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<u>Educational Policy Proposal to Remediate the Racist Impact of Standardized Testing</u>

"I can predict for you how well kids are going to do on a test, by and large, lower income kids are going to do worse, children of color are going to do worse," says Jamaal Bowman, congressional representative of New York's sixteenth district and one of the nation's leaders in the fight against standardized testing. Congressman Bowman had worked for ten years as a principal in the inner city and experienced first hand the ineffectiveness and harm of standardized testing, especially in schools that have a student body of predominantly racial minority students. Him and other critics of standardized testing assert that the lack of resources in poorly funded and understaffed schools place the students within such systems at a disadvantage when it comes to standardized tests compared to students who attend schools in affluent communities. At first glance this may seem like only a class issue but due to structural racism, which refers to "interinstitutional interactions across time and space that reproduce racial inequality," (Golash-Boza 2018:106) class inequality and racial inequality have become interconnected in the United States. Thus, standardized tests, such as state tests, and SATs are cogs in the machine of American institutional racism, which refers to policies that maintain racial inequalities (Golash-Boza 2018:102). This racial inequality perpetuated by standardized testing manifests itself in several ways, such as, lower scores for students in low income communities, difficulty getting into college for students of color, and even the closure of public schools.

The failure of standardized testing to remediate racial inequality in education indicates that the policy should be abandoned. Yet the current laws pertaining to this policy come from the Every Student Succeeds Act, which only tries to solve this issue by shifting the responsibility onto state level education policy (Forte, 2018). Needless to say this attempt at reforming the American education system has not accomplished its goal. The best way to solve the educational inequality which is perpetuated by standardized tests is to abandon them and focus on funding early childhood education, and encouraging the use of formative assessments.

The claim that students of color in lower income communities are given a disadvantage on standardized tests can be proven through numerous studies. For example, a peer-reviewed study from the journal *The Review of Black Political Economy* which focused on the standardized Armed Forces Qualification Test shows that, "family resources, as measured by family income, access to magazines, access to newspapers and access to library cards at the age of 14 have significant positive effects on AFQT scores, while attending a school with a high number of disadvantaged students reduces AFQT scores" (Cordero-Guzman 2001). The same article this study was presented in explained the racial connection to this issue by explaining how "In terms of poverty, for example, in 1990 only 7.4 percent of white young males lived in a household below the poverty line. The percent below poverty for African Americans was 22.9 percent, 19.3 percent for Puerto Ricans, 17.2 percent for Mexican Americans and 11.5 percent for Other Hispanics" (Cordero-Guzman 2001). This article proves that students in lower income communities, which are mostly students of color, have disadvantages when it comes to standardized testing as a result of socioeconomic factors. Further evidence for this claim can be found from the peer-reviewed research report published in *Sociology of Education* which posits that, "being of a minority or poor social-class status is often synonyms with attending a school

that is dilapidated, overcrowded, unsafe, and unhealthy" (Condron & Roscigno 2003:20).

Logical reasoning would lead one to see how such conditions will fail to foster a learning environment which prepares students to take high-stakes standardized tests. Moreover, the previously mentioned socioeconomic factors will also play a role in determining scores for standardized admissions tests like the SAT or LSAT. Evidence for this claim can be found in a study from the Brookings Institute which observed mean scores on the SAT's math section and found that, "the scores of black and Latino students are clustered towards the bottom of the distribution, while white scores are relatively normally distributed, and Asians are clustered at the top," similar distributions were found with the LSAT too (Reeves & Halikias 2017). Research from the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy shows that, "when test scores count heavily in admissions, the large differences in scores between black and white students have a major impact both on the probability that black students will be admitted and on the composition of the accepted student population" (Koretz 2000). This clearly shows how the racial disparity in standardized test scores is limiting opportunities for advancement for young people of color. The evidence clearly shows that standardized tests fail to account for the unique socioeconomic conditions in which many children of color live in, thus any decisions made on the basis of standardized test scores will be disadvantageous to these students.

