The term *standardized tests* is often heard along with *high-stakes*. Standardized tests are administered, scored, and interpreted in a consistent way, so that the performances of large groups of students can be compared. They are not in themselves high-stakes, but they are often used for high-stakes purposes such as determining which students will pass or graduate, which teachers are fired or given raises, and which schools are reorganized or given more funding. Heard less frequently are discussions of the effects of high-stakes standardized tests on student learning. Research shows that these effects include changing the nature of teaching, narrowing the curriculum, and limiting student learning. English language arts (ELA) teachers and their students feel these effects with special force because literacy is central in most standardized tests.

**Changing the Nature of Teaching**

One of the effects of the increased number and heightened stakes of standardized tests is that the roles played by teachers have changed. Specifically, teachers’ institutional tasks have increased because they are expected to take up work related to testing in addition to their regular teaching duties. Institutional tasks include:

- collecting, organizing, and analyzing data associated with tests
- grouping and regrouping students according to test performance
- developing vertical articulation of the curriculum to align with tests
- coordinating students’ assignments, based on test scores, to remedial programs

As a result of spending more time on institutional tasks like these, teachers have less time for instruction in their own classrooms. One study found that teachers lose between 60 to 110 hours of instructional time in a year because of testing and the institutional tasks that surround it.

Instruction is also diminished by mandatory curricula that have been developed to prepare students for standardized tests. Such curricula require teachers to use prepared materials which they did not develop and which may not address the needs of actual students in their classes. In some cases mandated curricula come with scripted lessons and/or pacing guides that determine when specific content should be taught, leaving teachers limited opportunity to make instructional decisions. Most teachers are expected to spend an increasing amount of time on practice tests
or drill sessions to prepare students for tests. Materials and requirements like these de-professionalize teachers, reducing their authority and autonomy in instruction. Instructional time spent on high-level writing skills such as how to use strategies of invention in writing is replaced by how to perform well on the relatively low-level skills required in standardized tests.

### Limiting Student Learning

Most important, standardized tests limit student learning because they focus only on cognitive dimensions, ignoring many other qualities that are essential to student success. Research shows, for example, that GED recipients perform about as well as high school graduates on standardized tests but have much worse life outcomes because they often lack important qualities such as curiosity, conscientiousness, perseverance, and sociability. ELA teachers could help more students develop these so-called “soft skills” or non-cognitive abilities if they didn’t have to focus on drills for tests. Instead, ELA teachers have to, for instance, cut back on large-scale projects that require perseverance, reduce the number of literary texts that engender the empathy necessary to sociability, and limit opportunities for developing student curiosity. Student learning that could lead in positive directions is diminished when tests prevent teachers from helping students develop the noncognitive abilities that support better life outcomes.

Another limitation on student learning results from the negative perceptions standardized tests can give to students about themselves and their own abilities. Studies show that elementary school students can begin to lose their sense of themselves as capable, able to do well in school and graduate, when they see unknown adults as controlling the administration and consequences of the standardized tests they are required to take. Even the very best ELA teachers have difficulty fostering learning in students who do not believe in their own abilities.

Student learning is also limited by testing’s inflexible sorting of students into categories of proficient or not-proficient. It can be very difficult for students designated as not-proficient to imagine themselves as effective readers and writers. This test-generated binary is troubling because it gives no space to the full range of features that comprise effective reading and writing. Students who have literacy abilities that extend beyond but do not fully encompass the narrow band of skills measured by standardized tests may not understand or appreciate their own capacities and become disengaged from school.

Standardized tests have different effects on various populations of students, and they usually lead to significant limits on learning among poor and minority students. For example, the scores of poor and minority students are often lower than those of middle class whites, and these results can lead to a failure to graduate, particularly when these students attend under-resourced schools. High-achieving minority students, particularly high-achieving African American students, have received relatively little
attention from researchers, but the available evidence indicates that those who do well on standardized tests do not think these assessments are accurate or valid measures of achievement. Rather they are merely a way to "play the game" of school.

English language learners, currently the fastest-growing population within US schools, represent another group whose learning is limited by standardized tests. The results of standardized tests usually determine whether students will receive the designation English language learner and the support services that go with it. Unfortunately, the tests English language learners take are not always valid measures of their ability, and their opportunities to learn are diminished as a result. Instead of receiving the support they need, students are assigned to classes where their learning is hampered because they cannot understand the language being used.

Policy Recommendations

Standardized tests have powerful and often negative effects on student learning, but their negative effects can be reduced by measures such as these:

- Employ multiple assessments of student achievement so that standardized tests are administered alongside broader, more comprehensive measures of student learning.
- Represent standardized tests to students as one type of assessment among several and help students understand how this type of assessment functions.
- Ensure that the standardized tests being used are valid and reliable for the population of students being tested.
- Provide special accommodations such as allowing extra time, dictation, and translators for English language learners and other students with special needs.

Endnotes