



Tips for Parents: More Standardized Testing?

W. James Popham, author of [The Truth About Testing: An Educator's Call to Action](#) and [America's Failing Schools](#) answers this **question**, "Should there be less standardized testing in the current school system, or more? Should all schools, including colleges, institute exit exams?"

Answer:

Standardized tests have much in common with French fries. Both of them differ in composition as well as quality. French fries are available in numerous incarnations, including straight, curly, skins-on, skins-off, and, in recent years, with sweet potatoes. Regarding quality, of course, the taste of French fries can range substantially — from sublime to soggy. It's really the same with standardized tests.

Certain standardized tests (called achievement tests) are intended to show us what skills or knowledge students have mastered. Other standardized tests (called aptitude tests) are designed to predict how well test-takers will perform in future settings, such as when they get to college. Some standardized tests are designed to differentiate among test-takers so we can say that Kevin scored at the 82nd percentile, while Melanie's performance puts her at the 96th percentile. Some standardized tests are supposed to let us know how well a particular group of students, such as those in a given school, have been taught. But, just as is true with French fries, standardized tests can vary dramatically in their quality. Some standardized tests perform their measurement mission marvelously; others do a dismal job of it.

Thus, if we're asked whether there should be more or fewer standardized tests in our school system, the only defensible answer is, "It depends." It depends on whether the right kinds of tests are being used and whether those tests are good ones. Given the kinds and caliber of the standardized tests currently being used in our schools, I come down on the "less" side of the argument. But that's chiefly because the wrong sorts of standardized tests are frequently being used. Take the No Child Left Behind Act, for instance, a federal accountability law requiring scads of standardized tests to be used in evaluating schools. Do you know that almost all of the standardized tests now being employed to judge school quality are unable to distinguish between well taught and badly taught students?

We surely don't need more of those sorts of misleading tests. But we definitely do need more standardized tests that are sufficiently sensitive to instructional quality, so we can accurately tell which schools are truly successful and which ones aren't. Standardized tests can be written that accurately measure a school's instructional effectiveness, yet also stimulate teachers to do a better job of teaching.

All schools — kindergarten through college — should employ exit exams allowing us to determine what students have actually learned. We owe it to our students to make sure that they've been properly taught. But when I hear, as I recently have, of a proposal for colleges to start using end-of-course tests as exit exams, I become altogether apprehensive. I was a college professor for more than 30 years, and I assure you that most professors know no more about making exit exams than they do about making French fries.

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