Students of all ages are required to take standardized tests to assess their learning development. Are these tests helpful or harmful to a student’s education?

Read the two articles and write an essay in which you explain the viewpoints presented in each and assess the validity of the arguments for and against standardized testing.

A TEST WE CAN’T AFFORD TO SKIP

Washington Post (Washington, DC)
August 2, 2013
By Norman R. Augustine

1. The chief problem with U.S. schools apparently isn't high dropout rates or under qualified teachers but standardized testing. This is the only conclusion that can be drawn from the push by parents and teachers in Buffalo, Philadelphia, Seattle and elsewhere to help students opt out of taking standardized tests.

2. Members of this burgeoning anti-test movement fail to grasp testing's valuable role in motivating and guiding students and teachers. Preparing young Americans for success in the global economy will require our schools to improve, not abolish, academic standards.

3. Opponents of standardized tests typically rely on three basic arguments.

4. First, they contend that these exams detract from the larger goals of education by encouraging teachers to “teach the test.”

5. In a certain sense, however, teaching the test is the whole point. Exams are instruments for measuring student proficiency. And, as I’ve learned during my career in the business world, measuring something is often the best way to maximize or improve it. Economist Dan Ariely of Duke University has said: “CEOs care about stock value because that’s how we measure them. If we want to change what they care about, we should change what we measure.”

6. If an exam effectively gauges a student’s mastery of U.S. history or English grammar, then teaching the test is simply a matter of helping students develop that knowledge. Teachers who feel that a test ignores something essential should commit to fixing the test, not condemning the entire practice of testing.

7. Another oft-heard argument is that standardized tests drive educators to cheat. Teachers and administrators in the Atlanta public school system, for instance, were indicted this year in an alleged scheme of inflating their students’ test scores to avoid sanctions and secure performance-based bonuses. Not surprisingly, some education advocates were quick to blame the scandal on the tests themselves.

8. It should be noted that most teachers are honest, dedicated professionals. But even if this sort of fraud were rampant, it would be absurd to fault standardized tests. As Thomas J. Kane, director of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, noted this spring, such a reaction would “be equivalent to saying ‘O.K. because there are some players that cheated in Major League Baseball, we should stop keeping score, because that only encourages people to take steroids.’”
The third argument is that high-stakes testing places too much pressure on students. This objection is not without some merit. Having visited schools in other countries where a single five-day examination can determine a student’s future, I understand how tests can sometimes constitute cruel and unusual punishment. But surely there is a sensible middle ground between such brutal practices and full-scale abandonment of standardized testing.

Finding that middle ground has never been more important, as U.S. students continue to fall far behind their international peers. In its most recent report, the World Economic Forum ranked U.S. math and science education 52nd in the world. A 2009 evaluation of students in 34 developed nations found that U.S. 15-year-olds were outperformed in science by students from 12 countries. The results were worse in math: Students in 17 countries outperformed U.S. students.

To address U.S. students’ international achievement gap, the National Governors Association, in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers, a nonpartisan organization of public school officials, helped create a set of nationwide achievement goals known as the Common Core Standards. These voluntary benchmarks in English language arts and math reflect what young Americans will need to know if they are to compete with students from China, Singapore, Finland, South Korea and elsewhere.

Instead of speaking out against the Common Core, critics of standardized testing should see this reform effort as an opportunity to make testing better. Educators have an indispensable role in creating tests that do justice to student achievement while rewarding skilled teachers.

Raising standards should be the primary goal of education reform. Those who argue against standardized testing are not only misguided but are also leading U.S. schools and students in precisely the wrong direction.

The writer is chairman of the National Academies’ congressionally mandated review of U.S. competitiveness. He is a former chairman and chief executive of Lockheed Martin Corp.

REVOLT AGAINST HIGH-STAKES STANDARDIZED TESTING SPREADS

By Valerie Strauss, Updated November 23, 2012

By Lisa Guisbond

As attention turns from analyzing ethnic and gender gaps among voters, let’s focus on another kind of gap that will linger long after Election Day. It’s the yawning chasm over the use of high-stakes standardized testing that exists between teachers, parents and students at the local level, and policy elites, foundations, entrepreneurs and mainstream editorial writers on the national level.

