

# It's Time to Debunk the Myths About Standardized Tests



*(This is the second post in a four-part series. You can see Part One here.)*

The new question of the week is:

***What are other ways than standardized-test scores to evaluate the effectiveness of schools?***

In Part One, Holly Spinelli, Tameka Porter, Ph.D., Mary K. Tedrow, and Meghann Seril shared their responses. Holly, Tameka, and Mary were also guests on [my 10-](#)

[minute BAM! Radio Show](#)

. You can also find a list

of, and links to, [previous shows here](#).

Today, Joseph Rodgers, Lorie Barber, Cindy Garcia, and Mike Kaechele contribute their reflections.

## Standardized Test ‘Myths’

*Joseph Rodgers has experience as a teacher, middle school basketball coach, elementary and middle school administrator, and Title I program director. He is the author of a new Routledge Eye on Education book, [A Guide to Impactful Teacher](#)*

[Evaluations](#)

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### Five Myths of Standardized Testing and How Schools Should Be Assessed

*Myth #1.* Parents trust the results.

This may have been true 15 years ago. The recent round of testing changes has made parents skeptical of the results. Parents just aren't that concerned anymore. They are thinking about college or jobs for their kids.

*Myth #2.* Students are motivated to do well on tests.

Students are not concerned with state-level testing. To a teenager or a younger child, it's just a crummy day at school behind a computer. Students do not see value

in testing and openly admit to rushing through or giving poor effort to “get it over.”

*Myth #3.* Tests scores are a valid measurement of teacher effectiveness.

There are an infinite number of ways teachers demonstrate their effectiveness. Standardized tests are only a small sample. All students enter school at varying levels and learn and grow at different rates. Student-test scores are influenced by several factors, only one of which is instructional quality.

*Myth #4.* Standardized tests are an objective measure of success.

The validity of state-level standardized tests has been brought into question. Schools across the country saw their scores drop 50 percent, 60 percent, and even 70 percent with the latest round of testing changes. Schools that were achieving well into the 90 percent passing rate dropped below 50 percent in just one year. The systems just aren't valid anymore.

*Myth #5.* Standardized tests are the primary measure of school quality.

There is a place for standardized testing in schools; it just shouldn't be the dominating factor in determining school quality. Standardized tests don't allow for human variation. Not all kids learn the same skills at the same age. Standardized tests are one data point, not a foundation for assessing school quality.

### **What are other ways than standardized-test scores to evaluate the effectiveness of schools?**

There are a few broad areas that states should consider as guides for districts and schools to assess their programming. If states could construct broad areas of prioritization, the local schools could assess, plan, implement, and revise their actions locally.

### **Community Support**

If the overall community, businesses, places of worship, chambers of commerce work together and create an environment of support, families will be more engaged and have the basic resources to support their own children.

What is the extent of the involvement of the community in the schools? What investment—resource, human, capital, or tangible—is the community making in the local schools?

### **Parental Satisfaction, Support, and Involvement**

A school that is supported by the community must have parental support, and involvement. Quality schools have active parents.

What is the perception of the school by the parents? What is the level of satisfaction parents have with the school? What is the level of parental involvement?

### **Professional Staff**

Professional staff should be judged on their ability to collaborate, build community partnerships, and develop relationships with families.

What is the perception of the school by the staff? Are the professional educators satisfied with the work? Is the organizational climate healthy?

### **Students' Accomplishments**

Communities, families, and educators working together, providing mutual support and respect, will result in positive and productive students ready to lead and contribute as adults.

What are students accomplishing? How are students involved in the life of the school?

Student accomplishment can be broad—state awards, honor societies, scholarships. Student accomplishments can also be very narrow and personalized.

### **Conclusion**

Standardized-tests scores are a small snapshot of a bigger picture. They do not even begin to tell the story of the great things happening in schools. They also don't give us any insight on how to improve. Schools should be assessed by the broad constructs, community involvement, parental involvement/satisfaction, a productive and satisfied professional staff, and student accomplishments.



