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A review of: The Test: Why our schools are obsessed with standardized testing—but you don't have to be

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A review of: *The Test: Why our schools are obsessed with standardized testing—but you don't have to be*

Abstract

This is a review of Anya Kamenetz's book, "*The Test: Why our schools are obsessed with standardized testing—but you don't have to be*"

Keywords

Testing, standardized tests, accountability, k-12 schooling, assessment

Book Review

Lasisi Ajayi

A review of: Anya Kamenetz (2015). *The Test: Why our schools are obsessed with standardized testing—but you don't have to be*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.

Anya Kamenetz's *Why our schools are obsessed with standardized testing—but you don't have to be* is a timely critique of the powerful and often negative effects of high-stakes tests on teaching and learning in K–12 schools across the U.S. The central theme of the author in the 262-page, two-part, seven-chapter book, is succinctly summarized in the introduction: “The way much of school is organized around these tests make little sense for young humans developmentally. Nor does it square with what the world needs” (p. 3). Kamenetz made a ten-point argument on why standardized tests are doing more harm to children than helping them to learn. The author made the case that nearly all school districts in the nation assess the wrong things, waste time and money on tests, make students and teachers hate school, penalize diversity, and create the atmosphere for teaching to the test and a temptation to cheat. Using evidence from classrooms, personal experiences, research findings, interviews from parents, students, and classroom teachers, the author provided a scathing critique of standardized testing as developmentally inappropriate for most students. Kamenetz argued that standardized tests have led teachers to emphasize “skill-and-drill” teaching methods to prepare students for multiple-choice questions and standardized answers that have not only failed to stimulate students’ creativity, imagination, and curiosity but also resulted in high school drop-out rates.

Kamenetz further argues that standardized tests have de-professionalized teaching in that

the law gives test scores more weight in judging students’ academic achievement than teachers. The author argued that standardized tests (for example, Teacher Preparation Assessment and Performance Assessment for California Teachers) in teacher preparation programs are examples of testing that has gone amok. However, supporters of standardized testing counter by arguing that teachers, like other professionals, should be held to high standards. Advocates of testing note that physicians have to pass the United States Medical Licensing Examination before practicing medicine just as lawyers must pass the Bar Examination. Similarly, professionals in nursing, accounting, and architecture have to pass standardized tests. Supporters of standardized tests argue that it is difficult to make the argument that testing is detrimental to the teaching profession if standardized tests do not seem to lead to deprofessionalization in these other professions.

Indeed, whether high-stakes standardized tests contribute positively or negatively to teaching and student learning have always been hotly debated in the U.S., particularly between the two ideological groups: conservative, free-market thinkers and progressive liberals. The conservative camp argues that standardized tests will raise student learning, provide data to compare students’ learning and strengthening accountability for schools and their academic performance. However, the liberal group argues that there is no evidence that standardized tests are effective in assessing student learning and

comparability of students' achievements because schools have not created equal educational opportunities for all learners. The liberal group points to the significant challenges that many schools in the minority-ethnic group communities face: budget cuts, teacher shortages, large class sizes, insufficient funding, lack of resources (for example, for library, technology, enrichment programs, etc.), poverty, poor salary, and family factors. Hence, the group contends that standardized tests place a significant stress on students and force teachers to only "teach to the tests."

New Solutions to Old Problems

Kamenetz's argument contributes to the debate on the negative effects of standardized tests. The author contends that standardized "tests do not correlate with students' ability to think" (p. 14). Many scholars have contended that tests do not predict children's ability to develop 21st century knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions—critical thinking, real-world problem solving, creativity, innovation, imagination, teamwork, leadership, collaboration, cooperation, multicultural knowledge, and new media literacies—that are crucially important for success in the future workplace and social lives in the community.

In the second section of the book, Kamenetz argued that society and schools need to adapt new approaches to assessment that are rooted in the new skills that students require to thrive in the changing world where cognitive, social, emotional, and creative skills are crucially important. The author identified important knowledge and skills that students need to learn: the general **cognitive ability** (for example, the ability to process information rapidly and pull together relevant information from disparate sources); **emergent leadership**

(for example, the ability to persuade, motivate and lead a team); **collaboration skills** (for example, the ability to work collaboratively with others to solve problems); **emotional and social intelligence** (for example, self-esteem, ability to persevere, willingness to overcome setbacks, and self-control); and **attitude and efforts**. In noting the inherent deficiency in standardized tests, Kamenetz argued that they only test students for solo, static, one-dimensional demonstrations of knowledge in mathematics and English language arts, rather than providing assessments that promote relevant and meaningful knowledge and skills that students need in the real world. The author argues that, "The world really needs people who come up with new solutions to problems, who know how to behave with others, who are internally motivated, and who are equipped to adapt to new situations and to act effectively" (p. 137).

In chapters five through seven, the author outlined examples of frontiers of alternative testing practices that take into account the issues of diversity, difference, complexity, and growth in students. The author gave examples of promising tests that researchers hope will test students not only on what they know but also how they think and learn such as Team Robot, Team Monkey, Team Butterfly, and Team Unicorn.

Like Diane Ravitch, a former conservative, former assistant secretary of education, and historian of American education, Kamenetz concluded that children are made smarter not by high-stakes tests but by smaller classes, adequate funding of schools, investments in the social and emotional well-being of students (for example, issues of mental health care, language classes for immigrants, Internet access, housing assistance, and so on), and collaboration between the school and community. In

essence, Kamenetz does not seem to be against testing in the schools but strongly in favor of the need to reform assessment

to promote 21st century knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions.