

The Hidden Harms in High Stakes Standardized Testing

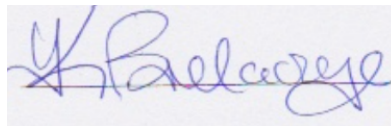
Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Sophia Poulin

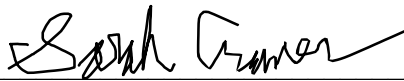
Committee Signatures:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric DeMeulenaere", written over a horizontal line.

Eric DeMeulenaere, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kate Bielaczyc", written over a horizontal line.

Kate Bielaczyc, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sarah Cramer", written over a horizontal line.

Sarah Cramer, MAT

ABSTRACT

There is widespread frustration over the negative impacts of standardized testing amongst students, parents, educators and educational researchers. This study aims to highlight the harms that exist in our high stakes standardized testing model in our education system. The data collected for this study was collected by interviewing participants through Zoom. The participants in this study were educational professionals, parents, and teachers. Overall, the data collected shows significant evidence that high stakes standardized tests harm our students through testing anxiety, standardization of curriculum, and a lack of representation and educational opportunities for students of color.

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2018 I spent most of my free time volunteering in a kindergarten classroom at Columbus Park Preparatory Elementary School. The students in my class were filled with excitement, wonder, incredible imaginations and resiliency. But, within this classroom there were also many children that came to school hungry, upset, or preoccupied with whatever was going on in their home lives. Some did not speak English, some had major behavioral issues, and some had no passion for learning at all. I helped to teach children in my kindergarten classroom how to hold pencils correctly, color inside the lines, and write their names. Every day, I would work with my students to complete small worksheets that were kept in folders to monitor their progress and improvement throughout the year, a project that I loved and cherished. I was able to see their progress through the year within these folders. It was incredible to see the improvements that they were making with their writing, motor skills, and sentence structuring. These students worked hard to learn the basic motor skills needed to function in a classroom and even harder to understand the basic and building block concepts that they will need for the rest of their educational careers.

One week I walked in and asked for my daily assignment within the classroom and was met with a new task. I was placed at one of the two computers within the classroom and had to sit there for the day and call the students up one by one to take a small, computerized test where I monitored their progress and assisted them when needed. The hardest part about conducting these tests was watching the students want to do well, but not understanding the material at all. They had headphones that read them the directions, as they could not read yet, and were asked to choose the correct answer to the question through a multiple-choice option. These students struggled and often looked to me for instruction and help, something that was my job to provide to these students, but I was not allowed to. They told me which option they wanted to choose, most of the time it

was obvious that they were guessing, and I clicked their answer. The majority of the students received a 50% or below on this math test, which is tragic to begin with, but the most tragic part was watching the students with learning disabilities and language discrepancies get frustrated with themselves because they could not understand, and I, again, could not help them. One specific student suffered from autism, so it was difficult for him to focus on the task at hand and even harder for him to critically think about the questions, so he pointed to whichever answer he liked the look of best, based on aesthetic instead of correctness. Another student, who did not speak any English, looked at me in confusion, then proceeded to point at random answers just to get the test over with. I couldn't help to feel badly for these children and wonder what the point of this math test was, but also why it was so difficult. As the students took it, I tried to answer some of these questions myself, as a sophomore in college, and found the wording and questions a little bit difficult for me, never mind for a kindergartener.

* * *

This experience has stuck with me since the day that it happened and is one of the driving forces behind this thesis. I have explored it in depth and have used it as an example in many of my educational classes as to *why* standardized testing is harmful and a poor judgement of a student's educational ability. The education system that we are currently working with focuses more on testing performance rather than individual improvements within the classroom. Standardized testing has become a beast in our society that seems impossible to avoid and the harms that exist in this reality are rarely spoken about.

The problems I, and two of my classmates, focused on while conducting this research all centered around high stakes standardized testing, but more specifically, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS. We were interested in learning more about why

this test is administered, the history behind it, accommodations, as well as personal testimonials of people who were directly affected by this high stakes standardized test. These initial interests led us to develop our projects that focus on high stakes standardized testing. The questions I explored through my research were as follows:

1. What are the different ways that students are affected by high stakes standardized tests?
 - a. How are they harmed by this system?
 - b. What is harm in an educational setting?
2. What measures have been put into place in order to make high stakes standardized tests more accessible?
3. Do high stakes standardized testing have any major effects on teachers and other educators and, if so, what kind?
4. How does opting out affect the graduation of students?
 - a. If a student does not meet the graduation requirement, what happens?

To address these questions, I began a project with my two partners, to learn as much as we could through interviews from people whom were chosen due to their position in their community, their knowledge on the opt-out movement, or their professional status. Each participant was asked their own set of questions relevant to their background but still centered around their experiences with high stakes standardized testing. These questions are investigated in direct relation to the effect that high stakes standardized testing has on students. The data collected during these interviews was shared with the broader community via a website and social media so that our project might serve to educate others subjected to the MCAS. We entitled our group the Worcester County Anti-Testing Collaborative, or WCATC.

I further analyzed all of the interview data and decided to base my thesis on working to understand the harms caused by standardized testing. Through the literature review, as well as an in-depth analysis of the data collected, the harms of standardized testing will be explored below. This study has revealed that high stakes standardized testing causes more harm than good to our students through creating anxious environments, standardized classroom materials, and a lack of representation and opportunities yet these tests are still distributed annually to our students.

A Review of Literature

Co-Written with Rebekah Etique, and Aidan Moffatt

History

The history of standardized testing in the United States dates back to the early 1900's. The first usage of a standardized test occurred during World War I when the United States Military instituted the Army Alpha and Beta tests in 1917 (Singer, 2019). These tests, created by the then President of the American Psychological Association, Robert M. Yerkes, were used to measure the intelligence of the recruits (Singer, 2019). Specifically, the goal of these tests was to determine which recruits were “mentally inferior” and which were considered to have “superior mental ability” (Singer, 2019). The basis of these tests was also of eugenicist ideals where it was thought that people of color would have a lower IQ, making it another reason why people of color were unable to serve in the military (Singer, 2019). Within the next ten years, the institution of standardized testing emerged for schools. Carl Bringham, an enthusiastic member of the eugenics movement, designed the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or the SAT (Singer, 2019). The first usage was in 1926. The test, distributed to high school students, was used as a form of gatekeeping to predict who would excel in college and who would not (Singer, 2019).

In 1959, a professor at the University of Iowa, Franklin Lindquist, created American College Testing, or ACT (Fletcher, 2009). This test included a section that was intended to guide students towards a profession through asking questions about their interests. The ACT tests students in the areas of math, reading, English usage, and scientific principles. What makes the ACT different from the SAT is the composition of the test. The ACT is geared towards measuring accumulated information from an individual whereas the SAT is centered on testing logic (Fletcher, 2009).

In 1993 a law was passed in Massachusetts that aimed to improve public education across the state (McCaleb-Kahan & Wenner, 2009). This law resulted in the creation of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) (McCaleb-Kahan & Wenner, 2009). “The MCAS testing program assesses all students including special needs students and LEP (Limited English Proficient) students enrolled in public schools” (McCaleb-Kahan & Wenner, 2009, p. 2). The MCAS test is also a graduation requirement in the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). Each student must earn a passing score in English Language Arts, mathematics, and one science test (biology, chemistry, introductory physics, or technology/engineering) (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). If these tests are not passed by 10th grade, students may retest until they earn a passing grade in order to graduate (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.).

Massachusetts was one of the first states to adopt statewide mandated standardized tests in the country. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) mandated and popularized standardized tests nationwide. This act brought testing to the top of the nation's educational agenda (Yaffe et. al., 2008). This mandated states to test students in reading and math in grades three

through eight, and once more in high school (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction). The aim of this policy was to close the academic achievement gaps through identifying struggling districts and students and providing them with assistance (Yaffe et. al., 2008). This policy was also designed to have all students testing proficiently by 2014, only twelve years after its institution (Rosenberg, 2004). This goal was quite unrealistic as our past expectations for testing levels were “minimal competency” (Rosenberg, 2004). This unrealistic goal adds to the pressure that exists with standardized testing and achievement.

