

Candace Stoltzfus and Molly Zahner

Eng 100

Formal Assignment #2

16 April 2018

Eliminating Standardized Tests Nationwide

On a Saturday morning, sixteen-year-old Mira stepped out of her parents car, her feet hitting the pavement of the sidewalk. She shut the door behind her with her sweaty palms, but it was not from the heat of the approaching summer. She looked up at Arcadia High School, pondering if she should go through this. Mira had worked so hard to get to this point. Instead of heading through the double doors of the building, she spun on her heel and headed to the right towards the city. Mira walked until she found the Greyhound bus station. She had already ordered her ticket for a cheap price which would take her to San Francisco. When Mira took her seat on the bus, she pulled out her phone to give her brother an explanation for her disappearance. The stress of the SAT was not worth staying, she decided. The pressure of being academically perfect was too much to handle. Mira was running away from it all.

This is a real life example of what Finland is trying to avoid in their education system. According to Michael Moore's documentary *Where to Invade Next*, until recently, Finland and America were relatively alike in international educational listings. Currently, however, "Finland is ranked at or near the top of having the best-educated students in the world (Moore)." Finland's education system is vastly different than America's. Most Finnish schools rarely use standardized tests, while American public education have more standardized tests than any other country. Standardized testing, as defined by ProCon.org is, "any test that's administered, scored,

and interpreted in a standard, predetermined manner." This definition will be the one referred to in this argument. Finland believes that America should get rid of standardized tests and multiple choice questions because it does not reflect the true knowledge of the student. One teacher said, "If what you are teaching your students is to do well on those tests, then you're not really teaching them anything." In addition, teachers do not get the opportunity to educate their students on subjects they are passionate about because they spend their instructional time having students practice for these tests. American schools should eliminate standardized tests because it will expand students' critical thinking skills and improve the quality of teaching.

The main purpose of education is for children and young adults to learn and gain skills needed in working world. When students reach high school, they begin to ponder their future and make decisions about what they want to do for the rest of their lives. In order to be accepted into their dream college, high schoolers work their hardest to maintain a good GPA, participate in extracurriculars, and do well on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). However, research shows that this standardized test may be restraining students from developing one fundamental skill needed for college and the workforce: critical thinking. Marcia Clemmitt explains in her article "Teaching Critical Thinking" that hiring managers are looking for critical thinkers in the workplace. She wrote, "Under one common definition, 'critical thinking' means the examination and evaluation of ideas, events and arguments in their contexts." Since technology is taking over many jobs, employers want workers who can be creative and formulate ideas on their own. In the 1970s, cognitive-science researchers recognized the importance critical thinking in future generation employees and that it should be taught at a young age. However,

this policy was never put into practice, leading to America focusing on the standardized test as a measure of success.

Clemmitt emphasizes how standardized testing is a problem because it trains students to memorize facts instead of thinking critically about a subject. Teaching a method of memorizing facts for a test does not teach students how to think analytically and problem solve. In order to answer multiple choice questions on a test, only a vague knowledge of the subject is really needed. A Finnish exchange student, when asked about the differences between Finland's and America's tests, says that Finnish students have very few multiple-choice exams. "We have to know it (the information), really (Moore)." According to Clemmitt's article, teachers see that creativity and deep thinking are often squelched by memorizing facts and stressing to get the "one right answer." The method of studying for standardized tests is not promoting students to develop thinking skills.

Those who believe that tests such as the SAT should still be implemented in high schools may argue that it is a legitimate measurement of a student's academic performance. One person who condones this is Herbert J. Walberg who taught at Harvard University and University of Illinois at Chicago for thirty five years. He thinks that colleges should use the scores for admission processes, especially for programs such as law and medicine. However, an author named Tony Wagner has the opposite belief. He wrote a book called "The Global Achievement Gap" which addresses his observations as an educator of the lack of change in American schools and how the only reformation in education now is the increase in test-taking. Wagner used a quote from Thomas Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*, where he explains that there is necessity in today's world to be skilled at thinking and analyzing data especially for jobs such as

engineering, architecture, software coding, technical support, customer service, and accounting. All of these jobs require critical thinking skills which, according to Wagner and Clemmit, is not developed when taking a standardized test. Students have to learn more than simply recognizing the answer on a test. They have to be able to think the problem through and generate their own answer to the question.

Another claim Walberg makes is that standardized tests target areas where students need to improve their work and it will motivate them to work harder. He ultimately believes that the SATs create competition amongst American students to pick out the individuals who will be more successful academically. Wagner noticed some eye-opening facts about the global competition for jobs. Whenever he would call technical support companies, he asked the employee on the other end where their work was based. Nearly all the phone calls he made over the years were based in another country rather than someone from the United States. Wagner concluded that competition for jobs is not just among Americans. It is a competition against every working individual in the world. Other countries are becoming much more advanced in education because they do not misuse their time on preparing for standardized tests. They are developing the proper critical thinking skills needed for high-income jobs which makes Americans a less-than-likely candidate in the workforce.

Standardized tests should be eliminated not only because they fail to teach students critical thinking, but also because they lower the quality of teaching. The first reason why they lower the teaching quality is because teachers, in the effort to prepare students for the test, often have to cut out valuable lecture time or even stop teaching entire subjects to make time for test preparation. The Harvard Political Review states in a recent article that many schools either

decreased or completely stopped teaching subjects such as “social studies, literature, art, music, physical education. The article also mentioned a 2006 study by the Center on Education Policy that found since NCLB (No Child Left Behind) Act was passed, 71 percent of school districts cut back on subjects like history and music so they could spend more time on the tested subjects (Harvard Political Review). American students are cheated out of much valuable learning because so much of their education is spent in testing and studying for tests. They are missing out on important subjects like music or art or social studies.

