

# The Washington Post

## 'Is this really what education is about?'

By [Valerie Strauss](#)

This was written by Vicki Abeles, a parent of three and the director of the documentary, "[Race to Nowhere](#)" and Jo Boaler a professor of mathematics education at Stanford University. "[Race to Nowhere](#)" challenges common assumptions about how children are best educated.

By Vicki Abeles and Jo Boaler



Welcome to standardized testing season, when students nationwide are clearing their desks, sharpening their pencils and fighting feelings of anxiety to meet our schools', states', and federal government's desire for a simple, quantifiable way to measure them. Is this really what education is about?

It shouldn't be. Educators across America agree that [high-stakes testing](#) has taken the place of meaningful teaching and learning in our schools. They're united in their conclusion that it's a poor tool for assessing a child's educational progress and needs. They agree that an over-reliance [on standardized testing](#) actively worsens the quality of American schooling. At best, they say, it leads to a narrowed, inflexible curriculum aimed at test prep and regurgitation. At worst, it erodes our students' abilities to grow into lifelong, creative learners and inquisitive problem solvers.

But the perception that parents and the taxpaying public *want* standardized tests — that we in fact *need* them in order to hold our teachers and school boards accountable for our children's educations — persists. And so standardized testing remains ascendant across American school districts. As our classrooms have been turned into test prep centers, important subjects that are not emphasized such as science, history and art have been significantly reduced in schools. In turn, students are becoming disengaged, stressed, checked out and — worst — dropouts.

Even for those students who stick with it, tests degrade the educational experience, fueling performance anxiety and the false impression that academic success is about speed, accuracy and competition. In the elementary schools of Palo Alto, California, for example, students as young as first grade are given a district-mandated test of 50 math questions to solve in three minutes. Children often cry when they're given these tests. Worse, they imbibe the message that math is a performance subject and success is all about reproducing facts under pressure even though the latest science tells us that speed tests are a direct cause of math anxiety and that they impede mathematics learning.

And the pressure is harsh, indeed. At a high school in the Bay area, the principal announces whether his school has performed better or worse than neighboring schools over the PA system. And the statewide test scores appear on students' transcripts — an inclusion that's prompted some teachers to remark to students that the scores will "follow you for the rest of your life." Such public anxiety is found across grade levels. At a screening of the film, "[Race to Nowhere](#)," held at the California Teachers Association, several educators volunteered that the state of California has developed an official protocol for what to do when a young child vomits on a standardized test. Enough said, no?

Perhaps even worse than the anxiety they create, [standardized tests](#) also erode the student's relationship with his or her teacher. As Deborah Stipek, former dean of education at Stanford University, has pointed out, standardized testing doesn't just limit the teacher's ability to innovate her curriculum or pace his lessons to individual student needs. It also destroys teacher's ability to cultivate the trust, respect and sensitivity that turn her students on to learning. "When tests become high-stakes, teachers naturally focus their attention on the knowledge and skills the tests measure," she writes. This leaves little time for educators developing what Stipek calls "a secure relationship" between the teacher and the student. And it undermines the benefits of that relationship, which is a student who is unafraid to ask questions and undeterred by challenges.

Beyond the educational sector, industry and government entities recognize the risks of an over-reliance on standardized testing, too. A [2010 IBM survey of more than 1,500 chief executive officers](#) from around the world found that executives hire for creativity, not for rote memorization and test-taking chops.

Meanwhile, a recently released report by the National Endowment for the Arts found that disadvantaged students do better academically if they are deeply involved in in-school or extracurricular arts programs. And the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, in conjunction with the Education Department, has [announced a plan](#) to bring art, music, dance, theater and other forms of creative expression into eight struggling schools in Washington D.C. -- to make them better.

These shifts are promising — but only if they signal national reform that de-emphasizes standardized testing countrywide and reintroduces educator autonomy and curricular versatility in every classroom. As it stands, American students will spend the better part of a week this month taking standardized tests. They will be denied the opportunity to develop their passions, to think deeply, and to experience critical thinking, innovation and teamwork. And they'll be taught that it's fill-in bubbles and timed answers that measure their academic worth and growth.

This is why we support the [National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing](#). Inspired by a statement that has been adopted by more than [473 Texas school boards representing nearly 2.7 million students](#), this resolution is backed by a coalition of major national education, civil rights, and parents groups. It calls on federal and state policymakers to reduce standardized test mandates and instead base school accountability on multiple forms of measurement. Initial signers include the NAACP Legal Defense Fund,

## Parents Across America, the National Education Association, and the National Center for Fair & Open Testing

We urge everyone who is concerned about the future of education in America to [read this resolution](#) and to endorse it, publicly and vocally, in communities and before school boards across the United States. For too long, state and federal policymakers have claimed that it's the public — parents and taxpayers at large — who demand standardized testing as a tool of measurement and liability for the American education system and its educators. It's time to demand a new model: classrooms that eschew rote memorization and test prep; teachers with the power to implement effective and flexible teaching strategies; students who are connected to their teachers and love to learn. Policymakers will find it hard to argue with that.

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By [Valerie Strauss](#) | 07:00 AM ET, 05/20/2012