The latter group continues to promote testing as a way to force improvements and address inequalities in learning outcomes—despite more than a decade of failure. Meanwhile, more and more people at the local level are joining a national grassroots rebellion against high-stakes testing. Promises of new and better standards and assessments are not persuading test-weary public school stakeholders that a slight variation on what has failed will suddenly succeed.
This broad-based dissatisfaction showed up in some surprising places on Election Day. Indiana voters ousted Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett, a devotee of test-driven reforms, in favor of 33-year veteran educator Glenda Ritz. Idaho voters soundly rejected several “reform” measures, including test score-based performance pay for teachers.

It won’t be news to loyal readers of the “Answer Sheet” that there’s a rebellion brewing. But it’s worth a moment to consider the full dimensions and status of this revolt and think about how to further expand and strengthen it. Hundreds of school boards have now passed resolutions loudly stating, “Enough is enough.” Parent groups are rallying to provide support. Test boycotts are expanding. Academic researchers are increasingly speaking out. The growing resistance is attracting increased attention from policymakers and the media. As the scope of the opposition expands, some local organizers are focusing on winning policy changes in their states and communities.

Former Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott helped spark the revolt in January, saying publicly that the mentality that standardized testing is the “end-all, be-all” is a “perversion” of what a quality education should be. Then school boards in Texas that had passed resolutions stating that tests were “strangling education,” gained hundreds of endorsements within weeks. FairTest organized a dozen other education, civil rights, and religious groups to launch the National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing. Groups of parents, students, teachers, principals, school board members and education researchers from around the nation endorsed similar statements. All decry the way high-stakes testing policies are harming our schools, teachers, students and families.

Here’s an update on the status of the high-stakes testing rebellion around the nation:

The National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing has more than 13,700 individual and almost 460 organizational endorsers. It calls on the U.S. Congress and Administration “to overhaul [NCLB,] reduce the testing mandates, promote multiple forms of evidence of student learning and school quality in accountability, and not mandate any fixed role for the use of student test scores in evaluating educators.” The Pennsylvania School Boards Association as well as individual boards in Florida, Oklahoma, Ohio, and Virginia endorsed it.

Florida activists adopted their own versions, and the Florida School Board Association passed a variation at its annual conference in the spring. The National Parent Teacher Association said the resolution is consistent with its policy positions. Regional groups continue to announce new initiatives based on the Resolution, including the Massachusetts group Citizens for Public Schools.

The Texas school board resolution has been endorsed by more than 830 school districts representing more than 4.3 million-(88%)-of all of Texas public school students.

Top-down testing mandates, in large part, drove Chicago teachers to strike. The teachers’ arguments were bolstered by 88 researchers from 16 Chicago-area universities who had signed an open letter to Major Rahm Emanuel opposing the city’s plan for using student test scores to evaluate teachers and principals. The letter said, “The new evaluation system...centers on misconceptions about student growth, with potentially negative impact on the education of Chicago’s children.” More than 1,100 New York researchers endorsed a similar letter to Governor Andrew Cuomo.

A letter protesting New York State’s teacher evaluation policy and its reliance on student test scores has been signed by 1,512 principals from urban, suburban and rural schools, more than one-third of all New York principals.

The nation’s second largest teachers union, the American Federation of Teachers, unanimously adopted a resolution at its annual convention saying the focus on standardized testing has undermined education. The National Education Association has approved similar resolutions in the past.
The Niagara (NY) Regional Parent Teacher Association passed an emergency resolution in late September. It says, “The intent of this resolution is to ask the State Education Department to suspend its testing program until such time as it can create a new one that reliably measures educational progress without harming children and lowering the quality of education.”

School boards, parent organizations, and others continue to pass variations on the resolutions and consider how to win the political battle to change testing policies.

Parent groups in a number of states, including Colorado, California and New York, that helped parents opt their children out of last spring’s tests are planning to continue and expand their boycotts.

At the local level, parents, students and teachers can unite to achieve concrete changes, such as halting the proliferation of “interim” or “benchmark” tests imposed by districts that are in addition to state or federal mandates. Winning changes against entrenched state and federal high-stakes testing policies will be a longer, harder task. But the upsurge in opposition to destructive high-stakes testing increases the likelihood of such victories.

FairTest’s web site has fact sheets, papers and materials to help testing opponents in their efforts.