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Position Paper

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Audience Analysis

This essay's primary audience is parents in the United States who would like to gain a foundational understanding of the country's recent educational pitfalls and how it affects their children. In particular, I am focusing on parents whose children were born between the years 1995 and 2015 as much of the information articulated is more likely to impact students in that age range. Many parents, due to busy day jobs and misinformation, are unaware of their child's experience at school, and if it has affected their child positively or negatively. Oftentimes, parents are also rather misinformed when it comes to understanding how much autonomy teachers and administrators truly have. I would like to educate and inform parents on the dangers of High-Stakes testing as parents have relatively powerful voices within academic contexts in the United States. For this reason I provide as much background information as possible. Components of my secondary audience are students and new or aspiring teachers. Students and new or aspiring teachers are people that have an interest in or are concerned about the United States' educational system whilst, at the same time, often having little to no knowledge or experience with the system.

The United States' Educational System Needs Testing Reform

At the start of the school year in 2016, the YouTube creator "Prince Ea" uploaded a video titled "I Just Sued The School System!" wherein, he critiques the U.S. educational system.

Spoken word artist, Prince Ea, argues that the United States' school system is "intellectually abusive" since it holds all students to the same standards, no matter their natural inclinations, skills, or dreams. Of nearly half a million ratings on YouTube, more than 98% are likes. Although YouTube's demographic is composed mostly of school-aged people, the fact that young people or students feel so strongly against the school system does not bode well for the United States' future educational successes. Much of the animosity towards the school system and its processes accumulated under the promotion of competitive environments fostered by increased standardized testing. The increase in standardized testing and its effects can be most notably seen in the analysis of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The No Child Left Behind act of 2001 placed immense amounts of stress on the United States' school system with its numerous idealistic demands for student achievement. Policy makers along with the public, became attached to the idea of an America with little to no achievement gaps for the various disadvantaged groups in schools, an America that reached a certain level of scholastic sophistication by having all students be measured at the 'proficient' level. The desire to be competitive both nationally and internationally has left the United States' education system rigid and dry. Forcing a system to reach an outcome will not increase the quality of that system's product (Nichols and Berliner).

The NCLB act was signed into law in 2002 by President George W. Bush. The act was born out of the collective agreement that the country's students were losing their international competitive edge. It sought to expand the federal government's role in public education in hopes of increasing achievement among students. The law specifically focused on building the skills of various underperforming subgroups in order to rise the country as a whole. The subgroups included those who were English language learners, students in special education, racial

minorities, and impoverished students (Klein). The act gave the federal government more control over the school system than it had previously. The government accomplished this by threatening to decrease financial assistance to the schools of states with high concentrations of low income students (Klein).

Under the No Child Left Behind Act states and schools had to: assess students' reading and math ability in grades three through eight and once in high school, report the assessment results per subgroup, and "bring all students to the 'proficient level' on state tests by the 2013-14 school year" (Klein). States had the liberty to determine what 'proficiency' meant for their students since not all states had the same standards. If a school was not able to meet its state's definition of proficiency or did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) that school was then subject to government sanctions. Sanctions enforced by NCLB sometimes required official state intervention or a school to spend more federal government funding money on tutoring. Schools that did not make AYP were denoted as failures. By the 2013-14 school year, many states had failure rates of up to 50% (Klein). In response to the poor outcome, the Obama Administration issued waivers to states that permitted them to not adhere to all of the acts demands. 42 states were issued waivers upon agreeing to adopt even more rigorous standards (Klein).

In this essay I discuss the implications of increased standardized testing under the No Child Left Behind Act to educate parents and like-minded adults and students. I also discuss its effects as it relates to effectiveness, achievement, integrity, and student engagement. I then, explain why eradicating standardized testing on the whole would not be a solution to the problems caused in the nation. Throughout the body of this essay, I place less emphasis on more recent changes to the school system as they have not affected the United States' achievement level much since enacted. I also do not place emphasis on standardized tests that are considered

to be voluntarily such as the SAT or ACT, as they have a less direct impact on the classroom and school itself. The pressure created by High Stakes Standardized Testing, such as those required by the No Child Left Behind Act, negatively impacts the United States' school system because it promotes corruption in schools, limits the quality of the school system, and diminishes the essential value of education in the country.