In efforts to reform the No Child Left Behind law, a new act was passed. This new legislature, entitled Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, replaced the NCLB law of 2002 (Klein, 2015). This new act stood to lessen the role of the federal government in K-12 education (Klein, 2015). Within this act there were new plans surrounding accountability strategies, school interventions, standards, testing, and more (Klein, 2016). In relevance to this study, ESSA allows for each state to create their own testing protocols and opt-out laws, but still need to test reading and math in grades three through eight, and once more in high school (Klein, 2016).

Teacher Autonomy

Autonomy in the classroom has been on a decrease since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 because of the standardized testing mandates (Yaffe et. al., 2008). These mandates restricted curriculum and the power that teachers held over the design because of the need to educate their students on the content of the tests so that they would do well. We see an even further decline in 2009 when the Common Core Standards became more utilized and implemented across the country (Tampio, 2018). The Common Core describes in detail what students in grades K-12 should be taught and has displaced other productive and valuable ways of

teaching and educating our youth (Tampio, 2018). Tampio (2018) states that this new method may be productive in raising the educational bar for some students, but overall, the costs outweigh the benefits. Tampio also makes the statement that democracies should work to disperse the educational authority instead of having one philosophy around education controlled by one group.

The standards put into place by testing as well as by the Common Core have led to the idea referred to as “teaching for the test.” The concept of this is centered around the focus of curriculum being on material that will be tested rather than relaying valuable information. “Widespread reports of teaching to the test along with data that suggest that schools are losing their most vulnerable students suggest that schools may be more focused on producing higher test scores in order to look good than on making improvements in teaching and learning that result in authentically better schooling for all students” (Wheelock, 2003, p. 4). Finding ways to assess non-cognitive skills would be a productive way in measuring the development and improvement of alternate skills that students will need in order to succeed in college and the workplace instead of the memorization of facts (Yaffe et. al., 2008). The central idea found behind standardized tests is measuring the improvement of students, but behind that it is a measure of accountability for teachers. One must think, though, is this accurate since all students learn differently? “The bottom line is that only teachers can use assessment day to day to support the learning of their students” (Yaffe et. al., 2008, p. 5). After all, teachers are the ones spending the most time with their students, so they would be the ones most fit to find an accurate way to measure improvement and development.

Cultural Capital

A firm correlation between cultural capital and the educational outcomes of test takers has been identified amongst relevant research. Testing may be advertised as a useful mechanism for assessing knowledge, but it also may be reflective of a much broader and more complex social movement (Clayton, 2019). “After all, what is a standardized test but an assessment that refers to a specific standard? And that standard is white, upper class students” (Singer, 2019). In other words, these are the students that will achieve the highest scores on these tests.

Testing retains the history of racial-bias inherent in the original intentions of first creators of standardized tests. Among test producers, the eugenicist foundations idealized that people of color have lower IQs, making the tests difficult for students of color to pass in the foundation’s “high-performing academics.” When mandated testing originated during a time of racial-hostility within national politics, testing was thought of by these foundations as a way to further enhance the Jim Crow Laws (Singer, 2019). Shockingly, the No Child Left Behind Law that supported this belief and used it to championize the popularity of their tests. This, undoubtedly, contradicts the supported claims of what the law stands for, which is to “leave no child behind.” Instead, the racial achievement gap promoted, and still does promote, a larger population of struggling students of color (Yaffe et. al., 2008).

The process of opting-out refers to omitting a student from a high stakes standardized test. It is required that parents be made aware of the possibility; but the unfortunate truth is that the majority of parents receiving this education about opt-out options are in suburban and predominantly white communities, thus creating an economic privilege among the few (Clayton, 2019). Opting out has been a movement since 2014, and while there are parents who have been made aware of the movement since its fruition, not many have actually participated in it. Not

because they are against the idea of opting out, but because testing industries have threatened that opted-out students would “compromise educational equality and fail to accurately evaluate teachers” (Levy, 2016, p. 58). Parents worry that they will be framed as bad parents for failing their children, or that their children will suffer academically by not participating in tests like the rest of their class peers. The common assumption has been to refrain from questioning the system any further, since these assumed risks sound too high (Levy, 2016). Many feared that the removal of standardized tests would “compromise educational equality and fail to accurately evaluate teachers” (Levy, 2016, p. 58), however, there is growing evidence of alternate assessment tools that are laying these concerns of accountability to rest.

Accountability/Performance Expectations

In any educational setting, establishing standards of accountability can be beneficial to help ensure the best possible results. The concept is fairly simple; when a specific group performs at a high level they will be rewarded and when they perform at a low level they will be punished. In the 1990s, the federal government “established and defined the concept of accountability to set standards in learning” (Esposito, 2003, p. 2). This system was enacted with positive intentions, but the idea that thousands of unique schools across the country can be held to the same set of standards is not realistic. Additionally, it would prove to have severely negative impacts on the schools which would need more assistance in ensuring student success. Accountability can be an effective tool in an individual classroom, but it is not as effective at a larger scale.

Throughout the United States, schools tend to be racially segregated due to factors such as housing segregation or socioeconomic status. The standard to which many schools are held accountable refers to that of the “typical” student. In the eyes of test makers, the “typical student”

refers to the performance of the average white, middle to upper class individual (Singer, 2019). When schools with less academic resources, due to the socioeconomic conditions of the individuals in the surrounding area, are forced to administer tests which cater to a more prepared demographic, it is obvious that they will not perform as well.

Also, not only are there inequities in the household incomes between schools, those differences are further exacerbated by the way we fund schools which typically results in less funding to the schools in low-income neighborhoods. Those schools, because they tend to be either heavily urban with older buildings or heavily rural with greater transportation costs, also are more expensive to run. Thus, the three economic factors, poorer families combined with poorer funded schools combined with higher costs to run the poorer schools in the poorer communities create a trifecta of inequality that the tests capture but do nothing to rectify. The schools are less to blame for the inequities than society as a whole. (DeMeulenaere, 2021)

Also, it is important to consider that “students who opt out of testing tend to come from districts and demographic groups associated with higher levels of performance” (Cremata, 2019, p. 3). So, students who have a better statistical chance of scoring higher on a test based on their race and economic status are the same students who are made most aware of their ability to *not* take the test. Students should only be tested on knowledge which is relevant to what they have been taught in school. To combat negative standards of accountability, “districts should consider explicitly adjusting for the characteristics of the students who actually sit for tests” (Cremata, 2019, p. 1) when creating the tests by which they are measured. The success of an individual student should not be significantly impacted by the performance of another student from a completely different environment.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The construction of my Praxis project comes as a result of my personal educational experiences and those that I observed in the Worcester Public Schools. The concepts that I built

off of come from the works of FairTest as well as Citizens for Public Schools. I, along with my team, received guidance from FairTest and Citizens for Public Schools through their websites as well as conversations that we had with members of these organizations. These organizations work to limit, and hopefully terminate, the use of standardized testing. My partners and I interviewed various subject groups that were affected by standardized testing and questioned them about their experiences, opinions, and recommendations for future work to be done.

In order to correctly relay the data to follow, it is important to create our working definition of “harm.” Merriam-Webster defines harm as “physical or mental damage; to damage or injure physically or mentally.” For the purposes of this research, “harm” refers to different actions that work against the wellbeing of students through affecting them mentally. Within this work, high stakes standardized testing will be referred to as harmful as the creating, usage, and administration of these exams work against the wellbeing of our students. Through our research and investigation of our primary research questions, the way that high stakes standardized testing affects students mentally stood out to me. Three themes stood out the most: anxiety, standardization of curriculum, and lack of representation and racial biases.

