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# The Double-Edged Sword of Standardized Testing


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**The Double-Edged Sword of Standardized Testing**

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In the field of education, assessment is a necessity. Politicians, parents, community members and others want to know how our students are measuring up compared to other students in other schools (Smith, T, February 2018). They want assurance that everyone is getting an equitable education, and they want to make sure that schools in one state are comparable to schools in another state. According to Arne Duncan, “Standardized assessments are still a needed tool for transparency and accountability across the entire education system” (Roach, 2014). The standardized assessment systems that are used in each state help make decisions on instruction (Aber, 2017), and they attempt to provide information that shows learning is taking place and student knowledge is increasing (McTighe and O’Connor, 2005). However, not all the assessments are measurable in a way that shows advancement of ideas and thoughts or allows comparisons in the detail sought out by educators, politicians and parents. Students often take more than one standardized test. According to a study conducted on 66 of the United States’ largest school districts by the Council of the Great City Schools, students spend between 20 and 25 hours taking standardized tests. Between Pre-K and 12th grade, approximately 112 mandatory standardized tests are taken by any one student, with most tests taken in the 8th and 10th grades (CBS/AP, 2015).

However, some educators would question why standardized testing is still being used because the tests are not informing classroom instruction. Perhaps there are other options to measure student growth and determine student needs. When standardized tests take away so much instructional time, students are losing academic time when they could be meeting benchmarks to standards. Nevertheless, until an agreed upon measurement for learning is identified, standardized tests will continue to be part of the nomenclature of education.

The most recent standardized test adopted on a large scale is that of the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). With yet another standardized test added, many parents protested the deluge of standardized tests taken by their children and joined the opt-out movement by not having their children take the standardized test. While some parents have joined together for such a movement, others have simply chosen to do so quietly and individually (Mann, Mitra & Hlavacik, 2016). In the researchers' local school district, most parents did not appear to have as much concern for standardized tests, and the researchers wanted to find what they thought of the latest test given to their students.

When PARCC was in the developmental stages, educators at a local school district hoped that this assessment would drive classroom instruction. With previous standardized tests, schools used the data to sort and separate students. Test scores for each school were shared with the public, which in turn impacted perceptions of education in the schools. Sharing of standardized test scores has been known to impact the value of homes, funding imbalance, provide unequal resources for educators and students based on economic class in the school district. Depending on test outcomes, the impact was either a benefit or a detriment to the community (Chen, 2017).

Many educators hoped that the newly designed standardized test could better determine next steps in educating students while being aligned to instruction, and thus, the standards being assessed. PARCC advertised that their test was an assessment fully aligned to the Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics standards and would provide information that would meet the needs of our students, communicate a direction to parents, and allow staff to reflect on their instructional and curricular needs. Hopes were high and

educators in this local school district were positive about the results they would receive.

During the first year of the assessment, PARCC communicated that the results would be shared in a timely manner, which again would allow staff and parents to guide students where they need further instruction. Despite the movement to opt out of standardized testing across the country, educators at Plains Elementary School (pseudonym) were still positive regarding the potential of this particular standardized assessment.

However, these administrators and teachers were disappointed with the results when they finally arrived. They were too general and did not show individual student outcomes aligned to the standards exhibiting their learning, progress and guidance. Assessment results were shared after the school year ended and the students in the classrooms had already moved on to the next grade level. This is common for many standardized tests as results often take between two and four months for school districts to receive state results (CBS/AP, 2015). Administrators believed this would be different given the announcements made by PARCC on their website, and they would arrive at a faster rate, so they could be used to inform instruction. Plains Elementary School has maintained strong assessment scores in state and national comparisons, but administrators believed the purpose of this particular assessment fell short. For example, administrators and teachers in this school district commented, if there was true alignment between the assessment and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) of English Language Arts (ELA) and Math, why is the individual student alignment to the standards information missing?

PARCC was introduced as the next standardized test that would be utilized nationally during the 2014-2015 academic year (Strauss, 2014). The goal was to assess learning according

to the Common Core State Standards (About PARCC, 2016). The PARCC Score Results were to be used to inform instruction and provide information that would explain where students excel and where students need instruction and guidance. By looking at information from all students in a classroom, changes could be made in instruction, individualizing to suit the needs of students to make sure they continue to move towards preparedness for college or career (Score Results, 2016).

This standardized test was expected to provide comprehensive results where parents and education staff would be able to gauge student preparedness for life after high school. The website provided information to parents, teachers, administrators and others, which led them to expect results that would inform instruction in a way that could change how teachers taught and provide guidance in the classroom. Parents, teachers and administrators from a local school district were looking forward to robust results that included standards aligned to Common Core ELA and Math that would provide another layer for reflection and curriculum redesign. This would drive decisions about instruction in class and for individual students.

