Education is a human right (United Nations, 1948), and is the one great equalizer our society can provide. Naturally, there is ongoing debate and action regarding the state of American public education; acts and laws are passed, programs are implemented, and standardized tests are imposed with increasing frequency. We are writing as students of this public education, and can attest to the fundamental flaws of the current system; it is not working in theory or in practice nearly as well as it could. The question must first be asked: for what purpose are students educated? Because tax-payer dollars fund public education, and because it is mandatory for all children in this country to receive an education which the government deems proper, it follows that education is for the good of all children, and therefore for the good of our society as a whole. Though we may not know all that our century will bring, we educate children based on the premise that a strong skill set and knowledge base will enable and empower them to do well for themselves, and for the communities in which they live.

This poses a more complex problem: How do we determine if our educational system is working? The method is to test students in an attempt to ascertain their progress, the quality and effectiveness of their teacher, of their school, district, and even of their state. Recently, we, the high school seniors of Colorado, took the ‘Colorado Measures of Academic Success’ (CMAS) test on social studies and science. A similar PARCC test will be taken by Sophomores and Juniors this spring. Although the CMAS was the product of many committees’ attempts to create the next best thing, those who wrote the test did not integrate some of the most fundamentally important concepts and philosophies of education. Our grievances regarding the test rang out across the state, and were as numerous and diverse as the statewide student body itself. However, in this manifesto, we aim to address the fundamental flaws of the standardized testing system in the State of Colorado. We write this in the hopes that we will see not only superficial change, but also a resolution of the issues regarding privatized testing and education, test-oriented curriculum design, and the core philosophy of who is accountable and responsible for education.

**Public Education Needs Public Tests**

The fundamental goal of education in this country is to educate every child as well as possible for the good of the individual, and by extension the whole country. Therefore, the core values and practices of privatized education run counter to the purpose of our country’s education system. Public education incentivizes each child being reached and taught as well as possible. Private education, including the ‘voucher system’, would incentivize schools to market and serve in a capitalistic way; students who could pay or were academically gifted would be sought after, leaving disadvantaged or less wealthy students to have no choice but to accept an education which may not serve them best (Ravitch, 2010). A capitalist economic system works because there are winners and losers, and therefore an incentive to succeed. Privatized education doesn’t work for the same reason; there are winners and losers.

Being that privatized education, by its nature, does not serve the American public as well as the public education model, we object to our standardized tests being written and controlled by a private company. CMAS was written by Pearson: a textbook and test giant. Pearson will be paid $24 for each student who takes the PARCC test (Cavanagh, 2014). Because teachers and schools are funded and evaluated to varying extents based upon the results of this test (and others like it), many teachers therefore have the incentive to ‘teach to the test’, instead of crafting curriculums based upon student need, interest, and ability (Ravitch, 2013). Although parts of this problem might still exist with a state-written test, the situation currently stands that we are being sold a test, and, therefore, to varying degrees, a curriculum. It is very possible for the State of Colorado to decide not to buy it anymore, and instead write its own test, using input from teachers around the state. A more direct and less artificial teacher involvement in the writing process would mean elicit in the test a better representation of what teachers across the state feel is important to learn. Currently, some teachers are paid by Pearson to give input on what appropriate content would be. We argue that without a larger conversation and collaboration process involving more teachers, the test will remain artificial, and will perpetuate the growing win/lose paradigm associated with private education. Students’ progress in their education, it should be measured by a means their teachers construct, as opposed to by a company paid to define and measure the success of a system with which is has no other involvement.

**Design Backwards to Move Forwards**

Not only do current standardized tests poorly reflect good educational values, but standardized tests (including CMAS) also reflect flawed educational design. There is a concept in education called Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Put simply, there must be a desired ‘result’, or a standard that teachers agree must be met. This standard can include skills and a knowledge base; both are necessary for success in the mysterious, ever-changing ‘real world’. Then, teachers must determine what qualifies as evidence that the standard has been met. If the standard were that students must know how to build a wall, then the evidence of the standard being met would be a student using their mortar and brick-laying skills and knowledge of physics and geometry to build a small brick wall. Presumably, the teacher’s curriculum would include relevant lessons on all of the necessary skills, so that students would able to meet the standard, and therefore pass the test. Standardized tests assess skills that are related to the standard, such as using rote memory and assimilating prior knowledge. But these tests often do the equivalent of asking students to recite different types of brick and recognize famous brick walls; the students may be able to pass the test, but it will remain unclear whether or not they are able to meet the standard.