Anxiety is a form of emotional distress, as stated by Medical News Today (2020). This becomes harmful to our students when the symptoms manifest in physical ways and/or interfere with the productiveness of a student. These symptoms can exist as a feeling, such as being overwhelmed or hopeless; lack of sleep or too much sleep; changes in appetite; fatigue; anger or irritability; and difficulty thinking or remembering (Kandola, 2020). All of these symptoms affect both the individual, peers, teachers, and families through affecting daily functions. Brown (2019) references a study conducted by Segool et. al. (2013) that measured the anxiety felt by 335 elementary school students that compared anxiety levels directly after a high-stakes test to an

average classroom test. This study found that there was a significant increase in anxiety levels directly after the high-stakes standardized test compared to that of the classroom test (Brown, 2019). One of the ways I will attend to the harm caused by high stakes standardized testing is to consider the emotional distress of anxiety that they invoke.

Richard Phelps (1999) evaluates some of the standardization and narrowing of the curriculum in his writing, *Why Testing Experts Hate Testing*. In this piece he investigates how the pressure of high stakes standardized tests results in the narrowing of curriculum in our schools.

Pressure to produce higher scores leads teachers to focus on material that will be covered by the tests and to exclude everything else. The curriculum is thereby narrowed, which means that some subjects are ignored. Within those that are taught, lower order thinking skills are emphasized. As a result, test scores get inflated while real learning suffers. (p. 7).

This narrowing of and focusing on less-rigorous curricula is a complete disservice to our students. The shifted focus to teaching material that will be on the test results in a shallow curriculum that tests superficial information and takes away from the diverse critical thinking and broad educational skills that students need to develop (Phelps, 1999). As Brown (2019) stated, the intense pressure that is put on teachers to have high classroom testing averages greatly affects the way that teachers are educating as well as the material that they relay to their students, also resulting in a decrease in teacher autonomy.

All this has developed from tests that we know unfairly discriminate against a variety of students; show only a limited sample of behavior; presume similarity of educational content across classrooms; ignore individualizing ideas such as progressivism and constructivism; make teachers and administrators narrow their curriculum to the test content; and require teachers to focus on test-taking skills, thus forfeiting valuable instruction time. (Gunzelmann, 2005, p. 217).

The ideas that Gunzelmann (2005) explores in their writing, *Toxic Testing*, are centered around the harm that is caused through the narrowing of curriculum and how this affects students that are not “standard.” Brown (2019) also states that one teacher interviewed stated that around 95% of

the work that they give in their class is centered around the preparation of standardized tests. In this case, the harm caused on students is not direct from the testing itself, as with the anxiety, but rather the harm is in the absence of broad, deep and enriching curriculum that is no longer occurring as a result of the intense focus on the more narrow and shallow skills that reflect the tests.

Lastly, and perhaps more obviously, the lack of representation and racial biases that exists in the tests, harm our students through creating racially unequal educational opportunities. Gunzelmann (2005) evaluates the ways in which students are affected by these high stakes standardized tests. One student in this writing, Scott, is said to be a good student that is enrolled in accelerated classes with many interests but is unable to demonstrate all of this knowledge and perpetually scores low on high stakes standardized tests (Gunzelmann, 2005).

It is also important to acknowledge the racial biases that exist in the high stakes standardized testing system. Robert Green and Robert Griffore (1980) evaluate how these tests put students of color at a disadvantage from the get-go. One of the largest issues here is the language barrier. Many students of color have a different understanding of mainstream English as it may not be their first language, and/or there are dialectal differences that exist that are not taken into account when these tests are created (Green & Griffore, 1980). These language barriers lead students of color to comprehend text and questions differently, leading to “incorrect” answers and lower test scores. This becomes harmful to our students due to the pressure that exists to succeed on high stakes standardized tests. Students often use these scores as a way to measure achievement rather than progress and look to them to be a measure of their self-worth. Gunzelmann (2005) evaluates a case of a student named Suzie. This student is described as an excellent student who performed well on standardized tests but came to rely on testing results too heavily (Gunzelmann,

2005). Suzie, throughout college, came to focus too closely on scores and academic competition and did not understand the other strengths and characteristics that she had as a young woman (Gunzelmann, 2005). Students like Suzie exist in every school, but they are not all positive. Suzie relied on her good grades in order to feel successful; other students do the same but do not achieve the high scores and success compared to that of Suzie. In an article published by Citizens for Public Schools, there are statistics that show the scoring disparities between students that English Language Learners and the scores of students who are not. This same data shows that over the last 16 years there have been no significant changes in the success of Black or Latinx students on the NAEP test in Massachusetts; “In 2019, MA had eight NAEP score gaps statistically larger than the national average and only one smaller for underserved student groups” (Citizens for Public Schools). The usage of these high stakes standardized tests is doing a disservice to our students through exposing them to the different harms that have been discussed above. Throughout the data that is evaluated below, the ideas of these scholars, and more, will be discussed.

METHODS

Methodological Stance

My original methodologies for this thesis were situated in the idea of conducting a participatory action research project, or PAR. The three of us have experience in YPAR, youth participatory action research, thanks to a class that we took with Eric DeMeulenaere at Clark University. The idea behind PAR is learning through action (Baum et. al., 2006). The idea behind conducting a PAR project was to allow our participants the opportunity to enact change that is meaningful to them and in a way that is meaningful to them within their communities. As Baum, MacDougall, and Smith stated,

Firstly, it focuses on research whose purpose is to enable action... Secondly, PAR pays careful attention to power relationships, advocating for power to be deliberately shared between the researcher and the researched: blurring the line between them until the researched become the researchers... Thirdly, PAR contrasts with less dynamic approaches that remove data and information from their contexts. (Baum et. al., 2006)

Our initial goal was to adopt this practice and empower our participants to lead us in a direction that they saw as important-within the realm of high stakes standardized testing- while we assisted them, collected data, and formed our theses. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic required us to shift our methodology into one that we were able to conduct while following the health guidelines that were brought on by the pandemic.

With the pandemic, we switched to a qualitative methodology of interviewing in order to collect our data. Our goal was to collect data from willing participants that we could then distribute to the public concerning high stakes standardized testing. My peers and I chose this form of research because, as Fontana and Frey stated, "...with the assumption that interviewing results in true and accurate pictures of respondents' selves and lives" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 646), if we were not able to study our participants as they worked- like we planned with PAR- then our hope was to collect accurate data that gave a good representation of how those that are impacted by high stakes standardized testing feel as well as what their experiences were like. The form of interviewing as a method of research exists as surveys, open-ended questioning, opinion-polling, structured interviewing and is most popular in the sociological field (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Our study uses open-ended questions as well as semi-structured interviewing.

Epistemological Stance

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, my team and I were limited in what methods of research we were able to conduct. As a group, after lengthy discussion, we decided to use interviews as a method of research. Health restrictions blocked our ability to observe participants during a PAR project like we had originally planned. Initially, we were to collect data through discussions and site observations. In efforts to adapt to the changing landscape caused by the pandemic, we settled on interviewing as we were able to conduct these interviews remotely through Zoom. It is our belief, as a team, that personal experience is the most powerful way to build knowledge and collect information. Since we were unable to do this in person due to the unforeseen circumstances caused by the pandemic, we decided that interviewing and obtaining personal stories was the next best thing.

Site

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all of my research was conducted remotely. This being said, we did not have a site as we were able to conduct all of our work safely from our homes. Each of us lived in Worcester, Massachusetts while we were conducting our research. The state of Massachusetts relies heavily on state sponsored standardized testing. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, is given annually to students in third through eighth grade and then once more in tenth grade (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MA Graduation Requirements and Related Guidance, 2021). Massachusetts relies on this test as a requirement for students to graduate high school. This creates an educational culture that is reliant on standardized testing results.