      Standardized testing also comes with the detrimental side-effect of public school closures. Schools that have poor student performance based on test scores, will oftentimes be closed down by the state government and the students will be forced to transfer to another school. A peer-reviewed report from the National Education Policy Center provides evidence of the negative impact of these closures when the authors note that, "the school closures caused significant stress in the lives of students and teachers, with negative effects on both reading and

math scores during the last year of school operation," and that these closures also led to an increase in dropout rates and a decrease in graduation rates (Sunderman, Coghlan, & Mintrop 2017: 8-9). This report also goes on to show that African American students are disproportionately impacted by these closure in both urban and suburban school districts and that "African American community members saw school closure as part of ongoing and historical racial oppression and felt that district administrators were not considering their viewpoints" (Sunderman et al. 2017: 12-13). Thus, evidence shows that standardized testing disproportionately hurts African American students and the African American community by causing school closures.

Policies that should be pursued instead of standardized testing to close the racial achievement gap include creating access to early childhood education and using formative assessments. Early childhood education, which usually refers to preschool, has a positive impact on young children but is oftentimes not accessible for children of color who live in low income communities. Making preschools more available for children of color will help narrow the racial disparities in education. Evidence for this can be found by observing the case study of the Salinas City School District which established a universal preschool program in 1999. The results from this policy have been overwhelmingly positive for Salinas City students, who are mostly Hispanic, as attendance and parental involvement both increased within the next five years (Slaby, Loucks & Stelwagon 2005: 50). Furthermore the data on academic achievement, based on test scores, after the implementation of this universal preschool program shows that, "Fifty percent (50%) of poverty-level students who attended preschool scored proficient or above compared to 31% of poverty-level students who did not attend preschool" (Slaby et al. 2005: 54). The Salinas City case study clearly proves that increasing access to early childhood education

programs will help decrease the educational achievement gap which is perpetuated by poverty as a result of structural racism.

Another effective policy that would help close the racial achievement gap is the implementation of formative assessment. Formative assessments refer to a wide variety of assessment techniques which are used during the ongoing school year or instruction period. This can include one on one meetings between teachers and students or asking students to submit a paragraph about what they learned in class. Such strategies will allow educators to immediately identify and help students who are struggling. This is opposed to the traditional method of applying summative assessments such as standardized tests, which evaluate student performance at the end of the school year when it's too late to help them. Evidence of formative assessments being more effective than summative assessments can be found in a study conducted by professor Hongli Li from Georgia State University. Dr.Li's study showed that an increase in formative assessment was associated with an improvement in reading achievement (Li 2016). She goes on to write that, "the direct relationship between formative assessment and students' reading achievement was found to be stronger for Black students than that for White students" (Li 2016). This study makes it evident that unlike standardized tests, formative assessments will not only improve student performance, but also help close the racial achievement gaps between Black and White students.

It is clear from the evidence that standardized testing has failed to remediate the racial education achievement gap and has instead exacerbated the issue. It does so by not accounting for socioeconomic factors and expecting students in various living conditions to conform to the same standard, this leads to lower scores for students in lower income communities which lack the resources to prepare these students. Structural racism has made this issue particularly relevant

for students of color, especially African American students. For example, according to *Race and Racisms*, "racial inequality in housing leads to racial inequality in schooling,"(Golash-Boza 2018 106) which would then lead to inequality in test scores. Such inequalities play a role in perpetuating systemic racism, which refers to a diverse assortment of racist practices encompassing daily microaggressions, deep-seated inequalities and antiblack ideologies" (Golash-Boza 2018 105). This is true because systemic racism includes "patterns of unjust impoverishment of nonwhites" (Golash-Boza 2018 106) and low scores on standardized admissions tests like the SAT, lower the chance for people of color to get into college, thus lowering their chance at social mobility and creating a cycle of poverty. Furthermore, low scores on standardized tests create motivation to close down public schools, this policy disproportionately impacts African Americans and is harmful both to students and their communities. The well documented failure of standardized testing indicates that the United States should look to implement alternate strategies to address the racial and class achievement gap. Such strategies include expanding access to preschool and using formative assessments to evaluate students; both of these policies directly address the needs of racial minority students who live in low income communities. Dismantling standardized testing and adopting more effective policies would be significant steps forward on the long journey to address the deeply rooted racial inequalities in this country.

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