

The Facts on Education

What is the Value of Standardized Testing?

Standardized testing is a contentious issue in Canada, and internationally. Education in Canada falls within provincial jurisdiction and every province and territory develops its own curricula. Additionally, every province/territory conducts large-scale assessments at specific grade levels. Provinces and territories also participate at the national level in the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) and at the international level in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

There is a large body of literature about these large-scale standardized tests with no consensus on their effectiveness. However, while there is some support for standardized testing, overwhelmingly, research suggests that it does not lead to improved educational outcomes for students.

Arguments against standardized testing include:

- There is a tendency to “teach to the test”, which results in narrowing of the curriculum.
- The tests do not allow for linguistic or other cultural differences among students.
- There is the potential for subgroups of students to become lost within the overall numbers.
- Standardized testing leads to student disengagement.
- The tests do not adequately assess 21st Century skills such as creativity, technological ability, problem solving, or critical thinking skills.

Arguments in favour of standardized testing include:

- The opportunity for comparison of educational outcomes across schools, provinces, or countries.
- Results of standardized tests provide an opportunity to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the system.
- Offering a means to assess accountability.
- Provincial assessments provide a way to evaluate curricula and determine which schools/districts/regions are meeting goals.

Even proponents of standardized testing recognize the limitations of wide scale comparison due to the differences between countries, provinces, and even school districts. Some countries with the longest history of standardized testing recognize these limitations and their reliance on standardized testing is declining. In Canada, some provinces, such as Alberta and Ontario, have recognized the importance of adapting standardized testing to suit varying circumstances and to meet the needs of 21st century learners.

Methods such as problem based learning are at the forefront of curriculum design yet are not evaluated in standardized tests. Standardized testing is, therefore, counterproductive as it focuses on memory and knowledge acquisition rather than ability to apply learning. Educators and students should be provided with assessment tools to identify issues and gaps for individual students as well as schools and/or school districts, improve learning, increase capacity to be independent learners, promote goal-setting, and encourage reflection on learning. A balanced approach to student assessment includes standardized testing coupled with rigorous classroom assessment.

For the research references that inform this issue, please visit:

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