Although the model of Understanding by Design would be better followed if there were more teacher collaboration and input on tests, there would still be a large issue in standardized testing. As of now, teachers can see data from their classes pertaining to how their students did on the test. Teachers and schools are then expected to make improvements in curriculum and methodology based upon this data.

Yet, teachers cannot see the tests (Pearson, 2014), upon which all of this influential data is based. Clearly it would be an issue if teachers could see the test before it was given; this might encourage dishonesty. After all of their students take the test however, a teacher should be able to see the exact test. This will help them assess precisely the successes or failures in their students learning. Perhaps even more importantly, it will enable teachers to collaborate and make changes to the test when they feel it is inconsistent with the standards they are trying to meet. To return to the brick wall analogy, if a teacher were only able to see the results of the test but not the test itself, they might think their student had excelled at building the wall, when fact, the student was merely very good at writing about it. Transparency of test materials will ensure better curriculum design, and more meaningful teacher involvement.

**Who’s Awake?**

Tests currently do not measure student interest or effort. Speaking from personal experience, we feel that tests would do well to have students indicate their effort; we were present at the CMAS, in which attendance rates could have been acceptable, but where approximately 50% of the class did no more than fill in random answers or fall asleep. Seeing as tests need 95% attendance to be statistically valid for school use, we think attendance should be measured not only by a head count, but as well by student participation, effort, and investment. After all, a student who falls asleep upon their test gives no more valid data than a student who fails to attend the test.

**For Whom the School-bell Tolls**

Although we’ve voiced our beliefs regarding privately owned tests, test writing, and transparency, we have yet to address what may be the most fundamentally important concept to our education: our personal responsibility. There are a few ways to view a student (Mahatmya, Brown, & Johnson, 2014). One is to view the student as a consumer; the student (and the student’s parents) has the ability to choose the nature their education, much like a consumer would be able to shop for a product. We arrive, therefore, at the issue of schools marketing to more affluent or capable students, leaving disadvantaged students as a less desirable demographic. Students and parents within this model have more leverage over what the students’ education looks like. We believe that society’s input comes through voting, and what is already a fair amount of choice in education both in school and at home, but that teaching is best left to teachers. If students are to be treated as consumers, education will become a privilege of the vociferous and wealthy. Students can also be viewed as products. Standardized tests, therefore, are a quality control to find defects and deficits in the products. The education system would be the designers of the products. But we, the products, have voices and interests of our own which must be protected and advocated for. In one year, a student who must sit quietly, raise their hand, and prove they are not defective, becomes an adult, who must suddenly be prepared to self-advocate, self-motivate, and make decisions for themselves. We believe CMAS and the education system that created and promoted it treats students as products. Subsequently, we witnessed a startling number of products asleep on their tests. Surely there must be a better philosophy to drive education. We believe that students should be viewed as clients: a mixture of a consumer, with choice, and a participant, with personal responsibility. If students are treated as clients, education becomes collaborative, and for the benefit of the student and their goals and interests. Teachers and education experts become just that: the experts to whom the clients go for guidance, structure, and support. The focus of testing shifts away from blame placement, market value, and quality control, towards an assessment of how effectively the team of teachers and clients are working together.

We believe education is both a right and responsibility. It is not a privilege of the wealthy—a product to be chosen and bought, or a set of numbers to be sold to the masses by a private company. But education is also not a factory production—a machine through which students are molded, injected with information, subjected to tests unrelated to the end goal (Mahatmya et al., 2014). They are left to fall asleep on their tests wondering when it’s their turn to show what they actually know, and what they and their teachers feel is relevant. Education should be the collaborative effort of teachers across the state to determine standards, for teachers in classrooms to design meaningful curriculums, and for students to play an active role in learning, and determining how their education is personally relevant. Standardized tests, by definition, should be in line with the standard, and inform both the student and teacher on how well the system is working. In this way, we, the students, may play an active role in attaining the highest quality of education possible.

**Call to Action**

Because of these beliefs of ours, we ask that standardized tests in Colorado be owned and operated by the state, written by teachers, and be transparent to those who design the standard, and to teachers, who must design curriculum to meet the standard. In order to attain this, we ask for a three-year on moratorium on standardized testing in Colorado, so that lasting and fundamental change may occur.

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