Positionality

I grew up in a small town in New Hampshire. This town was predominantly white, with my graduating class having less than ten people of color out of about 400 students. This being said, my hometown demographic is very different from that of Worcester. My hometown, according to Data USA, 93.8% of my town is white whereas Worcester is only 56.2% white (Data USA, n.d.). My hometown is also relatively wealthy with good schools, ample materials, and many educational opportunities. My life so far has revolved around school, educating, and the classroom. My mother has been a teacher in my hometown throughout my life, so I have high expectations of what teaching and educating should consist of. It is also important to note that I did not grow up taking the MCAS tests, or any high stakes standardized tests for that matter. These contributing factors are reflected in the work that I have done here as my positionality dictates the way that I conduct and evaluate the data collected.

Participants

The participants in our study were parents and guardians of students, high school students, educators, and professionals that work(ed) within the realm of standardized testing. We recruited our subjects through social media posts, emails, and various personal connections. We located each of our participants through personal and professional relationships that each of us hold, through research about standardized testing, as well as asking our participants if they knew of anyone that would be willing to participate in our research. Our original plan was to interview as many people as possible, with our cap being thirty total participants, in an effort to gather a diverse set of data. In total, we ended up interviewing six people. Many of the potential participants that we emailed never returned our correspondence, or we were unable to find a time to meet together. These included more local teachers, special education coordinators, test creators, professionals that

are for-testing, students, and more local parents. An important limitation to state is the sample size of our research as data and diversity of opinions was limited.

Out of our six participants, four of them were professionals, we had one teacher, and two parents (one was also listed as a professional). We had five females and one male participant. Our participants come from a variety of backgrounds and are all white presenting. We had one participant that was in favor of testing, one that was indifferent, and five that were against the high stakes standardized system. Our participants also varied in age with our youngest being a few years out of college and our eldest being retired. We also had a representative of Citizens for Public Schools, President of the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance, a Worcester high school math teacher, a parent of a student that went through the special education system, a special education coordinator from New Hampshire, a former President/CEO of the Worcester Regional Research Bureau as well as a member of the Massachusetts Board of Education.

Data Collection

Throughout this process, we audio recorded our individual meetings conducted on Zoom with teachers, students, parents and education professionals. Each participant was asked a set of questions specific to their experiences and title within their community. Within my methodological stance, I refer to the interview process that I followed as “semi-structured.” I say “semi-structured interviewing” as the questions that we asked our participants were different depending on their title (professional, teacher, parent, or student), but participants within the same group were asked similar questions. These questions varied based on the length of any given interview and follow up and clarification questions were asked when needed, a list of these potential questions can be found in Appendix A. We then worked to transcribe these interviews

in order to make the data more comprehensive. All data from this research was kept confidential and used for mine, and my partners, research purposes only.

Data Analysis

To preserve the foundation of proper data collection, we completed analytical reviews of the data collected from each participant interview. This process was accomplished by thorough data logs which were kept with our interview transcripts and safely stored. All transcripts were given the opportunity to be analyzed multiple times. It is important to emphasize that I am taking an activist standpoint with this thesis. Although there were six total participants, the data to follow highlights the answers of a select few to assist in showing how high stakes standardized tests are harmful. When evaluating the collected data, I took note of recurring themes, the major one being harm to students. After I established my central theme, I looked for more specific markers that addressed the notions of harm that was stated earlier, anxiety, standardization of curriculum, and lack of representation and racial biases. These markers included key words such as disadvantage, narrow, expectations, and hurtful. Special attention was paid during interviews as well in efforts to recall the tone used by the participant to ensure their words were not taken out of context.

FINDINGS

How Did I Get Here? (Co-Written with Rebekah Etique, and Aidan Moffatt)

Our theory of change was centered around the idea of educating families on the choice to opt-out, as well as the harm that is caused by high stakes standardized testing. The goal of this research was to create an impact in the Worcester district through raising awareness of the harms of standardized testing. Through the work conducted with my colleagues, with organizations such

as FairTest and Citizens for Public Schools, I have seen first-hand examples of how these tests are detrimental to the success of students. In order to craft this project, I reflected on my personal experiences with testing throughout my educational career as well as experiences within classrooms in Worcester. It is also important to mention that a lot of my work done throughout my undergraduate degree has focused on the disparities and inequities that exist in education in urban school districts. In learning about these realities, I crafted my own opinions and did research in order to create this thesis. I wanted to gather more information, personal testimonies, and distribute data in order to make the public aware of these issues.

I, along with my two colleagues, sought to gather the opinions and the stories of parents, teachers, and education workers with a range of experiences involved with education and standardized testing. Many of these interviewees had strong opinions on standardized and high stakes tests based on initiatives to remove them, discredit them, and/or opt-out of them. Specifically, we wanted to gather more information on the general perception of the opt-out movement and how it has played out in schools and communities. Based on the interviews and other research, we created a hub of social media resources for parents to use as a guide for researching the harms in high stakes standardized testing as well as a way for them to opt their students out. In addition to explaining the process, these resources contained facts and information which highlight the potential consequences of standardized and high stakes testing.



Worcester County Anti-Testing Collaborative

Figure 1. A screenshot of the home page of our website.

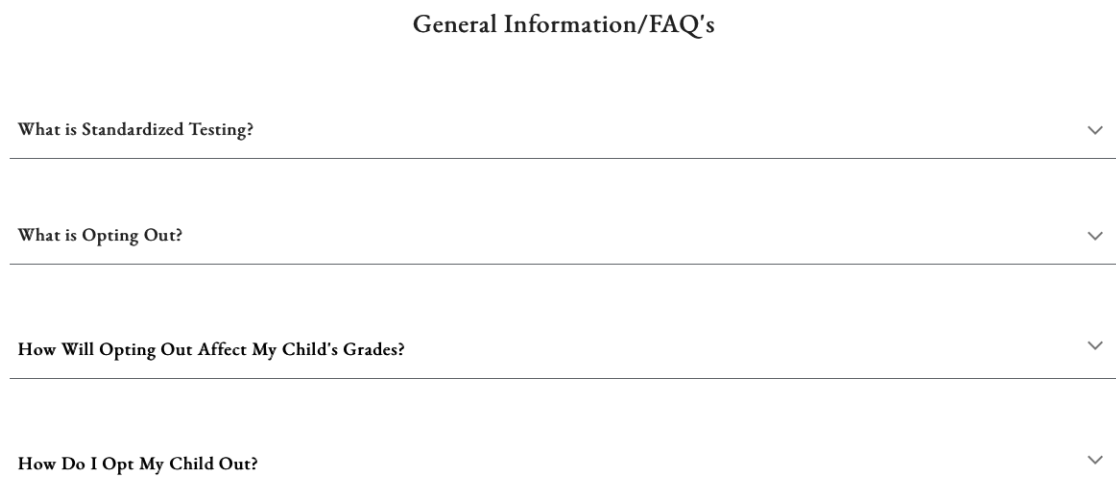


Figure 2. A screenshot of some of the resources available on our website.

The process of my Praxis research was heavily impacted by the unprecedented social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. My original theory of change consisted of educating parents of the opt-out process of standardized testing through in-person meetings and participant led projects centered around reducing the effects of high stakes standardized testing. However, state-mandated health restrictions withheld my ability to conduct in-person meetings and caused me to

rethink my process of data collection. With these restrictions, my partners and I decided to switch to share the information developed via a podcast. The opportunity for our research to be conducted through a podcast series was openly discussed, but was also dismissed by the institutional review committee, as failing to adequately protect participants' privacy rights. This led us to ultimately use a website and social media to disseminate the research we developed to promote the opt-out movement. With the privilege of interviewing educators, parents and students of educational and opt-out related experiences, we found success in creating a social media network.