In 2016, 268 of 272 of the students who were qualified to take the test at Plains Elementary School, chose to take, and 1.47% opted out of the test. Likewise, in 2017, 272 of 274 of the students who were qualified to take the test chose to take, with .73% opting out.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify parent expectations of standardized tests, in particular PARCC, at Plains Elementary, giving them an opportunity to explain what their expectations were prior to receiving results, how the actual results measured up to the expectations, and what they wished the results could provide. One of the researchers is a

curriculum coordinator for Plains School District (pseudonym) that participated in this standardized test. Like many teachers and administrators, her preliminary expectation was that the results would be more meaningful than past tests so as to inform instruction in a very specific manner based on the standards that were aligned with the assessment.

### **Theoretical Framework and Research Design**

This study on assessment results of standardized tests resides on the theory that Measurement of Educational Progress is necessary for individual students, schools, school districts, and grade levels (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Assessments that guide improvements in education must be developed and utilized to show the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction along with any interventions for different groups in a school. Assessments also provide necessary accountability for school districts and individual schools (Koehler-Hak, 2014). This is in direct alignment with the expectations of the parents, teachers and administrators of most schools in the United States, and in particular the school in this study. Standardized tests should provide information to help parents and educators understand how students learn and how it should continue.

Parents have questioned whether more standardized tests are needed, despite the promise of new tests being more robust with results that are more useful (Darling-Hammond, 2006). To support this Measurement of Progress framework, this study provided a voice to parents so they could explain their perceptions about the outcomes on the new test results, especially if it measured progress in their students' learning. This study used a qualitative research methodology called phenomenography. According to Marelli (2017, Section 17, "Phenomenography"), "The aim is to investigate the differing ways in which people experience,

perceive, apprehend, understand, and conceptualize various phenomena.” For this study, parent voices are collected using a survey with both multiple choice and open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of the results from PARCC.

This methodology examined three perceptions of parents of students who took the standardized test in 2015 and 2016, and the survey was administered after each test. Parents were asked about their expectations prior to receiving the test results, whether the actual results measured up to the expectations, and what parents wished the results could provide. Parents received the electronic survey one month after they received individual student test results. Parents had two weeks to respond to the survey. The researchers analyzed those questions that used a Likert scale by reviewing the number of responses at each level. Each of the researchers’ hand counted the number of responses for each of the levels in the Likert scale. They then identified the selection with the most responses along with the median and standard deviation. The researchers read and compared the open-ended survey questions for commonalities and differences between responses, and they identified and coded common words. Likert scale responses were compared to the open-ended responses to identify consistencies and inconsistencies between the two types of questions. Then, conclusions were made to help understand the expectations and wishes of parents related to PARCC, including why there were similarities and differences in opinions regarding the results.

This school serves students in preschool through eighth grades. It has a direct partnership with a large teacher preparation university, and it is located in the Midwest United States. Parents apply for their child to enroll in this school, but no tuition is required. The 389



students enrolled in the school are approximately 70% white, with 30% Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian or students identifying with two or more races.

The participants of the study comprised of forty-two parents whose children participated in PARCC. The survey included fourteen questions, with seven multiple-choice questions that asked about expectations and usefulness of standardized test results and how these results could support student learning. The additional seven questions were open-ended questions so that parents could provide more detail about their responses and perceptions of the standardized test, or standardized testing in general.

#### **Data Outcomes**

Parents responded to seven quantitative questions and seven open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of the PARCC results. Parents responded to the question of whether they found the PARCC results useful. This question was asked for the 2015 assessment and then again for the 2016 assessment. When compiling the responses for both years shown in Table 1, a total of 79 responses were received to these two questions by 42 parents. Forty-seven of the 79 parent responses stated that parents found the results to be either very useful or useful and 32 found the results either not useful at all or not useful.

Table 1

<i>Parent Responses to Usefulness of PARCC in 2015 and 2016</i>			
		PARCC Results Useful/ Very Useful	PARCC Results Not Useful/ Not Useful at All
Total Parent Responses	79	47	32

The open-ended questions provided almost an equitable amount of positive and negative responses along with a few taking a more neutral position. Those who provided neutral comments talked about the untimeliness of results, lack of information, and the drawback of using standardized test to gauge academic ability.

Negative responses identified the irrelevance of the standardized test, insufficient information to support students in the learning process, or the repetition of information received compared to information received from another standardized test, thus not being useful.

Parents did like to see the simple results of their students' strengths and areas in need of improvement that were easy to understand, especially when comparing their student to others who took the test. They also saw the potential to use test results to develop a plan for next steps in learning at school and at home.