One reason why Finland is so advanced in their education is because they get more opportunity to teach, despite fewer school days. In typical American schools, students will spend one third of their education preparing for standardized tests according to Michael Moore. Compared to other countries, which give their students an average of three exams during their twelve years, America gives an average of 112 mandated standardized tests to students (Layton, Washington Post). The article entitled “How Standardized Tests Shape- And Limit- Student Learning” was written by the Nation Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) explaining how educators must change their curriculum in order to prepare students for standardized tests. A study showed that teachers lose 60 to 110 hours of instructional time because they are required to focus on test material. They are even given a specific curriculum which is revolved around standardized tests. According to the article by the NCTE, students are not gaining high-level skills, such as writing, and teachers are not able to educate them through their own methods of teaching which “deprofessionalizes” them. Unfortunately, the teachers of America’s education system are hindered from passionately teaching the things they love because those subjects do

not benefit students for standardized tests. The incredible amount of time teachers are forced to dedicate to standardized testing is impairing their teaching quality.

Another reason standardized tests lower the level of teaching is because teachers often feel pressure to pass students or compromise student progress for the sake of good test scores. Good test scores are the determining factor in how much funding a school get. In other words, if students do not score high on the test, those schools won't get funded and will therefore lose their teachers. This puts immense pressure on teachers to teach to the test. Teachers are more likely to pass a student or manipulate a student's test results so that their school will be funded and they will receive a good evaluation. The Washington Post writes that in order to win a certain grant, teachers were evaluated partly by standardized test scores.

An article by the Harvard Political Review states that there are numerous ways to manipulate test scores so that the school appears to be doing well while not really increasing the level of achievement. The article references a 2009 report by the Journal of Education Policy and Leadership saying that "states have lowered the scores students need to pass" to make their school appear to be doing well (Harvard Political Review). When the evaluation and funding of a school is solely dependant on the results of a test, it is no wonder that schools and educators push so hard for students to get good test scores. Instead of being concerned about actually passing on knowledge to the their students and making sure there is intellectual growth, standardized testing pressures teachers to only focus on giving students "test taking skills" and in the process, teach them nothing about real knowledge. It is only when American schools eliminate standardized testing that teachers will be able to teach to the best of their abilities.

Both student's lack of critical thinking skills, and the decreased quality of education students receive when teachers must teach to standardized tests are evidences that standardized testing is not properly preparing students with the skills they need. If American schools are serious about improving the public education system, they will see these deficiencies and work hard to decrease and ultimately eliminate standardized testing. It is only then that our schools will be able to give the next generation what it needs to succeed in the world. America should not be fearful about changing our education system. As a teacher in Finland points out, "Many of these things that have made Finland perform well in education are initially American ideas. We try to teach them (students) to think for themselves and to be critical to what they're learning. We try to teach them to be happy... to respect others and respect yourself" (Moore).

Sixteen-year-old Mira, who was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, was found a day after her disappearance when she asked her parents to pick her up from the Los Angeles public library. She said she was unhappy because she had to leave her school in China and that the academic pressures of her new school in America was too much to handle. Mira is just one example of how standardized tests affect students academically.

Works Cited

Clemmitt, M. (2015, April 10). Teaching critical thinking. *CQ Researcher*, 25, 313-336.

Retrieved from <http://library.cqpress.com/>

Layton, Lyndsey. "Study Says Standardized Testing Is Overwhelming Nation's Public Schools."

The Washington Post, WP Company, 24 Oct. 2015,

www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/study-says-standardized-testing-is-overwhelming-nations-public-schools/2015/10/24/8a22092c-79ae-11e5-a958-d889faf561dc_story.html?utm_term=.22ec8cbe185a.

Moore, Michael, director. *Where to Invade Next*. Dog Eat Dog Films, 2016.

Mulholland, Quin. "The Case Against Standardized Testing." Harvard Political Review The

Case Against Standardized Testing Comments, 14 May 2015,

harvardpolitics.com/united-states/case-standardized-testing/.

National Council of Teachers of English. "How Standardized Tests Shape- And Limit-

Student Learning." 2014. Retrieved from

<http://cccc.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/CC/0242-nov2014/CC0242PolicyStandardized.pdf>

Parvini, Sarah, and Frank Shyong. "Feeling Pressure from School, Exams, San Marino Student

Runs Away, Police Say.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 8 June 2015,
www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-arcadia-missing-20150607-story.html.

Rocha, Veronica. “San Marino Teen Who Ran Away Because of Academic Pressure Returns Home.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 9 June 2015,
www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-san-marino-teen-found-mira-hu-found-20150609-story.html.

“Standardized Tests - ProCon.org.” *ProCon.org Headlines*, ProCon.org,
standardizedtests.procon.org/.

Wagner, Tony. *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need--and What We Can Do about It*. Basic Books, a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014.

Walberg, Herbert J. "Standardized Tests Effectively Measure Student Achievement." *Standardized Testing*, edited by Dedria Bryfonski, Greenhaven Press, 2012. At Issue. *Opposing Viewpoints In Context*,
http://link.galegroup.com.libdb.dccc.edu/apps/doc/EJ3010478217/OVIC?u=pa_de_ccc&sid=OVIC&xid=94992545. Accessed 7 Apr. 2018. Originally published as "Stop the War Against Standardized Tests," *Defining Ideas: A Hoover Institution Journal*, 20 May 2011.