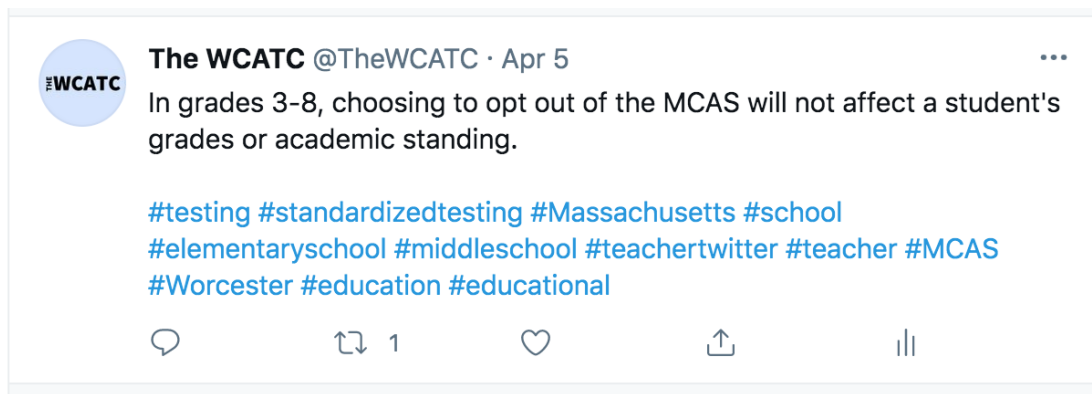


Figure 3. A Screenshot of Tweet posted on our Twitter page.

The Hidden Harms

Test-Centered Anxiety

High stakes standardized testing refers to standardized tests that also act as a measure to determine whether or not students qualify to be admitted into certain programs or in order to graduate (High-Stakes Testing, n.d.). Along with measuring student achievement, high stakes standardized tests are also used by the state of Massachusetts in order to determine schools and school districts that may require additional support from the state (Mass.gov, n.d.). The MCAS testing in Massachusetts is administered in grades three through eight, and then again in grade

ten (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MA Graduation Requirements and Related Guidance, 2021). This test, though it is high stakes for schools and teachers, only becomes high stakes to the students personally when they take it in tenth grade as they must achieve a certain score, that is different for each test, in order to graduate high school. The MCAS tests are a result of an educational reform act that was passed in 1993; the idea behind it being to strengthen education system in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, What is the MCASs alternate assessment?, 2021). Although the original thought behind the 1993 education reform act was, as one of our participants explained, to fix the financial disparities in the public schools, these tests have quickly become a large source of anxiety for both families and students.

High-stakes examination creates pressure on both students and teachers, and erodes the teachers' ability to creatively [sic] teach. Most teachers in Grade 12 reported using the time allotted to teaching science to teach how to write high stakes test. (Boon et. al., 2007, p. 62)

The anxiety around testing is felt early on for many schools as high stakes testing begins in third grade in the state of Massachusetts. Although these tests are not necessarily high stakes for the students directly, the results of the tests affect their teachers and the school. The MCAS stands as a graduation requirement, but also as a form of assessment for monitoring the effectiveness of teachers. One Worcester teacher “Instead, it’s all about threats, because I feel the MCAS, like, looming” (Teacher Interview, 03/26/2021). This same participant, when questioned about how comfortable she feels speaking out against testing in a school setting, replied stating that they do feel comfortable because of their status with their administrators, but feels like they are working against their school when they tell students about their option to opt-out, which has the potential to make other educators feel silenced.

The level at which this anxiety becomes harmful to our students is when it affects their overall quality of life. In the conceptual framework of this piece, the physical effects of harm are briefly discussed. The most important to note being a feeling of hopelessness, changes in sleeping habits, changes in appetite, anger, and difficulty thinking or remembering (Kandola, 2020). One parent participant shared an interaction that she had with the nurse in her child's school. "I heard from the school nurse about how she had like, so many more visits to her office around [MCAS testing] time and it was just heartbreaking. You know, these kids go into school with all this curiosity and excitement and it's like, why is it broken down? Like, instead of cultivated" (Parent Interview, 03/12/2021). This example shows that though the MCAS results do not impact the students in grades three through eight directly, they still feel the anxiety within their classrooms. This manifestation of anxiety is not conducive to the educational experiences of our students nor is it a productive way for our students to spend their time in school. If a student is suffering with test-centered anxiety, they are not functioning at their fullest ability. "One line of research, says consultant psychiatrist Rajeev Krishnadas, is that it involves the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala – a key region of the brain involved in learning and memory, as well as in the physiological and behavioral responses to fear" (Rix, 2015). Not only does this anxiety affect the daily functioning of our students, but it is also affecting the way that they are comprehending and retaining classroom materials. This is an incredible disservice to our students and is harming their overall educational experience(s). Lastly, it is of important note that this anxiety does not come due to the potential difficulty that students may have on the test, rather the weight that their scores hold for them, their teachers, and their schools.

Standardization

Narrowing of Curriculum. One of the largest arguments against standardized testing is centered around the thought of using instructional time to teach for the test instead of teaching more valuable curriculum. One teacher interviewed spoke about her test prep starting at the beginning of the year. This participant stated that they begin each year by combing through MCAS standards and determining what she can teach, what she will not be able to get to, and what concepts she must reteach to her students. This repetition takes away from other instructional time and narrows the curriculum through focusing on the same concepts over and over. This instance is particularly important as this participant teaches 10th grade math, the year that students must pass their MCAS in order to graduate.

A trend that was observed in conducting this research is the age in which this test prep appears to begin. One participant, whom is also a parent of students in the Massachusetts public schooling system, recalled seeing more and more worksheets and observed expectations from teachers that modeled standardized testing expectations for her children when they were in first grade. “I started realizing how narrow the curriculum was becoming because it's what was tested was what was valued” (Parent Interview, 03/12/2021). MCAS testing doesn't begin until third grade yet children in first grade are already experiencing preparation. This also is a prime example of what Phelps (1999) spoke about in their piece *Why Testing Experts Hate Testing*. In this writing, Phelps (1999) explains that the pressure to produce higher scores on the MCAS exams, many teachers narrow their curriculum down to materials that will be covered on these tests which results in some subjects and concepts being ignored altogether.

Dumbing of Curriculum. The harms and potential dangers that come from this limited curriculum are very real. Phelps (1999) briefly explores this possibility by explaining that the focus

on standardized test prep leads to teaching lower order thinking skills which takes away from diverse critical thinking and more broad educational skills that are essential for students to develop. Many teachers are focusing on teaching test-taking skills as half of the battle with these high stakes standardized tests is knowing *how* to take it. High stakes standardized test preparation only focuses on a sample of behavior, assumes universality of educational material amongst all classrooms, and blatantly ignores ideas such as progressivism and constructivism—individualizing ideas (Gunzelmann, 2005). This harms our students through taking away their right to an enriching, engaging, and educational curriculum and instead replaces it with bland, standardized, universal test preparation tactics instead.

Another important point exists within the volume of information that educators are expected to teach throughout the year. They state that “...if I were to like, teach the entire geometry curriculum as written out and the Massachusetts standards, like, I could not in a year do it well because there's too much. So, and then if you put MCAS on top of that, like again, it's just too much” (Teacher Interview, 03/26/2021). Having too much to cover in a single school year has the possibility of leading to lower quality educating in an effort to cover all material, this becomes a case of quantity over quality when it should be the opposite.

Decreases in Passionate Teaching. The pressure that many teachers feel to have high testing scores is often reflected in the material that they are teaching as well as how they are teaching it. Brown (2019) states that the scrutiny that teachers are being put under for their class scores is affecting their overall curriculum and their teaching methods. “For teachers who have underscoring students and need to raise the class’s average score, teachers are turning to methods such as memorization and drilling tactics” (Brown, 2019, p. 6). The need to teach material to prepare their students for their tests takes away some teacher autonomy and takes away the overall

creative options for many teachers (Brown, 2019). Teachers may also avoid attempting new teaching strategies and subjects in order to avoid the possibility of decreasing their class score.