High stakes standardized testing promotes corruption in schools. The high pressure environment pushes teachers and administrators to voluntarily "cheat the system" to avoid government punishments. Teachers are held responsible for most of the outcomes of a student's achievement. "For teachers, high test scores might bring about financial bonuses or increases in salary, while low test scores may cause a teacher to be fired or transferred to a different school" (Amrein-Broadsley). The amount of responsibility placed on teachers leads teachers to become fearful of how well students perform. As a result of this fear, some instructors have gone on to commit acts that result in the falsifying of test results. In 2006, Crosby S. Noyes Education Campus, a school located in the District of Columbia, was identified as an at risk school. In only two years, the school shot from having 10% of the students test at proficient or advanced to 58% (Gillum and Bello). Whenever teachers were able to boost the students' scores, the chancellor of D.C. schools would reward the schools' teachers and administrators. "In 2008 and again in 2010, each teacher won an \$8,000 bonus, and the principal won \$10,000" (Gillum and Bello). When many of the district's schools scores began to drop in 2010, Noyes's scores dropped much more than expected. It was then that organizations decided to investigate. Findings showed that Noyes had an extremely high rate of wrong-to-right erasures. This meant that most of the incorrect answers erased on tests were changed to right answers. The unbelievability of this trend is adequately expressed by the following quote: "The odds are better for winning the Powerball

grand prize than having that many erasures by chance” (Gillum and Bello). The results of the investigation remain confidential but one teacher’s account strongly hints that the school must have been altering scores. A former Noye’s teacher states “it was hard to trust the scores of some students entering her classes. Their scores showed they were doing well when, she says, they were still struggling with reading” (Gillum and Bello). The available evidence hints that the administrators at Noyes were “gaming the system” or using their knowledge about the education system to reap benefits.

Teachers have come to “game the system” by cheating or unlawfully aiding students during assessments. Teachers may whisper answers, definitions, and formulas to students during a test. Some teachers have been advising students by telling them to spend more time on a problem or even extending the amount of time allotted for testing in the first place (Amrein-Breadsley). School administrators have also been recorded taking part in unlawful acts as a result of the pressure for their school to perform well. Acts such as, distributing classified accountability tests to teachers prior to the testing date, invalidating the test scores of low performing students, and encouraging students who have performed well on tests previously, to take them again (Amrein-Breadsley). This reality is not terribly surprising considering the punishments for underperforming. “[A]s tests become more consequential and the penalties of failure more severe, the likelihood school personnel will cheat on tests increases” (Amrein-Breadsley). In order for seriously disadvantaged schools to submit scores that do not show consistent failure status, sometimes the standards needed to pass the test itself are lowered. This might show that a school has high percentage of proficient students when in actuality they are not reaching the criteria that demonstrates true ability in a subject area. Donald T. Campbell’s law explains why using test scores to make decisions would provide this negative outcome

(Rouse). The law states: “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures, and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” (Nichols and Berliner). Essentially, the law conveys that the nature of High-Stakes testing itself, especially when enforced harshly, as done under NCLB, is inclined to lead to a corrupt administrative school culture.

Furthermore, the High Stakes standardized testing limits the quality of the school system. The pressure also encourages teaching pedagogies that restrict broader learning. In an effort to somewhat ethically prepare students for standardized testing teachers have employed “teaching to the test.” This instructing style is defined “as preparing students for high-stakes tests by focusing instruction on test content and skills or, more explicitly, by devoting class time to teaching test items and test-taking strategies” (Menken). This pedagogy has become commonplace in many of the country’s schools affected by NCLB. Curricula have become more narrow as a result of this method of teaching. If a teacher knows a test and the standards that need to be met in order to perform satisfactorily the teacher may omit teaching certain information (Amrein-Breadsley). This has become increasingly dangerous in the case of English language learners. In order to reach NCLB’s ambitious goal of 95% accountability testing, school districts have had to force upon non-native English speakers native level English speaker curricula (Menken). Students are being taught test strategies and five paragraph essay formats in order to perform well on tests (Menken). This means that while barely having a grasp on how to engage in oral communication in English, English learners are expected to master the concepts of a test that even native English speakers might struggle on. As a result of the focus on testing, students are unable to comprehensively learn a language they may need for the rest of their lives. Teachers themselves may feel that this approach is incorrect but do not have the power to refocus

curricula. A research study at the University of Maryland found that “94% [of Maryland mathematics teachers] were concerned about school administrators' lack of concern for students learning curriculum content matters other than those content matters of their exit examinations” (Pinder). This serves to convey that teachers are not necessarily causing the issue, it's the administrators above teachers that have the power to create the most change within the school itself.

As a result of the limited scope caused by the focus on testing, education is diminishing in value as attention is removed from exploring curiosities and enjoying the process of learning and discovery. There is evidence that deeply teaching students in a few topics is more effective than familiarizing them with multiple at a time. A Stanford University article analyzing what it means to be internationally competitive states that “higher-achieving countries teach fewer topics more deeply each year; focus more on reasoning skills and applications of knowledge, rather than mere coverage; and have a more thoughtful sequence of expectations based on developmental learning progressions within and across domains” (Darling-Hammond and McCloskey). The students in countries with higher student achievement are better equipped learners for having gained deep and enriching understanding of a fundamental topic. This in turn, means that they can more easily develop the application skills needed for acquiring true knowledge.

