To test, or not to test.

That’s a tough question.

By Tom Antis

There’s a part of me that wants to opt my kids out of standardized testing. But I’m not going to.

I hear about the controversy over testing (see The controversy over standardized tests, below), and I side with parents who believe they are ultimately responsible and accountable for their child’s education. We — as parents — do have primary responsibility for the education of our children. It says so clearly in education law (Title 20, Education, Chapter 48, U.S. Code § 3401).

The law also says the state and schools have the “primary responsibility for supporting that parental role.” I agree, not just because it is written in the law, but because it is true.

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It is reasonable that schools should be expected to show their communities that children are learning what we expect them to learn. Those expectations are spelled out in state learning standards.

Schools build academic programs that begin with the end in mind. At the completion of any particular grade, students should develop and be able to accomplish a predetermined set of skills and tasks. How do we know if they’ve achieved those expectations? We test them.

Teachers can look at the results — what kids get right and wrong on tests or tasks — and adjust their teaching to meet the needs of their students.

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As parents, you should weigh both sides of the argument before making an informed decision in the best interest of your child.

We looked at eight of the arguments parents have made to defend their decision to opt their children out of taking tests. Read on for research-based responses to each of them.

(continued on page 2)
Part of the school’s program involves test-taking throughout the year. Some tests are simply to establish where the class stands before a unit is taught (benchmarking), some are measures of progress, some are final exams (allowing students to show that they have mastered the knowledge from a particular subject) and some are statewide tests for district accountability to the state.

Individual school districts – and state education departments – measure their effectiveness by comparing themselves with other schools, around the state and across the country, based partly on the results from standardized tests that all students take. The United States Department of Education stated in November 2004 that “if teachers cover subject matter required by the standards and teach it well, then students will master the material on which they will be tested—and probably much more.”

To Test or Not...

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Individual school districts – and state education departments – measure their effectiveness by comparing themselves with other schools, around the state and across the country, based partly on the results from standardized tests that all students take. We all take tests, even as adults. Lawyers, physicians, pilots and real-estate brokers all take standardized tests to make sure they have the necessary knowledge and skills for their professions. If you drive a car, you’ve passed a standardized test to earn the privilege. (At least all the rest of us on the road hope so.)

Standardized testing was introduced to public schools in the mid-1800s by Boston school reformers Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe, modeling their efforts on the centralized Prussian school system. So, it’s not anything new.

The modern testing movement got underway in the mid-1960s, and continued through education reform initiatives up to the present. Today, the multiple-choice format used on standardized tests produces accurate information necessary to assess and improve American schools. According to the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, multiple-choice questions can provide “highly reliable test scores” and an “objective measurement of student achievement.”

Today’s multiple-choice tests are more sophisticated than the questions many of us answered with our old # 2 pencil. The Center for Public Education, a national public school advocacy group,
To Test or Not...

(continued from page 2)

says many “multiple-choice tests now require considerable thought, even notes and calculations, before choosing a bubble.”

In the end, tests are a reliable and objective measure of student achievement. Ninety-three percent of studies on student testing, including the use of large-scale and high-stakes standardized tests, found a “positive effect” on student achievement, according to a peer-reviewed, 100-year analysis of testing research completed in 2011 by testing scholar Richard P. Phelps.2

According to the New York State Education Department’s instructions for administering state standardized tests, none of the tests is longer than 90 minutes on any given day. Total time spent on tests over six days (for English-language arts and math) is from 450–580 minutes – or between 7½ and 10 hours – depending on grade level. State-required standardized tests take up about one percent of the instructional time during a school year.

I’ve heard the arguments against standardized testing and, despite some reservations, I believe kids should take them. It’s part of life, having to do hard things, and sometimes doing things you don’t want to do. I want my kids to learn that lesson early. It goes along with developing 21st century skills such as persistence, adaptability, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and leadership. Letting my kids off the hook from confronting difficult tasks sends the wrong message, in my opinion. It’s just not OK to turn your nose up at something you are expected to do, just because it seems too hard or stressful.

At the same time, I understand parents’ concern about the stress and anxiety some children exhibit around testing time. (See Don’t Stress About the Tests, http://bit.ly/1g6rSpj)

You know your child best. If you can’t help your child manage the stress – if you truly feel as if taking a 90-minute test will harm your child – I support your right to opt out.

If you have concerns about testing, I suggest you talk to your child’s teacher about how assessments are used in his or her classroom, and with the principal at your child’s school about how standardized test scores assist the school in making big-picture decisions about curriculum and instruction.

Many of the arguments I have heard against testing are overstated. Do your own research in the school that is partnering with you to educate your child before you decide.


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Test Controversy...
(continued from page 3)

5. Testing is expensive, and costs have increased since No Child Left Behind (NCLB), placing a burden on state education budgets.

Standardized tests provide a lot of useful information at low cost, and consume little class time. According to a 2002 paper by Caroline M. Hoxby, PhD, the Scott and Donya Bommer Professor in Economics at Stanford University, standardized tests cost less than 0.1 percent of K-12 education spending, totaling $5.81 per student per year. “Even if payments were 10 times as large, they would still not be equal to 1 percent of what American jurisdictions spend on education.”

6. Excessive testing teaches children to be good at taking tests but does not prepare them for productive adult lives.

Stricter standards and increased testing are better preparing students for college. In January 1998, Public Agenda found that 66 percent of college professors said, “elementary and high schools expect students to learn too little.” By March 2002, after the passing of NCLB and a surge in testing, that figure dropped to 47 percent “in direct support of higher expectations, strengthened standards and better tests.”

7. Using test scores to reward and punish teachers and schools encourages them to cheat the system for their own gain.

Cheating by teachers and administrators on standardized tests is rare and not a reason to stop testing children. The March 2011 USA Today investigation of scoring anomalies was inconclusive and found compelling suggestions of impropriety in only one school. While it is likely that some cheating occurs, the solution is to fix the problem, not abolish testing.

8. Standardized tests are an imprecise measure of teacher performance, yet they are used to reward and punish teachers.

Only 20 percent of a teacher’s evaluation under New York State’s Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) ratings system is derived from “student growth,” either from a state-provided growth score, state assessment results, or a score that measures progress toward meeting Student Learning Objectives (SLO). The majority of the effectiveness score comes from classroom observation and evidence, and locally determined measures of student achievement.

In a 2009 Scholastic/Gates Foundation survey, 81 percent of US public school teachers said state-required standardized tests were at least “somewhat important” as a measure of students’ academic achievement.

REFERENCES
4 Stuart S. Yeh, “Limiting the Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing,” Education Policy Analysis Archives, Oct. 28, 2005
9 Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “Primary Sources: America’s Teachers on America’s Schools,” www.scholastic.com, Mar. 2010