When freely allowed to practice their teaching skills, these professionals can experience great joy and self-satisfaction. It is important that teachers be given the freedom to teach in such a way that is consistent with their belief and value system. (Brady, 2008, p. 42)

According to Jeffrey and Woods, as reported by Brady (2008), when teachers were no longer able to make decisions regarding how and what they are teaching, they reported feeling as though they went from professionals to simple technicians. Feeling poorly about oneself in the teaching profession also results in a lack of teacher efficacy. Brady (2008) also states that losing control over one's environment results in a change in overall efficacy. The need to teach material on the high stakes standardized tests takes away from the feeling of control within their classrooms (Brady, 2008). Decreases in passionate teaching seem to manifest themselves in the way of less creative work and more worksheets that mimic more of the standardized testing model. One parent interviewed reported seeing this change all the way in first grade.

So, kindergarten, kind of was like, it sparked my attention, like I got to start paying closer attention and then by first grade I was seeing a lot of like, worksheets, and almost already like, test prep type expectations to be reading, expectations to be, you know, following a lot of directions, and he really started disliking school. (Parent Interview, 03/12/2021)

The harm that comes from a lack of passionate teaching involves the decrease in student performance, which affects their overall grades and testing scores. This becomes a lose-lose situation. In a blog post by Alfred Thompson in 2007, entitled *Why Passion is Important for Teachers*, Thompson explores the necessity for passion in the teaching profession. Passion in the classroom is an incredible factor in the student outcome and class performance (Thompson, 2007). All in all, "teachers with passion inspire students" (Thompson, 2007). If the goal of high stakes standardized testing is to increase overall student achievement, then it is necessary for

curriculum to become less standardized and give more freedom to our educators. It is necessary to have passion from our educators so that we are not harming our students through giving them subpar educational experiences.

Lack of Educational Opportunities and Representation

The MCAS test, along with many other high stakes tests, notoriously puts students that are anything other than “standard” at a disadvantage. This includes English Language Learners (ELL) and students of color. The high stakes nature of the graduation requirement makes it exceedingly difficult for these students to do well if they are not the standard white, middle class, suburban student. One participant in our research who teaches tenth graders at a school in Worcester gave us insight as to how the graduation requirement affects her students, especially those that do not speak English as she states that reading is one of the largest challenges for her ELL students which is a large issue since, no matter what the subject of the MCAS is, they must be able to read and comprehend the questions in order to succeed.

English Language Learners. According to a study conducted by Stanford University, it takes approximately three to five years for oral proficiency to develop in ELL students, and four to seven years for academic proficiency to develop (Hakuta et. al., 2000). One participant attempted to recall some of the hardships her students go through when taking the MCAS.

And so, I think I want to say the rule is like, if it's been like, three or less years they've been in the country, they can get... they can get a test in Spanish, but I think she can... I think that's pretty flexible and she can kind of get Spanish test for most students who would want it. (Teacher Interview, 03/26/2021)

Upon fact checking this statement, it appears as though the only way a student is able to get a copy of the test in Spanish is if they have been in the United States for less than three years, and

is only offered for the tenth grade mathematics test (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Accessibility and Accommodations Manual for the 2020–2021 MCAS Tests and Retests*, 2021). If a student is given this test, they may respond in English or Spanish, but for all other tests they must respond in English (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Accessibility and Accommodations Manual for the 2020–2021 MCAS Tests and Retests*, 2021).

Green and Griffore (1980) also stated that, due to cultural and linguistic differences, it is difficult for some students to comprehend mainstream English. This fact is not taken into account when these tests are created. In efforts to understand what the context of the question is, ELL may interpret the question at hand differently, which will lead to incorrect answers and lower overall testing scores. Even with any possible accommodations and translations, many things could be lost in translation or misconstrued with the language and culture barriers that are a reality for ELL students.

I just think, I think that the test should be as much as just like, math without words as much as possible just because it becomes so much more biased and challenging for groups if you do include all the words. Like, I get why they do because it gets to a point, right, can you apply math in context? But we've seen time and time again that context is not neutral. And I think that's what really trips up my students. I mean, I do think they don't always know the math material, but I think it would be easier for them a lot of times too, if it was more just straight up math, and not like, going through this whole word problem that like, it's very confusing for them. (Teacher Interview, 03/26/2021)

I want to highlight the section of this quote that states that “context is not neutral” (Teacher Interview, 03/26/2021). This is an extremely important point to make as each individual goes through life with their own experiences which impact the ways that they comprehend everything around them. High stakes standardized testing, again, apply to the standard that is white, middle-class, suburban students and tailors the context of their questions to that population. This adds a whole new level of difficulty for students of color in low socioeconomic urban settings. Not only

are a lot of these students struggling to understand English as a language, but now they are also expected to do this with the added component of arithmetic and their scores are reflecting this struggle.

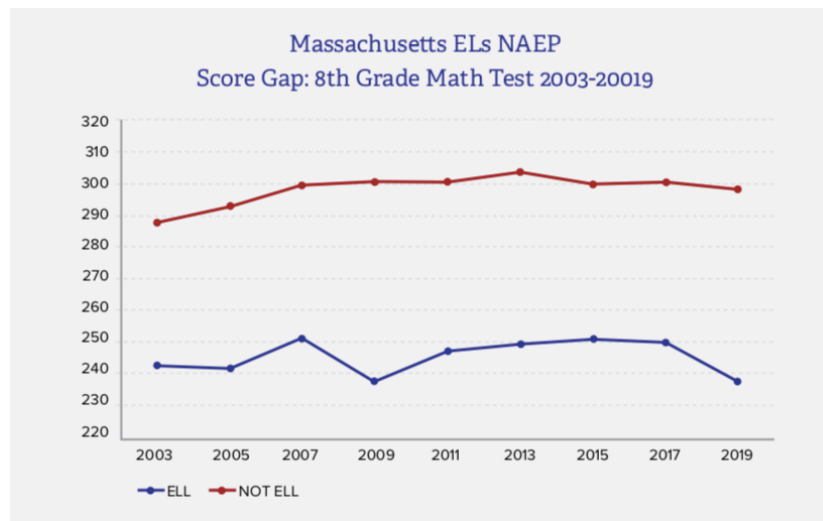


Figure 4. Massachusetts ELs NAEP Score Gap: 8th Grade Math Test 2003-20019. Adapted from Citizens for Public Schools. (n.d.). *MCAS is the Wrong Answer: Six Ways High-Stakes Testing Has Failed Students and what to Do Now*. <https://www.citizensforpublicschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MCAS-Wrong-Answer-Report-2.pdf>.

This figure above displays the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores of ELL students compared to their non-ELL counterparts. The score differences here show that these students consistently score lower than the “average” student. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, as reported by Sugarman and Geary (2018), only 14% of English learners in tenth grade scored proficient in the Science and Technology/Engineering MCAS where 74% of all other students scored proficient. There is also data that shows that graduation rates in Massachusetts have increased 3% over the last five years, however the graduation rates for ELL students stays unchanged (Sugarman & Geary, 2018). This lack of improvement is showing that our ELL students are not getting the same educational opportunities as their peers. These unequal educational opportunities are harming our

students through added anxieties around high stakes standardized tests since these students in particular must work harder in order to graduate with the rest of their peers.

Racism and Cultural Biases. Representation within the MCAS is also lacking. Many students throughout the state have very different backgrounds which affect the way that they are able to comprehend and effectively answer the questions given to them. One participant recalled a question that was posed on an MCAS test.

I don't know what students, but like, a lot of students in in like, urban districts like, got it wrong because they legitimately didn't know that milk came from cows, and then MCAS released this like, thing like, making fun of that and they got in like, a lot of trouble.
(Parent Interview, 03/12/2021)

The problem that is exemplified here is that these questions are crafted for the “standard” student (white, middle-class and suburban) without taking into account those that lack the necessary knowledge and experiences to effectively answer the questions. This does not give an accurate representation of the progress that these students are making in the classroom day to day. Not understanding a question about milk does not show that a student went from starting the year reading below grade level to being able to read at or above grade level throughout the year. This creates an added pressure to students of color; on top of wanting to succeed on high stakes standardized tests, they are also met with the extra barrier of comprehension. The continuous pressure to succeed, met with the low scores that students of color often receive, become harmful because it has the ability to affect the way that students see themselves. Gunzelmann (2005) explores this idea through case studies that prove that students become dependent on their testing scores in order to feel successful. If a student of color continuously scores low year after year, it has the potential to change the way that they see themselves and harm their overall view of education and learning.