Parent expectations of PARCC were mixed. While hopes were high for most parents who responded to the survey, many did not know what to expect. Comparison information was a hope for many of the parents, as can be seen from table 2. They expected results with explanations either from the test itself or from teachers.

Table 2

*Parent Expectations of PARCC Results*

Did not know what to expect from the PARCC results	Hoping for a comparison school and state, with strengths and weaknesses	Expecting results and explanations	Detailed assessment on each subject	Hopes that teachers would share results
10	18	2	1	1

When asked to compare results from past standardized tests to the results received from PARCC shown in Table 3, ten of 38 parents stated they received more information from PARCC than from previous tests. Twenty-four of 38 stated they received the same as the Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT). And, four of 38 stated they received less information from

PARCC than previous standardized tests. When explaining her answer, one parent questioned how much information they could get when only two subjects were being assessed.

Table 3

*Parent Perceptions of Standardized Test Comparisons*

	Received more Information from PARCC than from previous tests	Received the same information as ISAT	Received less information from PARCC than previous standardized tests
Total	38	24	4
Parent Response s			

Open-ended responses were almost all positive stating that more detail was provided for PARCC than other standardized tests. However, parents also stated that no standardized test provides the detail needed for all parties and they all provide similar results.

Parents were asked whether PARCC assessment results could help change instructional practice in the classroom. Eleven parents did not believe PARCC results could change instructional practice while twelve believed it could change instructional practice, and eighteen parents were not sure if the results could change instructional practice.

When asked to explain their responses, parents justified their rationale by explaining that it is one test in a student's year of learning, and one test should not be the basis for changing instructional practice. Another parent stated that if results were more itemized showing specific standards and results, their response may be different. A parent believed that PARCC is stronger than other assessments as it encourages critical thinking, and it was beneficial to compare where all students fell in the categories. Finally, one parent commented about the state and standardized testing. "It is up to the state to make decisions on a budget to decide which tests are to be paid/contracted and then maybe will be able to change instruction."

While twelve parents believed the standardized test could change instructional practice, they did not provide any comments explaining how this could happen. They did believe the test showed gaps in knowledge that could help with curriculum development. In addition, it could provide awareness of key vocabulary students should know. Some parents who believed this test could change instructional practice also worried that teaching to the test would take place. One parent suggested that standardized test results could show where teachers are the strongest in terms of teaching different areas and which teachers are most effective with different student populations. Two parents who were not sure whether PARCC could improve instructional practice mentioned that it was difficult to adapt instruction to the results since results are not received until the following year. Another challenge mentioned included detail in results. "If PARCC provided more specific feedback on strengths and weaknesses, it could benefit, but until then, it wouldn't help." In addition, "teachers should not alter instruction based on test scores since this is only one form of assessing progress."

Parents had many questions regarding standardized tests. How does this standardized test fit into other required standardized tests? Is standardized testing the best use of student time in the classroom? How are the test scores used by the various stakeholders?

The time to get results back was also reiterated. PARCC shows scores of other students in the state and reaffirms the decisions of parents who chose to enroll their students in this school instead of their neighborhood school or a private school. One parent acknowledged the stress and frustration their student felt in taking the test, perhaps because of the competitive nature of the students, and another stated they would not have their student take the test again. One parent stated, "There is no point in such testings unless parents get more input on what we can do to help our children."

#### **Discussion - Analysis of data**

The hope was that PARCC would be the test that provides information to inform practice and determine next steps for students. According to the 2017 PDK national poll, "Among public school parents, fewer than six in 10 are very or somewhat confident that standardized tests measure how well their child is learning, including just 19% who are very confident that this is the case" (Richardson, J, 2017, p. K23).

Parents were mixed regarding the usefulness of the results. In past versions of their website, PARCC implied they were going to provide more than what past standardized tests delivered as far as information from test results. If this is the case, knowing that only ten of thirty-eight parents believed this to be true implies that PARCC may not have met the goal they were hoping to achieve.

According to the surveys disseminated twice over a two-year period, the responses indicated that only about one-fourth of the parents believed that PARCC provided more information than the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). This could be for many reasons. Since they had been told many times that the test results would be more robust than any other, they had seen, the expectations may not have been able to be met to the level expected. In addition, the results were only a one-page snapshot instead of an in-depth report.

At the school where the surveys were disseminated, standards-based learning and standards-based grading was implemented at a similar time as preparation for the PARCC test and the use of Common Core State Standards. A standards-based report card at Plains Elementary is very detail oriented, letting the parent know how their student is doing on each of the many standards. PARCC results do not show the same detail. It is possible that the expectation of detailed standards-based, detailed results on the assessment may not have been as high had the parents not also been introduced to standards-based-grading at the same time.

