tests not only affect what happens within a school, but also become the basis for judging individual, class, school, district and state competency. How best to prepare for testing, while maintaining an ethical stance and sound instructional practices, is the focal point of this article. In addition to discussing the issue of test preparation, a general look at standardized testing is offered, a sampling of

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common criticisms is given, and suggestions are made for a proactive approach.

### General Look at Standardized Testing

In the 1850's Boston trustees decided to implement a written test for all their schools to assess the quality of instruction across the city. Upon examining the results of the written tests and visiting personally with students, the trustees found that the skills receiving high marks on the tests did not translate into quality classroom interaction (Hymes 1991). From the beginning, standardized tests have been a source of controversy.

Norm-referenced achievement tests are administered in virtually every school in the country- over 100 million times a year. This method of testing measures the level of achievement obtained by comparing local scores against a so-called "norm group", a sample of students who were given the tests by the publisher (Hymes, 1991). Some of the most frequently administered norm-referenced tests include the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), the California Achievement Test (CAT), and the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT).

Criterion-referenced achievement tests are administered in about 50% of public schools. Rather than compare students, a criterion-referenced test attempts to measure the extent to which a student has mastered specific learning objectives.

In the current climate that demands attempts at reform and asks for accountability, testing has become a hotly debated topic. Educators, parents, policy makers, and politicians are looking for ways to accumulate evidence of how well schools are doing. According to a recent American Association of School Administrators (AASA) survey, standardized tests are the most commonly used vehicles for accumulating evidence because they are cost effective, can be scored objectively, and are a familiar tradition (Hymes, 1991). The debate surrounding testing is instigated by the pervasive and persuasive arguments that perhaps cost, scoring and tradition are not sufficient reasons for administering tests that many critics say are not only meaningless, but are also potentially harmful to students.

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## Criticisms of Standardized Testing

### The Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education

spends much time and money lobbying political and educational organizations to phase out most standardized multiple choice tests. They state that leaders "...should not rely on existing standardized tests as indicators of educational progress; and should not depend on standardized tests to make decisions about program placements for students. These tests misdirect curriculum, are inadequate educational measures, are not instructionally useful, are often too inaccurate to be the basis for making decisions about individuals..." (Hymes, 1991). Not only do inaccuracies have the potential to create unfairness for individual students, standardized tests also assume that children enter testing situations on equal footing. Geographic, demographic and socioeconomic factors contribute varying experiences that influence test performance (Meisels, Dorfman, and Steele, 1995). Patricia Bolanos, principal of Key Renaissance Middle School in Indianapolis states, "Standardized tests are very, very powerful, and they're used extensively for decisions in our system (Bushweller, 1997)."

The following list is a sampling of common criticisms of standardized tests:

- scores may not reflect mastery, or the absence of it
- may cause curricula to be distorted; narrowed or unreasonably expanded
- alignment of curricula to test may be lacking
- may be culturally biased
- higher-order thinking skills are neglected
- multiple choice format may not be meaningful
- drill and practice may dominate instruction in the name of test preparation
- places undue pressure on classroom teachers to achieve results
- test results are often the sole determinant in funding, student placement and other key decisions

### Developing A Proactive Stance

Abolishing standardized tests is neither imminent nor likely. Creative and resourceful educators have the capability to turn the test preparation process into a positive experience for

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students while achieving high test score results. On a daily basis teachers face and overcome challenges and obstacles for the good of their students. Dealing with the dilemma of standardized testing should be no exception. All the pieces are in place to turn what many dread as a disjointed puzzle into a picture of success. States want schools to be successful, although they may needlessly restrict some legitimate forms of preparation. Districts certainly value high success percentages, although they, too, may unnecessarily inhibit effective preparation. Building administrators know that the reputation of their schools as well as funding allocations rest with test results. They often provide extra training and manpower to aid teachers in test preparation in whatever form it may take. Publishers offer lists of objectives and skills that will be tested, along with samples of the formats to be utilized. And best of all, teachers are armed with previous years' results to diagnose strengths and weaknesses. The pieces of the puzzle are just waiting to be assembled!

It's time to look at some positive aspects of this not-so-hallowed institution. Here are some to consider:

**1. Standardized tests have the ability to measure a broad range of outcomes in ways that are cost and time effective.** Individual districts, for the most part, lack the manpower and expertise to write and score their own standardized tests. Writing reliable and valid assessment requires specific skills and experience accompanied by statistical analyses. In light of this, purchasing standardized tests makes sense.

**2. Standardized tests are evolving into effective assessment tools.** Publishers are responding to the challenge of including items that require higher-order thinking skills. They are offering a greater variety of test items each year. Norms are updated more frequently and greater amounts of information are given that allow for an increased degree of curriculum alignment. Recent versions of the most widely used tests call for analysis of complex information in order to choose the appropriate answer among the four possibilities offered. Sections of the tests now offer the answer choice "not given" which, in essence, creates a problem solving dilemma that mirrors real life decision-making. Most questions that follow reading passages call for more than factual information. For instance, an item may ask for the BEST way to rewrite a passage. None of the choices is actually incorrect, but one can be considered BEST for a variety of

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contextual reasons. It is encouraging to see that the tests available are changing in response to evidence of effective practice.

**3. Standardized tests generally lend themselves to objective scoring.** The answers are either right or wrong. Scoring is mechanical, efficient and fast. This is effective when the goal is performance comparison and amassing information about student progress.

