

# Educating Citizen Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Josh Bain; Matthew Cecka; Elizabeth Garri; Anastasia Marle  
Longwood University

## Federal Legislation and Standardized Tests

Over the past few decades, the federal government has expanded its role in education systems to promote higher standards and equality in schools; this oversight has increased the prominence and importance of standardized tests, limiting the development of creativity and critical thinking in the classroom. In order to best prepare citizen leaders for the 21st century, the education system must also promote creativity and application, rather than simple memorization.

Historically, educational standards in the United States has been determined by state governments; however, in the 1960s, pressure from civil rights groups to ensure equal access to educational resources drove President Lyndon B. Johnson to introduce the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to improve classrooms serving economically disadvantaged areas (Turner 2015). Thus, the federal government established a precedent for creating legislation regarding education and academic standards.

In the early 2000s, congress introduced a highly controversial extension of this act, named the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Turner 2015). NCLB increased the importance of standardized testing as a measure of student's success and a way to identify underperforming schools; under the new legislation, schools were required to report the scores of certain "subsets" of traditionally underperforming students (Klein 2015). These new requirements were designed to promote academic success of marginalized populations, however, schools faced harsh penalties if students failed to meet grade-level proficiencies, regardless of their relative progress towards achieving that goal (Turner 2015).

As it became clear that the goals set by the NCLB were too ambitious for most schools, the government introduced yet another law targeting education: the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Klein 2016). The ESSA scaled back the federal role in education and allowed for greater state autonomy in determining measures of school's effectiveness in educating their students (Klein 2016). The law allowed for states to set one long-term and one short-term proficiency goal, while requiring intervention in school systems with high-school graduation rates below 67%; however, the requirements for testing remained relatively unchanged (Klein 2016). According to the US Department of Education, the ESSA represents a "commitment to equal opportunity" for students and requires "high academic standards" to be implemented in schools (US Dept. of Ed n.d.).



## How does testing currently affect the classroom?

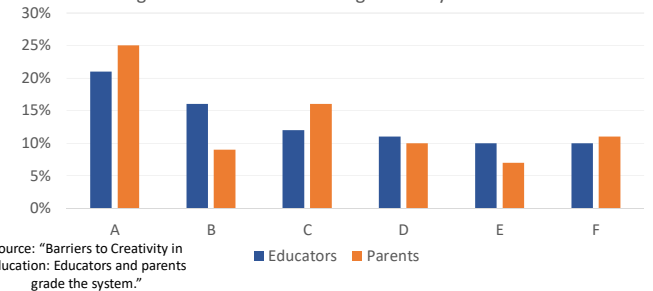
Because of the federal mandates regarding testing, many state's curriculums now center about preparing students for these standardized, typically multiple choice tests. As Sternberg discusses in his article on current testing models, these tests foster a hyper-specific set of skills in students: multiple choice tests improve recollective functions of our brain and have contributed to a trend of higher average IQ's (Sternberg 2016). However, this extensive testing leads to loss of instructional time, as the remaining days after tests are administered are often treated as "movie days," while the "hyper-focus" on standardized tests may also be contributing to students negative perceptions of school (Klein 2018; Grinell and Rabin 2013). John Holt eloquently spoke to this phenomena in his assertion that "we kill, not only their curiosity, but their feeling that it is a good and admirable thing to be curious" (qtd. Dixon 2018). Overall, the current testing model does not benefit our students, but instead serves to enriched the testing, tutoring, and textbook industries (Dixon 2018).

## How can we do better?

In order to better prepare students to solve 21st century problems as citizen leaders, educational professionals must work to supplement, if not replace, test-preparatory activities with tasks that foster creativity and wise thinking. Creativity, as defined by Sternberg, is "that which produces a novel, surprising, and useful idea or product;" it is a measure of originality that cannot necessarily be proven through quantitative measures (Sternberg 2016). Wise thinking, in contrast, is defined as "that which seeks a common good by balancing one's own interests with other people and with larger interests ... through the use of positive ethical values" (Sternberg 2016). Thus, wise thinking can be understood as a tool for understanding the needs of a community and serving as a citizen leader for the benefit of others. Education systems must reform so that they no longer focus on the cognitive aspect of learning to exclusion of other measures of intellect and ability (Grinell and Rabin 2013).

However necessary, implementing such a sweeping change would require allocation of more resources: money, faculty, and research, to education. Some schools have worked to develop individualized analysis of student success through a "holistic educational approach" and advocate for conferences involving a variety of educational professionals to discuss student progress (Kittaka 2016). Others have instead fostered a sense of community within schools, serving as a support network for students socioemotional, in addition to intellectual needs; yet, they have been able to do so only while maintaining above-average test scores (Grinell and Rabin 2013). Perhaps the simplest solution, for now, is training teachers to foster creativity and wisdom within the classroom by including challenges that invoke critical thinking, problem solving, and ethical reasoning centered about real-world issues (Sternberg 2016). The preparation of citizen leaders may not be mandated by federal legislation, but can begin at the grass-roots level, with teachers and administrators committed to providing a holistic education for their students.

Parents and educators were asked: What do you believe is the greatest barrier to teaching creativity in education?



Source: "Barriers to Creativity in Education: Educators and parents grade the system."

	Educators	Parents
A- An education system too reliant on testing and assessment.	21%	25%
B- A lack of resources	16%	9%
C- Educators restricted from straying outside the curriculum.	12%	16%
D- Heavy state and federal mandates that hinder creativity	11%	10%
E- The current education curriculum.	10%	7%
F- Educators ill-equipped with tools and techniques to teach creativity.	10%	11%

## Examples of Questions that foster critical thinking

Evaluate the relative importance of the following factors in starting the American Revolution: taxation, civil liberties, national identity.

This question prompts students to consider several factors that contributed to a conflict and craft a well-written argument to support their thesis.

Explain how ecosystems are formed and give an example of a human impact on an ecosystem.

This question prompts students to summarize a major concept and apply it to the real world.

Choose a rhetorical device used in a passage and explain how it benefits the author's argument.

This question facilitates the development of metalinguistic skills and encourages students to critically evaluate written texts.

Buzzwords: Evaluate, relative, explain, etc.

Teacher's should frame questions that encourage creativity within well supported answers, and focus not only on technical correctness, but also reasoning.

## Department Information

Josh Bain; Matthew Cecka; Elizabeth Garri; Annastasia Marle  
Professor Dolence  
Citizen 110  
Cormier Honors College

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