Based upon the overall results of the questions where parents had to respond using a Likert scale, it is interesting to note that 45% of the results were neutral, leading the researchers to think that many parents are still unsure of the benefits and disadvantages of standardized testing. Perhaps school districts should take a better look at how standardized assessment data are being used and communicated. It causes one to question why schools are still using standardized testing if the outcome is not informing the next steps in educating students.

Parents are also mixed on the value and purpose of standardized testing. While some liked to see the growth or measurement between their student and others, their school and

others, measurement based on the state. Parents also question whether one test is better than another, and most believe standardized test are similar in outcome.

From this study and in review of literature, a standardized test would need to measure student progress, suggest next steps for instructional practice, and evaluate more than comprehension of content such as critical thinking skills in order to inform instructional practice.

### **Conclusion**

Standardized tests are part of the school culture in the United States. They have been part of the American Education System since the 1800s and the Industrial Revolution (Moses & Nanna, 2007). However, identifying the standardized test that measures and informs parents in addition to teachers, students, community and government officials in a clear and concise method is a challenge.

Parents and schools receive test results from standardized tests with little explanation of what the score means. This is like traditional grading provided by many schools who give students grades of A, B, C, D and F. If a standardized test could provide something like standards-based grading, looking into the breadth and depth a student has met the specific standards, parents and schools would receive a rich and useful document for schools and parents. For example, the assessment results could indicate which standards are being met at a level 2, which standards are being met at a level 3, and which are being met at a level 4. With this information, parents and schools would then know where learning should be focused for that individual child. If it is evident that many students at a particular school struggles with a given standard, then the administrators and teachers might be able to target that standard in



their daily lessons. At the same time, if students in a school are strong across the board regarding a standard or set of standards, then the school and class activities that target that standard may be reduced or kept at the same level.

Students, parents and the staff in the schools would also benefit to know the parameters of scoring a level 3 versus a level 2 or a level 4. Knowing the strengths and areas for improvement of individuals could identify areas needed for additional instruction, whether this be something the school works with or a parent who might provide additional tutoring support for their student.

Finally, receiving results in a timely fashion so that a change in instruction might be implemented or a summer plan for a student can be established could benefit all parties. However, because the testing season is often in April, this leads for a very tight timeframe. It might mean that testing would have to take place earlier in the year.

This study explains how parents reacted to results received from PARCC. While perceptions of their results were both positive and negative, teachers and researchers can learn the importance of effective communication and guidance when providing standardized assessment results and decision making regarding standardized test participation.

Pre-service teachers, teachers, administrators and parents should be as informed as possible regarding standardized test results. Questions should be asked and answered. Everyone should understand the purpose and the impact of the outcome to students and schools. Teachers, administrators and parents should make sure that those who decide what standardized tests are required in our schools know what they wish a standardized test can provide.

PARCC was designed to test whether a student is progressing towards being college and career ready. Perhaps a better explanation of what the scores mean, how they should be used in the schools and the classroom, and what they mean for individual students might help all parties be more comfortable and understand the test results, including how they would impact the individual student, classroom instruction and school setting. Stating whether or not they are on track for their grade level is a start but explaining how the test reaches this conclusion and what recommendations should be taken to get the student on track would be most beneficial.

Education and communication is necessary for anything that is implemented. Educators should continue to research the value of the standardized tests in use in their K-12 schools. They should not choose a standardized test only because it is the latest opportunity. Providing the appropriate knowledge about the standardized test, what it is meant to achieve, and why it is important should be information that is disseminated to administrators, teachers and students. Professional development must be provided to administrators and teachers.

Assessment is meant to inform, and making sure people are knowledgeable about it is imperative for success. This can happen if what is communicated about the test matches what is delivered, and appropriate professional development for administrators and teachers is provided. Since this study, the media has suggested that the 2018 test year could be the last year PARCC will be utilized in this state (Rado, February 2018). According to ISBE representative, Jackie Matthews, "While its name may change, standardized testing is not going away, and some elements of PARCC will remain in whatever new format takes its place" (Krishnamurthy, 2018). For the 2018-2019 school year, the state's board of education has

chosen to “...use and build on the core features of PARCC...[it] is the only large-scale assessment to ‘fully meet’ all federal accountability requirements...This initial work will serve as our foundation for continuous improvement (Smith 2018). As educators in this and other states seek to improve standardized testing and look into what the next standardized test should be, they should take into consideration the wants of parents regarding standardized test outcomes. From the information in this study, parents hope for a clear purpose for testing with minimal time taken away from the learning process, and there should be a clear purpose for the standardized test. Parents seek that out at the individual, school, district and state levels with detailed assessment results on each subject, identifying student strengths and weaknesses. When that test is identified, parents should be supportive in standardized testing than what has been witnessed.

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