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The Failures of Standardized Testing

Originally standardized testing in United States schools was for the purpose of “diagnostic information about student, teacher, and school performance” (Lay, 2009) at the district level. Standardized tests were meant to compare students in individual classrooms to each other in a way that removed favoritism out of the picture. However, these tests have evolved to the national level where students are compared with each other while ignoring the fact that not all students have the same access to all the resources necessary to pass nationally implemented standardized tests. Therefore in order to understand why standardized testing fails students and how school libraries can help bridge the gap, better information must be available about the historical problem of national testing.

History has shown that high-stakes testing disfavor minorities and the poor. In the 1970s, African-Americans worried that the tests would be inheritably biased against them since their children would not have “equal opportunities to learn the material” (Lay, 2009). These fears have been proven true when only 5% of African-American fourth graders score at or above the proficient level (Williams, 2003). Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have also suffered from a significant achievement gap disrupting their potential to succeed. Lay points out that “low-income children also tend to be concentrated in high-poverty schools” where resources are scarce therefore they are unable to have the same opportunities as students from more affluent areas in learning the material that is tested by standardized testing. The lack of “fairness

of distribution of resources” (Williams, 2003) creates a system where students from high income families score disproportionately higher than their lower income classmates (Nichols, 2007).

Then in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act made schools accountable for students meeting standards. If a school is unable to keep up, they lose funds and resources that would have allowed them to strive towards meeting the standards set for them. Worse still in this era of high-stake testing is that if a district is unable to meet those standards, they could face abolishment or restructuring (Donham, 2008). Therefore, minority and poverty-stricken students are systemically being exposed to broken up communities as their resource-deprived schools are broken up and the students bussed further away from home.

In order to help offset the factors of poverty, schools must provide a strong media center with skilled librarians who can assist students. The school library’s role in standardized testing cannot be overstated: a better equipped library and certified teacher-librarians increase test scores. For example, “scores on standardized reading and English tests [...] tended to increase when school libraries had newer books, and had more open hours with staff during the school week” (McGarry, 2010). In school districts where not every student has access to a home computer and the internet, the best defense is for schools to employ librarians who can help students close the gap between poorer and richer communities. In Colorado, test scores increased 21% when librarians and teachers collaborated together (McGarry, 2010).

A lack of resources has historically proven to be detrimental to student success. School librarians will not be able to fix the systematic failures of the standardized testing, but they can make the gap smaller. With this in mind, we can work towards a fairer system for all students.

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