**4. Standardized tests can cause teachers to ask probing and/or difficult questions as they analyze changes in test results.**

- Are test results consistent with the performance of the same group of students in previous years?
- Did the teaming configuration change?
- Was block scheduling introduced or eliminated?
- Did teachers have less time to plan together as a team?
- Did the staff change?
- Were different textbooks used?
- Was preparation for testing, in whatever form, conducted differently?

Just asking questions can lead to positive change. But the questions would not be asked without the prompting provided in the analysis of some measure of achievement.

**5. Standardized tests provide data to document change and draw conclusions** (Sanders and Horn, 1995). Middle school advocates are often asked for definitive data to support the changes brought about by the transformation of junior high schools. Rather than using the excuse that the benefits of reconfiguring education for early adolescents are not measurable, here's an opportunity to make the system work FOR middle school, rather than middle school working in spite of it. Documenting academic improvement while implementing the tenets of Turning Points lends credibility to the middle school philosophy.

**6. Review of standardized test scores can be an excellent team planning tool.** Teams should aggressively look at how their students performed in specific areas on previous tests before the first day of a new school year. Students are not identical blank slates. Teachers should know the strengths and weaknesses at the outset in order to personalize instruction. Looking at the performance of individuals and teams of students over time will provide the basis for the scope and sequence of

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what we teach. Teaming in middle school provides a unique opportunity for comprehensive planning that is not possible in the junior high model.

**7. All major test publishers provide information about the objectives covered on the tests.** These objectives can be readily folded into the planned curriculum. Middle school teachers have an advantage because of the support provided by team effort. A student is the responsibility of two, three, four or five core subject teachers, as well as related arts teachers. As connections are made among subject areas, skills may be taught and reinforced in ways that provide variety and aid students in transferring skills across disciplines. Teams should not view test preparation as an "extra." Test preparation becomes a part of daily instruction. Effective teachers already present students with a myriad of learning opportunities. Thorough and ongoing test analysis will fine tune these opportunities.

### Preparing For Testing

"Teaching to the test" is a value laden phrase that bears explanation in order to avoid misgivings. Teachers test what they teach. Thus, teaching to the test is both inevitable and desirable. Nancy Grasmick, Maryland's state superintendent of schools said in 1997, "If you're teaching to the test and you're mirroring good teaching that will enhance learning, then we don't see anything wrong with that" (Bushweller, 1997). The usefulness of any test is the extent to which it measures mastery of the curriculum. How students perform on material that is tested but not taught holds no significance. Lois Easton, in the 1991 AASA report on assessment, is quoted as saying, "We want our assessment to be transparent, not secret or secure. We want to know that students are doing what we want them to do. If the teachers teach to the test, then we'll know the students can read and write and use math for a purpose...We teach what we value. We test what we value. They should be the same" (Hymes, 1991).

Test preparation should become a natural part of the school day. If we wait until the eleventh hour to begin whatever method of preparation we choose, then a cycle of drill / review / remediate may take over. Test preparation will become an interruption, an inconvenience. If we emphasize skills and format within context the way they naturally occur, test preparation becomes folded into the learning process. Here are some points

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to consider when preparing for standardized tests:

1. Create **enthusiasm**. Think of testing as an opportunity for students to show what they know. Have a test pep rally for your team! Take advantage of the incredible energy of early adolescence.

2. Encourage students to **READ,READ,READ...**then summarize and paraphrase. Use material that interests middle school students (CD inserts, advice columns, skateboard magazines, etc.)

3. Create weekly team **vocabulary lists** with words from every subject. Post these lists in each team classroom. Use them, verbally and in writing. These words become relevant as students hear and see them in many settings.

4. **Problem solve** continually in every class. Ask students for real life situations and help them pose their own problems in cooperative groups.

5. Expose students to all kinds of **data, graphs, and maps**. Examples are plentiful in real life- newspapers, television, magazines, etc. Challenge cooperative groups to collect and interpret various forms of data. A large percentage of science and social studies questions deal with statistics.

6. Have students **edit** their own and others' writing. This requires both skill and trust. Editing is a healthy academic habit to nurture.

7. Give regular pencil and paper **practice tests**, using a variety of formats. The material used for the tests may be from published standardized testing preparation booklets or from the district prescribed curriculum. The important issue is to create an environment similar to what students will experience in standardized testing. This practice will increase their comfort level and help eliminate anxiety.

8. Use **published test preparation materials** to the extent they are allowed by your district. Planning ahead as a team will coordinate these materials to your curricular sequences, as well as provide variety. Requiring middle school students to be organized is one of the most valuable skills we can pass on. Have them keep standardized testing practice folders, complete with a chart of assigned practice materials and progress indicators.

9. Expose your students to an **array of formats covering the same content**. This will reinforce their grasp of content while increasing their ability to adapt.

10. Implement a **test-wiseness program**. Materials for

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programs are available commercially or can be tailor-made for your students. We are doing our students a favor that will last a lifetime when we help them become test-wise. The standardized tests of middle school will certainly not be the last such exams they will encounter.

### Conclusion

Standardized testing, though shrouded in controversy, is an inescapable fact of life in public education. As with tests of any kind, we should include standardized testing as a valid tool to improve instruction. While policy makers grapple with the "do we or don't we" of standardized testing, and publishers attempt to make both the content and format of tests in the image of what is considered best practice, the classroom teacher has the daily responsibility to make this requirement beneficial to students. Rather than allowing the current system to depress or overwhelm, teachers should take a proactive stance and turn standardized testing into a positive experience. With team planning, creativity and encouragement, test preparation can be an ongoing and intertwined layer of instruction.

Bottom line- **make test preparation a natural, integral part of what we do in the classroom!** Students will learn more content, become more flexible, and reap the benefits of success.

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