## What Is 'Standard'?

*Lorie Barber is a former elementary school teacher turned educational director for an independent bookstore:*

Why do states, districts, and schools insist on hammering a square peg into a round hole? After all, that's what standardized tests are: ill-fitting, inaccurate, and unjust "solutions" used to measure schools' effectiveness. They are written by for-profit companies with questions designed to confuse students all in the name of "rigor" and have little, if any, connection to the standards they are deemed to measure. Moreover, standardized tests are achievement-based in a pedagogical world where individual growth over a period of time is a more accurate measure of success.

Oxford Dictionary defines *standard* as, "an idea or thing used as a measure, norm, or model in comparative evaluations." Using that definition, we must ask, "What is normal?" Teachers work with students who are beautifully unique in countless ways. We differentiate for that uniqueness in countless ways. We know that one size never fits all and that each student should receive what they need to succeed, which is rarely the same thing.

Yet we test them the same.

The same test for every student.

The same allotted dates and times.

The same passages, questions, problems, and solutions.

We measure for "normal," which does not exist. This is not an effective measure of school success.

So what are some ways we can effectively measure school success that don't provoke anger in parents, anxiety in children, and stress in teachers and staff? To do that, we must look at the whole child and how they are growing.

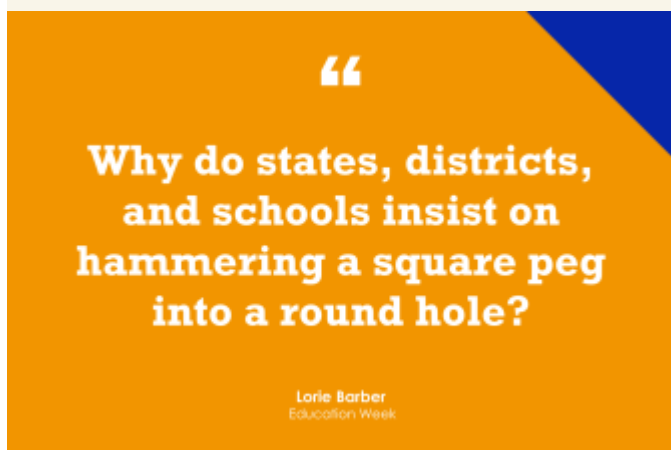
What if part of measuring a school's success involved the students it serves? What if it was based on what the kids could show as evidence of their learning? For example, a 3rd grade student could share their math fact data over a period of time, explaining their growth and what they are working toward. A 5th grade student could share their reading journal from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, with marked pages to demonstrate where they were really understanding a standard. An 8th grade student could share their attendance record from last year to this year, explaining their work on being to school on time. This could add a

social/emotional/behavioral growth piece to the complex puzzle that is a human being.

What if part of measuring a school's success involved the staff it employs to serve those students? What if it were based on what the teachers thought about the school in which they worked? After all, a supported teacher is a more confident teacher, and a more confident teacher is more likely to continually want to strengthen and grow their practice. For example, a teacher could, as part of their evaluation, evaluate the school. What is going well? What, from their perspective, needs to be immediately changed? What needs changing, but could be part of a longer-term plan? Yes, this takes trust between teacher and evaluator, but this is where we dream big. Teachers must trust that honest feedback will not be met with rebuke or retribution. Teachers and administrators must trust that all are working toward the common goal of serving the students effectively, which is the job of schools in a nutshell.

What if part of measuring a school's success involved the caregivers of those students it serves? What if it was based on what families thought about the school in which their kids attend? Not those annual, state-driven "5Essentials" surveys. I'm talking about a conference where caregivers have a voice. Instead of teachers presenting how the child "is doing," educators could partner with families and ask: What could administrators and teachers be doing better in service to the students? What changes need to be made now? In the future? Asking our families to dream big creates a sense of community and trust that both educators and caregivers often say is missing from the family/school partnership. This would mean that educators must first have a deep understanding of their professional and personal biases and be open (without retribution toward the caregiver or student) to change in their pedagogy based on the student's lived experience.

None of these solutions is *standard*. None of them are tests. All of them are measurable and attainable.



