

Test scores under scrutiny

Corey A DeAngelis contends that tests are weak predictors of long-term success

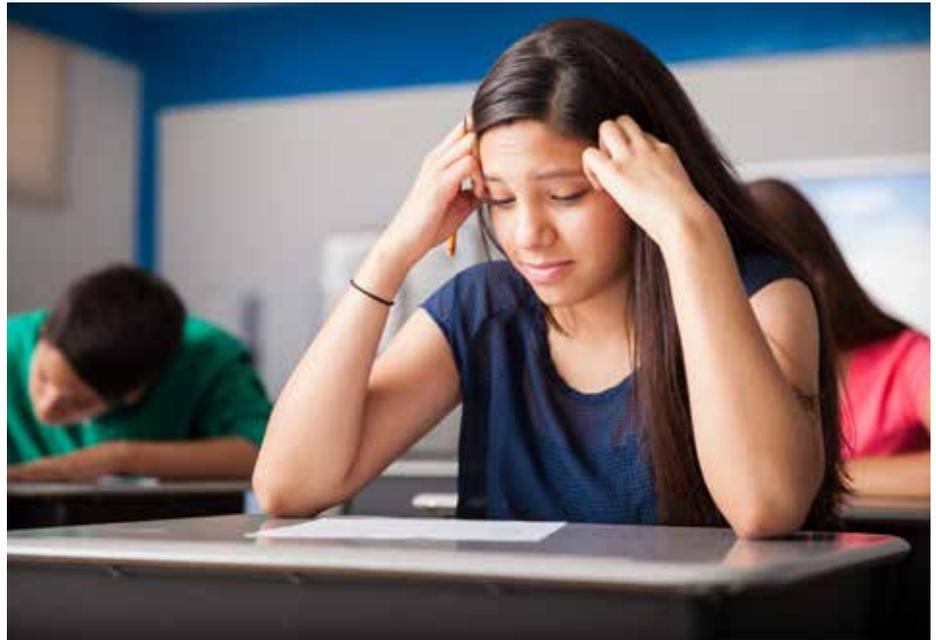
It's time to reassess how we evaluate the quality of teachers and schools. The education debate has largely treated standardised test scores as the key metric of success. Researchers rely heavily on test scores to determine whether education policies are 'working', while others point to subpar test scores while calling for more education reform. New evidence suggests we've probably got it all wrong. And that could be a big problem. Here's why.

At a Cato Institute policy forum on school choice last month, I alluded to a study recently released by AEI that found standardised test scores to be weak predictors of long-term success. Specifically, the authors collected 34 studies that evaluated the effects of school choice programmes on both test scores and high school graduation. Surprisingly, the study found that 61% of the effects on mathematics test scores – and 50% of the effects on reading test scores – did not predict effects on high school graduation. Similarly large divergences were found between choice programmes' effects on student test scores and their effects on college enrolment.

But that's just the beginning. Standardised test scores are not only weak predictors of high school graduation and college enrolment. I have started to compile more evidence of these divergences that exist in the most rigorous private school choice literature. I've already found 11 disconnects between private schools' effects on test scores and their effects on other, arguably more important, educational outcomes.

For example, an experimental evaluation of a private school voucher programme in Ohio found that winning the lottery to attend a private school had no effects on test scores, but made students more generous with their charitable donations. Other studies found significant divergences between test scores and outcomes such as tolerance of others, political participation, effort, happiness in school, and adult crime.

And the evidence isn't limited to school choice. At least five studies that I know of using rigorous value-added methodology find disconnects between teachers' effects on student test scores and their effects on student



character skills, such as behaviour and effort. For example, Northwestern University professor Kirabo Jackson finds that teachers' effects on student behaviour are much stronger predictors of high school graduation than their effects on student test scores. Indeed, Jackson finds that teachers' effects on student behaviour are over eight times as influential for high school graduation as effects on student test scores.

But we cannot ignore the fact that some studies do find a link between test scores and long-term outcomes. For instance, prominent education scholars – Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff – found that teachers that improve student test scores also tend to have positive effects on earnings later on in life. But, of course, that doesn't mean that their effects on test scores caused the effects on earnings. It is more likely that – in their sample – teachers who were good at shaping test scores were also good at shaping the non-cognitive skills necessary for success in the long-run, on average.

In other words, teachers who are good at improving standardised test scores can also be good at motivating students to work hard and to treat others with respect. Hard work and respect may be the skills that influence

long-run outcomes such as earnings. But it's nearly impossible to measure soft skills accurately, which could be why we have found so many divergences in the literature.

The weak predictive power of test scores suggests that policies incentivising teachers and schools to improve these crude metrics could actually harm students in the long-run. Putting too much weight on test scores could compromise the character development necessary for true lifelong success.

But families already know this. When given the chance to choose their children's schools, families consistently prioritise things like school culture and safety over standardised test scores. When 39 parents from a school choice experiment focus group in Washington D.C. were asked to list the most important factor for them in determining what school was best for their children, none of them chose test scores. Perhaps families know something that the experts are missing. ■

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