Along with not taking into account the experiences and backgrounds of the students taking the MCAS tests, there have also been instances of test creators creating insensitive questions. For example, the instance referenced below was found in the tenth grade English Language Arts exam in 2019 (Lisinski, 2019).

But you guys have probably heard of like, the stuff that's happened with the English MCAS in the past where... so last... no, two years ago, they put a question on the English MCAS open response that ended up getting, like, taken... like, afterwards they discounted it because of the pushback and the students had to like, read a passage... It was something that was like, pro slavery basically, like from the point of view of like, a slave owner and you had to write from the perspective of that person. And so there was the... yeah, legitimately... so there was a lot of pushback at the test about that being insensitive and like, affecting students so they ended up like taking it off afterwards. (Teacher Interview, 03/26/2021)

The instance being referenced here was an MCAS written essay question that requested students to write their essays from the point of view of a white woman who uses derogatory language towards an escaped slave and is unsure of whether or not to help her (Citizens for Public Schools, n.d.). This question was based off of a passage that was written in the novel *The Underground Railroad* (Citizens for Public Schools, n.d.). The mere fact that test creators thought that this question was unproblematic shows the disregard that exists for the experiences of students of color. This becomes harmful to our students due to the fact that it culturally insensitive, could surface trauma for students of color, and disregards both the historical and current racism that exists in our country.

A study conducted by Citizens for Public Schools (n.d.) found that there was statistically little to no evidence of improvement for students of color even though these tests were implemented to ensure that all students were receiving universal education.

We found that since 2003, there have been no statistically significant changes in the NAEP score gaps for MA Low-Income, Black, or Latinx groups. Even the largest improvements were modest. The largest reduction in the test score gap over 16 years was 5.5 points for Latinx students on the 4th grade reading test. However, at that rate of

progress, it would take another 78 years to eliminate the gap. (Citizens for Public Schools, n.d.)

This article shows that over the last sixteen years, there has been little to no improvement in the testing scores of our students of color. The question that this raises is as follows: if it is going to take almost 80 years to close the achievement gap, is the deficiency in our students, or the system that assesses them?

This table below is a breakdown of the MCAS testing scores, sorted by race, for the third grade reading test by percent of proficiency (Casey Foundation, 2013).

Location	Race	Data Type	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Massachusetts	White, Non-Hispanic	Percent	70%	69%	69%	65%	65%
	Black, Non-Hispanic	Percent	42%	37%	38%	33%	38%
	Asian	Percent	67%	69%	69%	66%	68%
	Multi-race, Non-Hispanic	Percent	64%	63%	64%	56%	61%
	Latino	Percent	38%	36%	36%	31%	34%
	All	Percent	63%	61%	61%	57%	57%

Figure 5. Table of proficiency of reading on third grade MCAS tests. Adapted from Casey Foundation, A. E. (2013, September). *MCAS 3rd grade reading below proficient by race by school district: KIDS COUNT Data Center. KIDS COUNT data center: A project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.* <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7794-mcas-3rd-grade-reading-below-proficient-by-race-by-school-district?loc=23&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/869,36,868/816,817,172,4751,757,217/15029>

It is apparent with this data that racial disparities in high stakes standardized testing exist. With each passing year, white students score significantly higher than their minority counterparts. In the most recent year on file (2014), white students scored 27% higher than their Black peers and 31% higher than their Latinx peers in proficiency in reading for this third grade MCAS test (Casey Foundation, 2013). Seeing as though our students of color are not scoring sufficiently compared to their peers, a disadvantage exists somewhere. By proceeding with the protocols already instituted, that are putting students of color at a disadvantage, we are harming them by not allowing them the same opportunities of their peers.. Ibram X. Kendi said it best,

“Standardized tests have become the most effective racist weapon ever devised to objectively degrade Black minds and legally exclude their bodies” (Kendi, 2019).

Opting Out Can Reduce Some of the Harm

Opting out refers to the written request that parents can make to have their children excused from standardized testing; an easy process that is exceedingly unknown. Although many parents and guardians do not know that they have the right to excuse their children from MCAS testing, doing so could reduce many, but not all, of the harms explored above. One participant that was interviewed had opted all of her children out of the MCAS tests. She stated that the process of opting her children out consisted of a simple letter addressed to the principal that was signed and dated. This same participant also mentioned that she thought the process was going to be much longer and harder than it actually was, a possible misconception that keeps many parents from opting their children out of high stakes standardized tests.

An important thing to note, however, the option to opt out only applies to the tests given in grades three through eight. The MCAS given in tenth grade also doubles as a graduation requirement for students in Massachusetts, one of the larger and most well-known factors that makes these standardized tests high stakes. In order to excuse your child from the graduation requirement, it is a much harder process, and in the end, your child may even receive a different diploma than their peers.

Um, I was at an opt out talk and there was one parent who said that their child opted out in 10th grade, and it was a fight, and they did have to go through other channels to prove that they had what it took to graduate and I don't even think that they got a traditional, like, diploma, even though they had all the grades, the projects, the recommendations, everything else, they still got into whatever college of their choice and their life is fine and exciting and normal and, you know, there's no, like, long lasting, ‘Oh my gosh I didn't take the 10th grade MCAS!’ you know, but honestly that is like the only case, the 10th grade one still hangs over everyone. (Parent Interview, 03/12/2021)

The concerns that arise from the inability to opt out of the Massachusetts graduation requirement are apparent when looking at students who are not “standard.” Students who are not native English speakers and children with learning disabilities are all at a disadvantage when taking these tests and graduating becomes much harder for them. A local teacher that teaches 10th grade math stated that her students are disproportionately negatively affected by these tests as many of them are not native English speakers and/or struggle with test taking.

As of 2003, students with disabilities are no longer required to get a passing score on the 10th grade MCAS, but the process to appeal this requirement is lengthy and requires a lot of documentation in order to prove competency (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MCAS performance appeals for students with disabilities, 2018). It is up to the superintendent to file this appeal, to provide evidence that the student is on track to graduate in alignment with local requirements, submit a “cohort group” to show side by side comparison, or submit a portfolio that stands as evidence of sufficient knowledge and skills to meet the competency standards (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MCAS performance appeals for students with disabilities, 2018). This process still requires extra work for the student, family, superintendent, and faculty. When an appeal is submitted, there are three possible results: granted, denied, or no determination (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Frequently Asked Questions about MCAS performance appeals, 2018). If a student is denied, they must resubmit an appeal once they have more academic evidence or take the necessary MCAS test (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Frequently Asked Questions about MCAS performance appeals, 2018). If a student is given the “no determination” result, that means that there were pieces of the appeal missing that must be submitted or the appeal needs to be resubmitted at a

later date (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Frequently Asked Questions about MCAS performance appeals, 2018).

Conclusion

This thesis began with the idea of drawing attention to and educating the general public about the choice to opt-out of state standardized tests. Throughout our research, the problems that arise around standardized testing became more apparent and worrisome. The experiences of our participants quickly led me to approach this problem in a different manner. As more time went on and more data was collected, it was obvious that the opt-out movement is just that, a movement. This is not a solution to the harm caused by standardized testing, rather it stands as a strategy to mitigate the effects of the beast that is high stakes standardized testing. There is potential, however, for this opt-out movement to gain enough traction and popularity that it could undermine the current reliance on testing that our education system has. Going into this research, I posed the notion of harm within high stakes standardized testing and wanted to evaluate this more to see if there was any substance to this claim. Through speaking with my participants, as well as spending time conducting research online, I was able to bring light to the harmful reality that many students face within the classroom each day.

