

What C.S. Lewis Thought of Testing

As recent years have seen a rising number of high-stakes tests for children in elementary, middle, and high school, more and more Americans are beginning to question the wisdom of testing. Claims of burnt-out, stressed children permeate the news and have caused many parents to join the growing opt-out movement.

Like today's parents and teachers, famed 20th century author C.S. Lewis questioned the wisdom of testing. In a [letter he wrote to a friend in 1950](#), Lewis had this to say:

"But there is something about this endless examining, quite apart from the labour, which bothers me. It sets me wondering about the whole system under which you, as well as we, now live. Behind all these closely written sheets which I have to read every year, even behind the worst of them, lie hours of hard, long work. Even the bad candidates are doing their best and have been trained up to this ever since they went to school. And naturally enough: for in the Democracies now, as formerly in China under the mandarin system, success in competitive examinations is the only moyen de parvenir ['way to arrive'], the road from elementary school to the better schools, and thence to college, and thence to the professions. (You still have a flourishing alternative route to desirable jobs through business which is largely disappearing with us: but it is at least equally competitive)."

While Lewis was unhappy with the grind of testing which children were subjected to, he also came to realize that it was an unavoidable outgrowth of a system that held equality as its standard:

“This of course is what Democratic education means – give them all an equal start and let the winners show their form. Hence Equality of Opportunity in practice means ruthless Competition during those years which, I can’t help feeling, nature meant to be free and frolicsome. Can it be good, from the age of 10 to the age of 23, to be always preparing for an exam, and always knowing that your whole worldly future depends on it: and not only knowing it, but perpetually reminded of it by your parents and masters? Is this the way to breed a nation of people in psychological, moral, and spiritual health?”

Lewis’ questions are ones that haunt this age of standardized testing. But his conclusions also lead to another question. If we succeed in abolishing the testing that so many students, parents, and teachers hate, will we also be abolishing the equal opportunity which we demand of the American education system?

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