

"USA TODAY hopes to serve as a forum for better understanding and unity to help make the USA truly one nation."

—Allen H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982

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Today's debate: Standardized tests

Critics target wrong culprit as minorities' test scores lag

Our view:

But schools, not tests, are blame. Some states strike a balance.

For years there was an unspoken agreement between schools and middle-class parents: Schools prepared the higher-performing students for college, a job and another round of middle-class life.

And the rest of the students were kept out of the way. They were prepared from class to class, grade to grade, and eventually handed a diploma that nobody looked at when they applied for a job at the mill — or signed up for welfare as a teen mom.

Well, the mill jobs are gone. And even welfare has changed; it now requires work.

So the deal is off. Those kids who could remain invisible 10 years ago, many of them black and Latino, now need a real education to survive. And they aren't getting it.

The proof is as clear as the standardized tests that most school systems are now administering. In many districts, these tests will determine who graduates and is promoted in coming weeks and who will face summer school and possible grade retention.

Yet state after state report a distressing gap between the performance of white and minority students. In Texas, black and Latino children fail at twice the rate of whites.

Last week, Massachusetts released grim news about its racial testing gap: Among 10th graders, the math test was failed by 45% of whites, 80% of blacks and 85% of Latinos.

Civil rights leaders are outraged, as well they should be. But instead of complaining about the schools that aren't educating minority children, they're targeting the tests that expose this longstanding fraud.

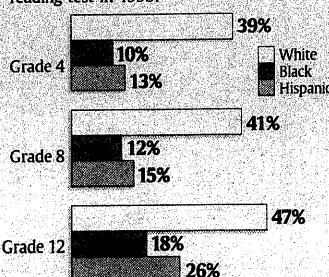
Their complaint: High-stakes tests discriminate against minorities. This month, the president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund compared the exams to Jim Crow tests used to deny blacks entrance to schools, professions and voting booths.

Forget the fact that other educational measures long have showed that minority students were being shortchanged. Minority leaders in Texas, Massachusetts and elsewhere are now pressuring legislators to keep the tests, but drop their consequences.

The idea sounds more humane. But it would only allow schools to return to their old ways of passing kids along. And this

Race gap touches all grades

Here are the percentages of students from different racial and ethnic groups in grades 4, 8 and 12 who scored at or above proficient levels on a national reading test in 1998:



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress

By Gary Visgalitis, USA TODAY

when students are more likely than ever to need academic skills for college and work.

For instance, in 1985, only 22% of Massachusetts manufacturing jobs required the ability to interpret written instructions; by 1995 that jumped to 63%. And this week, the Education Testing Service released figures showing the number of college-bound students will increase by 2 million over the next 15 years, with black, Hispanic and Asian students accounting for 80% of the rise.

That's why high-stakes testing is so important. It forces action. Based on such tests, New York City plans to send 250,000 children to summer school this year. Chicago has sent about 20,000 children to its summer program for each of the past three years.

No, it's not fair for students, alone, to be punished for school-system failures. That's why states such as Texas hold teachers and administrators accountable for how their minority students fare on required tests. It's one reason Massachusetts, Virginia and other states soon will decide whether to lower the required "cut" scores enough to allow more students to pass.

Likewise, it may not be fair to penalize students based on a single test. Chicago, the leader in tough reforms, now uses multiple measures to determine which children are held back a grade.

Such reasoned moves keep the tests, keep their consequences, but dispel the notion that it's OK for schools to fail minority students, as long as nobody notices.

ly and in high-stakes-testing locales such as Texas and California, we have a shortage of qualified teachers and a disturbing imbalance in their allocation. Advanced courses are disproportionately available to the rich. Testing requirements are often imposed before standards and curriculums are developed. Penalizing students for failing to meet standards based on material they haven't

Tests threaten real reform

Opposing view:

Public schools relying on exams, to detriment of minority students.

By Janell Byrd-Chichester

People have good reason to be skeptical about relying solely on standardized test



Letters

Strange alliance on

I believe that economic trade with China is the best and most pragmatic avenue of continued prosperity that the United States can pursue ("China trade bill clears House with ease," News, Thursday).

I find it interesting that a lot of liberals and conservatives are on the same side of opposing trade with China, for different reasons.

The liberals are crying about Tibet, human rights and forced labor, while the conservatives are still playing the anti-communist card.

Those concerns are relevant only to those who care about them, but the American people are only concerned with cheap consumer goods. They don't care where they come from or how they are produced, as long as they are cheap!

I see this vote by Congress as a harbinger of good and of even more prosperous times to come, because if we can normalize trade with China, trading with Cuba, Iraq and Iran can't be far off.

I also see that if we can potentially do business with these countries, maybe we can overcome a lot of the cultural and political hurdles encountered in the past.

After all, the bottom line for these countries is getting the almighty American dollar.

Ben Bryant
Decatur, Ga.

Windfall for special interest

It probably will become clear that the true motive of having normal trade relations with China is to improve the lives of Chinese, but access to a potential market for a few American corporations.

Free trade with China benefits corporate interests: benefit of environmental and labor concerns. Furthermore, the social impact might be that the goal of furthering a more transparent code of conduct into new markets — is illusory.

Once again, greed, not common rights or the collective good of common Americans, seem to be driving this bill. Congress order for the big-money and public-relations team: received our country's leadership otherwise.

Antoine Maisani

Vote maintains status quo

It amazes me that so many are opposed to having permanent trade relations (PNTR) with China, while individuals are uninformed

Air merger will mean higher fares

USA TODAY's story on the proposed purchase of US Airways by United Airlines certainly brought back memories for me ("Airline players face obstacles," News, Thursday).

I was a regional and national sales manager based on the West Coast for a couple of companies in the early 1980s. I can remember flights from five Los Angeles-area airports to San Jose or San Francisco priced at \$39 each way — if you purchased them in advance or at the gate.

Then along came buyers for Pacific Southwest Airlines (United Airlines), AirCal (American) and Western Airlines (Delta). These purchases were going to open up all kinds of route combinations not available via the "regional airlines."

