



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“What’s the Standard?”

by Kyra Zimmerman

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January, 2006, May 14, 2006 and November 4, 2006. What do these dates all have in common? Many, many New York city middle school kids may know. These are dates of the standardized tests. I thought about these dates and realized how much they affected my life. Our vacations, outings, when we go to Broadway show, even the date of this Bat Mitzvah was chosen not to interfere with the standardized test for the specialized high schools that many of my friends and I took a two weeks ago. Because of this, standardized testing as a topic stuck to me like “wet spaghetti to the wall”. I had considered freedom of speech, women’s right, and with much badgering from my mother thought long and hard about the topic of Affirmative Action. But standardized testing permeates everyone life, and can alter people’s career paths and life choices.

Standardized testing also relates to Jewish thinking. Education is a fundamental value of all denominations of Judaism, and as you have heard, a basic value of mine. Historically, Jews have always studied and debated. They emphasized learning for its own sake and furthering one’s understanding of ancient texts. Further, Jews realized that knowledge was not something that could be taken from them. When faced with discrimination and exile, the Jews could “take” their knowledge and it could help them overcome obstacles. They realized that pursuing all forms of education was a method of achieving professional success, notwithstanding external political restrictions imposed on status and property ownership.

However, over the years Jews have changed their views towards education. Historically, girls were not given the same opportunity as boys to gain a traditional Jewish education, or to study for a bat mitzvah, like me today. Isaac Beshavis Singer’s story, “Yentl”, showed how a girl had to disguise herself as a boy to get a yeshivah education. Over time, we became slightly more open-minded and allowed girls to get an education. But the priority was still on the boy’s education if the family had financial constraints. Today, however, we live in a time and culture where women attend college in larger number than men.

For the Jewish people, the tenet of education embraces the value of fairness and equality. These parallel the controversies around standardized testing, which are also connected to issues of fairness, racial equality and social justice which are important to me and Judaism as well. It even relates to affirmative action mom! But it also occurred to me that the issues surrounding the controversies of standardized testing vs. other performance measures, like portfolios, and interviews, are similar to a comparison between secular Judaism vs. traditional Judaism. Both standardized testing and traditional forms of Judaism largely measure performance by achievement and compliance with “rules”, or “correct answers.” Whereas, secular Judaism and portfolio and interview assessments focus more on critical thinking and creative expression, There’s that term again.

Standardized tests are used as entrance exams at all levels of schooling. Standardized tests were first used as a stepping stone to assist those students who could not go to elite prep schools. But over time they have been used as entrance criteria at all levels of schooling. With the passage of federal legislation in 2002, commonly known as “No Child Left Behind,” standardized tests are used to measure teacher’s performance in addition to being used to measure a child’s progress in school. Those who continue to support standardized testing view it as a “fair and accurate test that objectively measures levels of thinking of the test takers.” Because the test is “objective”, the results can be used to make comparisons among the test takers. In other words, a standardized test does away with the possibility that an evaluator’s subjective opinion, values or prejudices will negatively or positively impact the assessment of the person being tested.

The importance placed on standardized tests has been elevated because the “No Child Left Behind” legislation relies on them for measuring students’ progress and teachers’ performance. The legislation is designed to help ensure that all children are receiving an adequate, complete and comparable education. The law requires states to demonstrate that their students are learning, and teachers are teaching, by measuring the student’s performance on standardized tests. If the test scores are not high enough, the state or locality has an opportunity to correct it. If there are continuing failed grades, the school district, and ultimately the state can lose federal funding. So high test score results are paramount. This has led to concerns that “No Child Left Behind” has increased “teaching to the test” either by teaching only topics that will be on the test, or by focusing all teaching time on test strategies.

New York City’s Mayor Bloomberg has taken the idea of standardized testing to measure performance a step further. Additional standardized test have been added to the elementary and middle years to eliminate “social promotion,” kids being moved up grades without having really learned the grade materials. Mayor Bloomberg believes that test scores can detect if children are learning and progressing. If a child does not score well, he or she will not be promoted. It is believed that if children have learning delays they should be caught and addressed early, to avoid the historic problem of some kids getting to high school and not knowing how to read, write and do basic math. If these issues are discovered through tests when the child is younger, then needed assistance can be provided to put the child “back on track.”

Children should be taught to read, write and do math before they are promoted. Of course, holding states accountable for ensuring that the children are learning, if they are going to get federal money our tax dollars, is worthwhile. And a college applicant’s capabilities should be assessed before he/she is admitted to a college. The controversy, however, revolves around whether standardized tests are the best way to measure one’s capabilities.

There are many difficulties in relying on standardized test. They range from issues in accuracy in the grading to substantive biases in the questions. In recent time there have been errors in test grading. The implementation of the “No Child Left Behind” has caused an explosion in the standardized testing business. It is now a 2 billion dollar industry with more work than it can handle. “The demand for testing has outstripped the abilities of the industry and testing and scoring quality have deteriorated,” stated an article in the New York Times. Ironically, it is the increased reliance and value placed on test results that has led to increased grading problems. So much so, that legislators and education policy makers believe that there should be a new federal agency created to provide oversight to the designing, administering and grading of the test.