## Professional Learning Communities

*Cindy Garcia has been a bilingual educator for 15 years and is currently a districtwide specialist for P-6 bilingual/ESL mathematics. She is active on Twitter at*

*@CindyGarciaTX and on [her blog](#)*

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An effective school is one with a safe environment where all students are learning at high levels. One way to gauge effectiveness is by the existence of a strong professional learning community.

Effective schools have a consistent system in place for campus faculty to meet and continuously analyze multiple data points in order to figure out what instructional strategies are working. While engaging in the PLC process, campus faculty determine what is not working and what changes need to be made in order to support student learning.

Student engagement is another way to evaluate school effectiveness. Student engagement goes beyond listening attentively and paying attention to the teacher. Students are engaged when they are actively working, are curious, ask questions, and are motivated. Engaged students are not just completing and working on knowledge-level assignments. Students are being challenged and taking part in a productive struggle as they work to figure out how to complete a task. When students are engaged, they take ownership of their learning and they have some choice in either process, content, or product. Engaged students are eager to be in school, work hard, and are open to new learning.

An effective school needs administrators that are strong instructional leaders. They do not need to be experts in all content areas, but they should provide ample opportunities for learning and collaboration for their faculty. Campus administrators prioritize classroom visits as a way to gauge student engagement and implementation of strategies learned during professional development. Part of being an instructional leader is taking part in PLCs and getting to know which students are not being successful and then following up to make sure the necessary supports are provided for students. Leaders that seek feedback from faculty, staff, and students throughout the school year are able to make adjustments as needed before problems and issues escalate.

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Cindy Garcia  
Education Week

## ‘Wasted’ Test-Prep Time

*Mike Kaechele*

*is a teacher, author, and consultant of social-emotional learning and project-based learning. He believes in student-centered learning by giving kids authentic opportunities to do real work with local community partners. His upcoming book, The Pulse of PBL: Seamlessly Integrating Social and Emotional Learning, explores how to fuse SEL into the daily practices of the PBL classroom:*

Standardized tests are great at measuring what they are designed to: student’s abilities to score well on a sterile test with a specific format, centered on a limited subset of knowledge deemed critical by some committee. We know that there is so much more to learning and education than what is on these tests. Too many of our students’ abilities fall outside of their narrow scope and are not measured. While standardized tests have demonstrated gaps between the educational opportunities for certain subsets of learners in this country, they have not offered any helpful solutions to educational inequity. It’s past time to reject the deficit thinking of standardized testing as a path forward.

The first thing that I would “measure” to determine a school’s effectiveness is student, parent, and community feedback. Schools would send multiple surveys throughout the year to elicit feedback from the community about the culture and effectiveness of the school. Regular meetings would connect students, teachers, and the community to reflect on school practices and local opportunities for students to learn and contribute.



Imagine for a moment all of the time, energy, focus, and money currently wasted on test preparation shifting to making sure that students and parents felt that school was meeting their needs. School improvement meetings would be required to have students and parents not only present but at the center. School improvement topics and goals would not be based on test scores but the data from the feedback surveys. Money squandered on test preparation could be reallocated to fieldwork opportunities for students in the community. Social and emotional learning would be prioritized to help students grow holistically. Project-based learning would be the framework for meaningful academic work addressing local issues. At the end of each project, students would reflect on the process and offer feedback on how they, the teacher, and their group could improve.

The second thing that I would use to measure schools are the portfolios of authentic work from the PBL projects students are embarking on. Throughout their school career, students would be demonstrating content knowledge alongside SEL skills of confidence, public speaking, problem-solving, autonomous learning, and collaboration with their classmates and community members. Physical and digital artifacts would be curated and selected by the students themselves to represent their progress. At the end of each year, they would present to the community to demonstrate their cumulative growth.

Rather than measuring schools to reward or punish them, the emphasis should be on growth and increased opportunities for all children. As a result of the partnerships between the students and the community and the teacher responsiveness to student and parent feedback, schools would be viewed as relevant, vital institutions in the community. Standardized testing is often treated as inevitable, a necessity that cannot be removed, but it is not. We know better and can do better.

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