

# Do Disenfranchised Populations Benefit from State Testing?

by Danielle Puhl

All types of learners participate in state testing. State testing is used to determine if a student is below grade level, at grade level, or above grade level. Results become solidified if students are classified into different categories based on their levels of performance. Is it worth it for these disenfranchised populations to take more tests?

Disenfranchised groups is a term used to refer to those who are missing classroom opportunities, due to testing requirements. Groups impacted from testing the most, include special education students with identified learning disabilities. These are students at the bottom thirteenth percentile within the school setting. State testing also affects students on 504's. These are students with suspected disabilities or impairments-mental or physical, such as ADHD, or those hurt by a life altering situation, such as an accident that may have resulted in a Traumatic Brain Injury. Another subgroup are ELL (English Language Learners.) These groups are all tested more than any other population of students, including gifted or talented students.

A decade ago, we had kids test, test, and test, so many new tests, weekly probes, and so much weekly practice. Prior to the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teachers spent nights agonizing over Standard Deviation scores on specific district level tests. The teachers worked extremely hard at differentiating levels for students at their levels, scaffolding and color-coded lessons and PPT's, so that all learners, including ELL students, had access to the curriculum. They were just merely doing, drill and kill on test prep each week. They looked at each sub area and measured the Standard Deviations. The larger the number, the bigger the difference in range. They thought to themselves, "What did we miss?" The old model of excess testing did not allow time to truly apply and master new concepts. They did not specifically master each standard.

Today literature teachers might focus on one novel for months and expose students to each of the outlined concepts through extension activities. This method of teaching brings new life into classic texts. It allows students to obtain different perspectives. With the adaptation of speaking and listening standards, Socratic Seminars and Philosophical Chairs, students are now able to communicate more and learn

different perspectives, as opposed to learning the one, and only one, interpretation the teacher has shared or encountered throughout the book. Math courses are also diving deeper into more content and activities. Now, it is not simply about remembering a formula and solving a computation problem. It is about how learners can be given a formula, but need to build a room with their final calculated dimensions on the computer-generated tests. The next generation of learners are tech savvy, teachers are not their source of information, and they have access to anything by Googling it. We, as teachers, need to push them to apply themselves in a new way, through discovery. Students who are over tested, do not have the same access to these learning opportunities, they are missing days of instruction due to testing. They end up missing the most seat time of any population. One of the reasons why they are required to participate in more testing is because they are not at grade level. This results in them taking the mandated tests over to verify that they are not at grade level.

Grade level classrooms are filled with learners whose abilities may range from several grade levels. It should be expected that there are kids at the top, a few who failed, and many right in the middle. When it comes to our disenfranchised populations, we cannot allow for any of them to fall behind any further, they need to be exposed to deeper thinking and ways to apply it. The goal is to narrow the achievement gap, year by year to prepare our students to compete for jobs against the general population. Students cannot get there if they are unsure where to start. CCSS has helped with this over the past few years.

With the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a new standardized test was created that objectively measures whether grade based peers are performing at standard or below. Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium (SBAC) is aligned to what is taking place in the content areas with CCSS. Assessments are taken by students in grades three through eight and at the high school level. Eleventh graders take Math and English Language Arts assessments. Each of the tests have two portions, the Performance Task (PT) and Computer-Adaptive Test (CAT). Both are taken over a period of several days. The system allows many accommodations to be implemented and are already embedded without



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special requests. Since they are computer tests, the burden is taken off the system and the teachers. New testing practices through SBAC have allowed students to access more seat time, especially the disenfranchised groups. They will always have the burden of testing more than other groups, to determine appropriate levels, but with the implementation of SBAC testing, it is a start in the right direction to eliminate some of the other probes and tests districts required. The caveat is that as eleventh graders, they are test given the tests twice, if not at grade level to these populations, and again twice in twelfth, to prove they are indeed low performing and not meeting standard. The testing is also done over several days for each PT and CT part. This is not ideal, but it is having the most impact at the high school secondary level versus elementary or middle school level where skills are brand new to basic skills.

Most schools have moved towards full inclusion models with SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Operational Protocol). This includes having trained teachers who are skilled at working with ELL populations.

Language objectives and built into the daily academic objectives. Co-teaching models being adopted and access to new and clever tech tools to allow students easier access to content than ever before. The goal within each class is MASTERY. When students attempt state tests, they are working towards that Level 3 victory that shows mastery of the material. Sometimes for these groups, that Level 2 Basic is even a victory.

Other tests seem to be phasing out as most states move to this standardized test. Some groups, such as our bottom learners, are still required to take multiple tests to meet graduation requirements if they fall below standard. ELL students are still required to take ELP (English Language Proficiency) tests. Nevertheless, if we look at the purposes, it is to determine if we are doing our jobs to move these students in the right direction. Frustrating as it maybe, they benefit us as teachers and determine if students are in fact still in the disenfranchised groupings. With CCSS, we are moving in the right direction, but we still have work to do, to eliminate over testing.

When results are public, it is a clear picture of that particular neighborhood and community. Parents make better-informed decisions as to which schools to enroll their children in that best suit their child's needs. Schools can use these tools to aid in funding for specialized interventions such as academic literature support classes or additional math labs. With increased transparency between the community and parents to help aid in discussions can be, jump-started regarding community needs and support for different populations and different learners. Public testing results can also provide a guide for focus at teacher PLC (Professional Learning Committee) meetings to ensure teachers are using best practices and see where their personal instruction maybe falling short. In summary, testing is worth it, but it needs to continue to evolve to allow all groups the opportunity to continue to thrive, in a classroom seat, not a testing environment.