One example of grading errors was documented in a flurry of newspaper and magazine articles, in March, 2006, about misscored SAT scores that affected thousands of high school students applying to college. The College Board had to notify more than 1000 colleges that over 4400 students who took the SAT in October 2005 received grades up to 450 points lower than they should have. The cause you may ask? Excessive moisture on some of the tests which caused the computers not to register the results when grading the tests. The error was revealed five months after the exam were taken, scores were received, college applications were submitted and acceptance and rejection letters based on the errorous results were issued. Grading errors have also occurred because the “bubbles were not filled in completed” and because someone skipped a line of “bubbles.” And remember our 7th grade ELA test where the letter choices for one question on the exam were a, b, c, d and the corresponding bubble choices were f, g, h, and i?

The debate concerning the use of standardized tests was reinforced to me when the articles about the SAT appeared next to another series of New York Times columns, also in March, 2006. The Department of Education has a plan for kindergarten admissions to the “gifted and talented program” in the public schools on the Upper West Side of NYC. Anne Commiante, citywide director of gifted and talented program, established a new system designed to open the admissions process and diversify the gifted programs. Kindergarten students will be judged not only by their test scores, but also by teacher’s observations of the child’s behavior and creativity. Some Upper West Side parents are furious about this, claiming that the new admissions policy is too subjective.

Having the two series of articles together in the same newspaper highlighted for me that the controversy about standardized tests effects everyone. I also know that beyond accuracy errors, standardized tests have been determined to have many biases that result in inaccurate results. There are cultural biases in standardized tests when questions refer to facts it presumes the test taker must know to answer the question correctly. If the person is from a different culture or geographic area and does not know what is referred to in the question, he or she is at an extreme disadvantage when figuring out the correct answer.

There is also documented gender bias in Standardized Testing for college admissions. The “SAT 1” is designed solely to predict first year student’s grades. Girls earn high grades throughout high school and college even though they consistently receive lower grades on SATs. Similar results are found in GREs and MCATs, graduate school entrance exams. This disparity is attributed to references in the questions that women are less familiar with and that, in general, men perform better on multiple choice questions.

Standardized Testing does not measure other aspects of a person. It’s just a small “snapshot”, not a full evaluation of who the person is. Creative expression and life experiences are devalued with Standardized Testing. Standardized Testing can’t capture who you are as a person. It can’t measure your personality, behavior, attendance, diligence or conscientiousness, or the pride one has in their work. When I was in fourth grade, to help us understand the time period of the 1920's, the class learned to “swing dance” Not only did I learn the steps, I learned about the importance of hard work, discipline and commitment to a project. I also learned how to interact and respect others. I learned to dance with boys! This can’t be measured or quantified on a Standardized Testing.

The results of Standardized Testing measure test taking, not creativity. Creativity cannot possibly be measured on a “bubble sheet” or show through the answer to a multiple choice test. But as I have heard people say, if you don’t like the situation, come up with a different approach. So I decided to see if there was another way that could be used to assess a person but allow more of your creativity and personality to “shine through.” And with the help of my mom I came across the Posse Foundation.

The Posse Foundation provides scholarships for high school graduates to attend “partnership” colleges and universities. But the foundation does not choose their students with standardized tests results. Instead of having the applicants fill in “bubble grids,” the Posse Foundation uses interviews and observations of the teens doing teambuilding activities like robotics (Go Gabe!!) to assess students capabilities and potential. They are assessed to see what their social and interpersonal skills are. Their personalities and creativity “shine through or they do not shine through.” The students are then interviewed personally and matched with colleges. When in college they can call upon other Posse students for support and help if things get rough.

Additionally, there are over 700 colleges and universities in the United States that have chosen not to rely on standardized tests for admissions. They include Bowden, Hamilton College, Middlebury, Bates and Sarah Lawrence, to name a few. They realize that high standardized test scores results do not measure who will be a valuable addition to a college campus. These colleges have found that without Standardized Testing requirements the applicant pool has increased and become more diverse. These schools have also found that they consider students individually.

Test optional admissions policies and the Posse foundation are not perfect alternatives. It may not be a practical if a school received tens of thousands of applications. Also, just because students can interact and get along in a room, does not mean they can make it in college And isn’t the measure of how well people get along completely subjective and subject to bias? What if the observer thinks aggressive leadership is good, or, alternatively, that cooperation without asserting yourself is better? This could lead to skewed choices by the evaluators.

I asked Grandpa David, who had to take the MCATs to get into medical school and then medical boards to become a doctor, what he thought of standardized tests. He said standardized tests result in only standardized doctors. He believes reliance on these tests does not result in the best selection of doctors. The result is good test takers become doctors, and that makes the “practice of medicine stagnant.” Instead, Grandpa David thinks that medical school applicants should be evaluated based on careful review of applicants recommendations, interviews, “analysis of what they have given to the world,” their community service, and their grades. But when I asked about other factors, and what background the evaluators should have, to eliminate arbitrariness in the selection of medical students, he was stumped. Devising an alternative to standardized testing is no easy task!

I think that in the future there should be a middle ground between Standardized Testing and alternative admissions polices without regard for testing. You want to have a fair, personal way to assess a person that also maintains levels of consistency and rigor. Standardized Testing affects a lot of people in many ways. They can make you cry in sadness or cry in joy! But it is one of those things that doesn’t have an easy answer, no pun intended. Think about it, what would you do? Keep standardized tests? Don’t use them at all? Or something in the middle? Like most issues in life, it’s not black or white, it’s just gray.