Conducting this research during a global pandemic opened my eyes to the many alternative ways of educating our youth, as well as showing me how large of a role education plays within our society. This pandemic created quite the challenge for us as researchers and led us to change our research plans, processes, and evaluations multiple times. This pandemic did show, however, how high stakes standardized testing is not a staple in the success of our students. In 2020, all MCAS administration was halted (Lannan, 2021). This year, The Massachusetts Board of

Elementary and Secondary Education declared that the junior class (class of 2022) will not need to take nor need to pass the MCAS tests in order to graduate (Lannan, 2021). Since the class of 2022 did not take the MCAS during their 10th grade year in 2020, they have been allowed to skip this requirement altogether (Lannan, 2021). This fact confirms for me that not only is the MCAS graduation requirement a problematic argument, but that it is possible, and relatively easy, to end this requirement altogether. As one participant noted, “There are grades, there are [class] tests there’s always been like other things. And all these guys who are like acting like ‘oh, we can’t just keep giving diplomas to people if they’re not competent’ they all got diplomas! They did fine” (Professional Interview, 01/15/2021).

Altogether, the high stakes standardized testing industry is harming our children. The three major ways that our students are being harmed by this industry discussed above are only a few of the ways that high stakes standardized tests, in particular the MCAS, are negatively affecting our students. Of course, there are other ways as well. Possible areas for further investigation in this topic include driving students and teachers alike out of education, affecting school climates, undermining student engagement, lowering student motivation, and taking away the creativity that our students have. These multiple levels of harm significantly outweigh the benefits of the high stakes standardized tests-specifically the MCAS- because the number of potential negatives significantly outnumber the number of positives that we see. Some popular arguments for standardized tests include teacher accountability, the ability to gauge areas that need improvement, and the ability to evaluate progress. These three arguments are valid, however there are alternate ways to collect this data without subjecting our students to standardized tests. One option would be to switch to a portfolio-based assessment system to gauge student progress, achievement, and teacher effectiveness.

It is not lost on me that there are now, and will continue to be, people who stand in support of standardized testing. I challenge them to evaluate the system more closely and from all perspectives. It is also necessary to acknowledge that each individual experience is subjective. This research highlights the experiences of a select sample of people within the general public, but each experience maintains its own validity. The slightest detection of harm on our students should be enough for reform, however our educational system is one that is built on aiming for success and performance rather than individual experience. It is important to take into account the possible harms that exist with high stakes standardized testing in order to craft a new policy that is both effective and healthy for our children.

Throughout this research my perception of harm in the educational setting has developed and changed. Before this research, I saw harm as something purely physical. I did not understand how a tool used in our educational system, a system that is meant to grow and develop the minds of our future generations, could cause harm in any way. By evaluating the high stakes standardized testing system, I became aware of how truly damaging our policies can be to our students. In both my own research, but also the research of the numerous authors that I have evaluated, I have seen harm in a new light. Harm, to me in the educational realm, is now defined as anything that works against the wellbeing of our students. My hope with this research is to bring light to the hidden harms caused by standardized testing. Reforming this system will not be easy but educating the public on what is really happening is the first step.

Further research in this realm should investigate alternate ways to measure the success of students as well as the usefulness of educators. As a society we teach our children to be unique yet subject them to a test that compares them to their peers. We claim to value diversity and then measure everyone by the same yardstick. Why test all students in the same way when all students

learn and perform differently? I propose the idea of instituting a method of assessment that is related to how Massachusetts assesses students in special education in lieu of the MCAS tests. I think that it would be beneficial to conduct research comparing students taking the MCAS to another group of students that work within the premises of the MCAS-Alt model in order to be granted permission to graduate. The MCAS-Alt model is already established for students in special education, so there is no need to create a new testing assessment as we can work with one that is already enacted.

The high stakes standardized testing model had become an unconscious part of our current educational system, but it should be reevaluated. The data collected through this research shows the harms that exist in the classroom, in the school, and at home but are only visible when one questions the system. Since this system has been a part of our society for so long, we have become blind to the harm that is caused to our students-it has even become normal to us. Subjecting students to this type of evaluation discredits the work that both teachers and students put into the classroom each day through only counting their progress through a test given a few days once a year that measures only a tiny percent of the material teacher and students focus on. Education is one of the most powerful weapons that we as humans possess, so it is time we use this power to question the systems in place in order to find a more sustainable and empowering assessment system.

Our goal in having completed this project was to enact change in the current usage of standardized testing. The results of standardized testing in public schools loom over the heads of every student within Massachusetts due to the graduation requirement that is currently in place. As conductors of this research, we were all impacted by the dedication and insight provided to us by our participants. It was a challenging yet educational experience for us as future educators to

see how passionate the local parents are about ending the standardized testing position in our educational system. The completion of this project brought a sense of pride and accomplishment to all three of us. Although it is incredibly difficult to create change to the educational system as a whole, the results of this project brought change to those who participated in the work of the Worcester County Anti-Testing Collaborative.

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Appendix A

Parents

1. Do/did you have any children enrolled in a public school? If not, do you share a close relation with a child currently enrolled in a public school? (This includes elementary, middle and high school level).
2. When you were an individual attending school, did you participate in any state-sponsored standardized tests? If yes, what were they?
3. What do you know about standardized testing/the MCAS?
4. With the knowledge you currently have on the current state-sponsored standardized tests in place, what would you like to see changed?
5. Have you ever been made aware of the option to opt your student out of standardized testing?
6. Can you expand on what the process looks like for opting your child out of the standardized testing?
7. What are your reasons for liking/disliking the subject testing methods?
8. What conversations have you heard about standardized testing within a school environment?
9. What are the assumptions that you made on these tests before being exposed to them, vs. what did you realize after being exposed to their material?
10. What is your opinion on the expectations that teachers have to utilize their classroom time on preparing their classrooms for generalized testing?
11. As a parent yourself, could you see a difference in the way your child learned from their school time before being exposed to testing, compared to after they were exposed to classroom time? Can you explain what that looked like?
12. Your time as a student years ago had to have had some differences in comparison compared to the way your children are learning in school today. What was it like before generalized testing was so popular, and did you feel the pressures that you see students having today to get into college, or to graduate?
13. Do you find it fair that generalized testing is expected of all students? Why or why not?
14. Describe what led your child/children to opt-out, and what that process was like when they went through it.

15. Discuss the challenges of opting out, what steps were easy (if applicable), and what challenges followed your child/children in their academic career after opting-out (if applicable)
16. Did opting-out affect your child/children's elementary/middle/high school graduation status, college application process, or college acceptance in any way?
17. Would you like to share any personal advice, based on your child/children's experience of opting-out of testing?

Professionals/Teachers (in related fields to education)

1. What do you know about standardized testing/the MCAS?
2. When you were an individual attending school, did you participate in any state-sponsored standardized tests? If yes, what were they?
3. With the knowledge you currently have on the current state-sponsored standardized tests in place, what would you like to see changed?
4. What are your reasons for liking/disliking the subject testing methods?
5. What conversations have you heard about standardized testing within a school environment?
6. What are the assumptions that you made on these tests before being exposed to them, vs. what did you realize after being exposed to their material?
7. At any point, did you feel that the way in which your students learn was affected by the preparation courses they had to take in school for standardized tests?
8. What is your opinion on the expectations that teachers have to utilize their classroom time on preparing their classrooms for generalized testing?
9. If applicable, how do you have to structure your lessons in order to address topics on standardized tests/to prepare your students for them?
10. Your time as a student years ago had to have had some differences in comparison compared to the way your children are learning in school today. What was it like before generalized testing was so popular, and did you feel the pressures that you see students having today to get into college, or to graduate?
11. Do you find it fair that generalized testing is expected of all students? Why or why not?
12. Are there any specific instances where the result of a standardized test affected you/anyone you know in any way?