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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 has more standardized tests than any other country. Standardized testing, as defined by ProCon.org is, "any test that is 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. 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. One Finnish teacher said, "If what you are teaching your students is to do well on those tests, then you're not really teaching them anything." American schools should eliminate standardized tests because it will expand students' critical thinking skills and improve the quality of teaching.

By eliminating standardized testing, students will get the opportunity to acquire critical thinking skills needed for the working world. One reason why standardized testing is ineffective in developing critical thinking skills is because it trains students to memorize facts instead of thinking critically about a subject. Marcia Clemmitt emphasizes in her article "Teaching Critical Thinking" that teaching a method of memorizing facts for a test does not teach students how to think analytically and problem solve. She wrote, "[u]nder one common definition, 'critical thinking' means the examination and evaluation of ideas, events and arguments in their contexts." In order to answer multiple choice questions on a test, only a vague knowledge of the subject is really needed (Clemmitt). A Finnish exchange student, when asked about the differences between Finland's and America's tests, says "[w]e have to know it [the information], really (Moore)." He goes on to explain that multiple choice questions do not reflect the true knowledge of the student which is something he did not enjoy in American schools. 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.

The lack of critical thinking skills developed in students is hurting them and their ability to thrive in certain areas of work. One person who condones standardized tests is Herbert J. Walberg who taught at Harvard University and University of Illinois at Chicago for thirty-five years. He argues 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 a 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 both 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.

American students are losing jobs to students of other countries because they do not have the required critical thinking skills needed for their field of work. Another claim Walberg makes is that the SATs create competition amongst American students and it picks 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 (Wagner). He argues that 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. One reason behind this claim is that educators are given a specific curriculum revolving around standardized tests. In typical American schools, students will spend one third of their education preparing for standardized tests according to Michael Moore. 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 a well rounded education because so much of their school time is spent in testing and studying for tests. Unfortunately, the teachers of America’s education system are hindered from passionately teaching the things they love if 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 give students good test scores for the sake of the school's reputation. Tim Walker writes in his article "Poll: Americans Want Less Standardized Testing and More School Funding" that good test scores are the determining factor in how much funding a school gets. In other words, if students do not score high on standardized tests, those schools will not get funded and will therefore lose their teachers (Walker). 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 (Walker). 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. This puts immense pressure on teachers to teach to the test (Harvard Political Review). 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. Eliminating standardized tests will alleviate the pressure on teachers to pass their students even when they do not know the subject material.

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.

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