

# ***PURE FACTS***

## **Racial Bias in Standardized Testing**

In a letter published in the *Chicago Union Teacher* magazine in February 2014, CTU President Karen G J Lewis wrote:

What many people do not know is that the use of standardized tests has its origins in the Eugenics movement, where basic tenets assert that certain races are inferior to others biologically and intellectually. From our 21st century perspective, we can look back in horror, but we have to be clear about the original purpose of standardized tests. The original IQ tests were designed by French psychologist Alfred Binet for benign and limited uses: a) on young children who were not developing “normally”; b) as “general” tools to make “general” decisions, not a precise measurement for precise decisions; and c) to signal when a child needed more help in their intellectual development. Unfortunately in the United States, IQ scores were posited to be fixed and innate, and were promptly used to rank and sort individuals by race and ethnic background. Businesses, government agencies and educational institutions used IQ tests to justify placing certain people into certain jobs and excluding them from others....

Ask yourselves whether you want to be part of a legacy born of the unholy alliance between the concept of “natural inequality” and the drudgery that has been imposed on many of our classrooms. Do your own research and let’s start to have the discussions on what is fair, equitable and good for our children.

A FairTest fact sheet, “Racial Justice and Standardized Educational Testing,” states that young people of color, particularly those from low-income families, have suffered the most as the explosion of high-stakes standardized testing in U.S. public education has undermined equity and school quality.” According to FairTest, decades of research demonstrate that African American, Latino and Native American students, as well as students from some Asian groups, experience the following problems with high stakes testing, from early childhood through college entrance:

- They disproportionately fail state or local high school graduation exams. Those tests provide no social or educational benefit. They do not improve college or employment readiness. Not having diploma leads to higher rates of unemployment and imprisonment and lower rates of forming stable families.
- Students in these groups are more likely to be held back in grade because of low test scores. Grade retention produces no long-term academic benefits; it undermines self-esteem and doubles the likelihood of dropping out. Boys are subject to this damage more often than are girls.
- Because, on average, students of color score lower on college admissions tests (SAT and ACT), many capable youth are denied entrance or access to so-called "merit" scholarships, contributing to the huge racial gap in college enrollments and completion.
- Schools at times suspend, expel, "counsel out" or otherwise remove students with low scores in order to boost school results and escape test-based sanctions mandated by the federal government's "No Child Left Behind" law, at great cost to the youth and ultimately society.

- As Claude Steele and his colleagues have demonstrated, "stereotype threat" increases the likelihood that students of color will have inaccurately low scores. Stereotype threat means that students who are aware of racial and gender stereotypes about their group's intellectual ability score lower on standardized tests perceived to measure academic aptitude. In effect, the use of high-stakes testing in an overall environment of racial inequality perpetuates that inequality through the emotional and psychological power of the tests over the test-takers.
- High stakes testing causes additional damage to the many students of color who are English language learners. The tests are often inaccurate for ELLs, leading to misplacement or retention. ELLs are, alongside students with disabilities, those least likely to pass graduation tests.
- African Americans, especially boys, are disproportionately placed or misplaced in special education, frequently based on test results. These programs often fail to fully educate them

A PURE Fact Sheet, "Bias in Standardized Tests," adds to this list of concerns, stating that "although in recent years test makers have attempted to address concerns about test bias by establishing review committees to 'scour' the tests for bias, and by using statistical procedures, significant problems remain in the content of the questions, the cultural assumptions inherent in the 'wanted' answers, etc."

Here are just a few examples from PURE's Fact Sheet:

**Discriminatory item selection:** Jay Rosner, executive director of the Princeton Review Foundation, which provides test preparation programs for the college-entrance Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), reported in 2003 that potential SAT questions which are answered correctly more often by black students than white students are *rejected* by the test makers. This was apparently done to assure that test results (showing African-Americans scoring lower than whites) would be "consistent" from year to year.

**Outright racism:** A series of questions on the 2006 global history New York State Regents exam asked students to describe how Africa "benefitted" from imperialism. Using this 150-year-old quote: "We are endeavoring ... to teach the native races to conduct their own affairs with justice and humanity, and to educate them alike in letters and in industry," students were asked to name "two ways the British improved the lives of Africans."

**Socio-economic bias masquerading as cultural diversity:** The 2006 New York State Regents third grade reading practice test used the example of African-American tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams to ask children questions about tennis "doubles" and country clubs.

**Accidental (?) bias:** In 2001, the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) included a reading passage taken from Ann Cameron's book, *More Stories Julian Tells*. The book is about an African-American family and is familiar to many African-American children, but the illustrations showed a white family.

**Lack of cultural awareness:** A Latina "bias reviewer" caught this item while reviewing questions prepared for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. "I remember one question that showed a picture of a couch on a porch and asked, 'What doesn't fit?' " she says. "I started laughing...the way I grew up, everyone had a couch outside."

PURE also warns, "Watch for the increasing use of 'feeling' questions which supposedly evaluate the student's ability to construct meaning from the text but may also evoke a wide variety of life experiences resulting in 'wrong' answers.