An assistant instructor provides an account on how a particular teacher battled with the NCLB mandates in her classroom. Passman, recalling the constructivist style of the fourth grade teacher Esther, describes that she had once aligned the student desks to invite students to communicate with peers while developing deeper thinking skills. Esther put the desks in groups because she knew the group style was induced critical thinking and emphasized teamwork

(Passman). The atmosphere favored collaboration over competitiveness. Throughout the students' time in interactive groups, they were able to put their minds together to solve a problem that indicated the level of critical and creative thinking their minds were capable of. Halfway through the school year, in a meeting that brought together the teachers and the administrative staff, the principal demanded that constructive pedagogies be neglected and replaced with "teaching to the test." Esther realigned her students' classroom seats to be in rows. This classroom style forced students to focus on their own individual experience as it became harder to communicate with peers (Passman). As the students were tested more excessively the classroom atmosphere became less intellectually engaging. This example in large, emphasizes how the focus on testing has ineffectively altered the way teachers teach and how students learn.

Many adamant opponents of standardized testing say they should be done away with altogether. Finland's educational successes are often cited in support of this claim. In recent years, Finland has been consistently out performing every other country in the Programme for International Student Assessment or PISA, an examination that measures critical thinking in math, science, and reading to 15 year olds of the 65 most prominent countries in the world (PISA; OECD). Finland is particularly important because, although it has high achievement on the PISA exams, the country itself has no external standardized testing requirements that students must adhere to in order to rank schools and measure achievement. The essay titled "What It Would Mean to be Internationally Competitive" reports that "[o]ver the past 40 years,...Finland...[has] shifted from highly centralized systems emphasizing external testing to more localized systems using multiple forms of assessments" (Darling-Hammond and McCloskey). It is reasonable to think that the removal of standardized testing could also benefit the United States in the face of such evidence; however, in recognizing the differences between

the two countries the impossibility of eradicating standardized testing in the United States and reaping similar benefits becomes apparent.

One reason why approaching the United States' problems in education as Finland had would be ineffective comes down to characteristics as fundamental as size. Finland is only about the size of the state of California and therefore, acting upon plans for radical educational reform is more conceivable (MyLifeElsewhere). In addition, Finland's population is only about 5 million whereas, the population of California alone is nearly 40 million. As a result, removing standardized testing abruptly in a country as large as the United States would not be practical. If it took Finland 40 years to successfully transform its school system, it may take the United States more than twice as long.

Furthermore, companies that develop and score standardized tests in the United States participate in rather big business that contributes significantly to the economy. An article titled "The Business of Standardized Testing" states: "The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy at Boston College reported that the value of the standardized testing market was anywhere between \$400 million and \$700 million" (Alexandra). Since the United States' government is based on capitalism and the idea that individuals may climb their way up the socioeconomic scales, removal of standardized testing all together is likely to be viewed by economists in very negative lights. The competitive atmosphere that breeds from having any form of standardized testing is actually somewhat beneficial to student citizens as they are provided opportunities early on to familiarize themselves with the importance of competition in a capitalist nation.

Although the United States may not be able to follow Finland's exact blueprint for success, there are particular lessons the nation would benefit from. The part of the reason why

Finland is able to eradicate external standardized testing was due to their ability to trust their instructors. Finland puts their teachers and administrators through a very rigorous certification course. For example, “[m]ost teachers now hold master’s degrees in both their content and in education, and their preparation is aimed at learning to teach diverse learners” (Darling-Hammond and McCloskey). Subjecting teachers to a more thorough review process is what allows Finland to trust their teacher to educate children and what has subsequently, led to the country’s competitive success. The goal was not to increase the ability to compete but, rather, the quality of the student’s education. As a result, Finland is able to use testing methods wherein the student designs their own test: “Public schools assess students using independent tests they create themselves” (Alexandra). This allows for students to interact directly with their own learning experience and forces students to take responsibility for their own education. If the United States were able to trust its teachers on a similar level then it would be easier to lessen the frequency of standardized tests whilst simultaneously decreasing how negative affects it has on administrators, teachers, and students alike.

Overall, every student deserves the right to a meaningful and engaging education that is somewhat detached from our nation’s competitive nature wherein, curiosities and interests may be explored. Standardized testing is needed in the United States to measure whether or not we are reaching state standards, especially since the nation’s teachers are not as trusted by the government as Finland’s teachers are trusted by theirs. Standardized tests should not be the basis for which productivity is measured. It shouldn’t be at the center of a classroom’s instruction rather, a small side effect so that government systems can correctly allocate monetary assistance where it is needed most. If the pressure to perform well on tests was lessened, students would be more engaged in the learning process. Therefore, if in the United States, the school system were

to put less emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing, then students will be more likely to have a more wholesome learning experience in school and develop the critical thinking skills needed for success in all aspects of life.

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