Book Review


“Is this going to be on the test?” It’s a question that has been uttered in every classroom across the country—a sign of just how central tests have become to the school experience. Tests are required to assess class performance, graduate high school, and even grant a high school equivalency diploma (GED) when students decide to drop out of school. Given their pervasiveness, it is easy to consider standardized tests—like the teacher, the student, and the curriculum—as an inherent part of schooling. But, as William Reese reminds us in his new and important book *Testing Wars*, tests were not always the coin of the public school realm.

Focused on the struggle to enact the first ever standardized test in American public schools in Boston in 1845, *Testing Wars* reveals that standardized tests were introduced to schools as part of a particular reform agenda: to hold school masters accountable for student learning; to standardize school organization; to broaden the curriculum; and to stamp out rote learning and sterile pedagogy. The cure, however, proved worse than the disease. Within a generation, Reese demonstrates, tests had succeeded in transforming school organization only in turn to be seen as a leading cause of the very problems they had been introduced to fix. That this book appears at a time when policy makers and reformers are once again peddling tests as a solution for everything from low standards to poor teacher quality to inequality makes this lively history a must read for historians and policy wonks alike.

In order to understand the kind of effect written examinations had on schools, Reese first introduces us to the colorful world of school exhibitions in which, he explains, “public performance was everything” (p. 14). Once a year, citizens would gather to hear students recite their work, perform music, and answer (likely preassigned) questions posed by their teacher. These were high-stakes affairs given that “what one saw, heard, and observed remained decisive in shaping opinions about teachers pupils and schools” (p. 32). A strong exhibition was a sure sign of a well-functioning school, while flubbed lines were sure to raise both eyebrows and questions about teacher quality. Though contemporary observers used the words “exhibition” and “examination” interchangeably, critics complained that these performances were poor evaluators: they rewarded spectacle and rote memorization rather than scholarship and deep learning; they were too easily gamed by narrowly selected
questions and carefully chosen pupils; and they prevented real accountability by inflating the public’s perception of school quality.

Among the fiercest critics of school exhibitions were Secretary of the State Board of Education of Massachusetts, Horace Mann, and his good friend Samuel Gridley Howe. Mann, recently returned from a tour of European schools, and Howe put in motion a plan to introduce a new form of examination in 1845—a timed, standardized written test to be given to all the first-class pupils in Boston. The results of the test would, in Mann’s words, replace vague public impressions with “positive information, in black and white” about what students did and did not know (p. 131). Not coincidentally, Mann also believed the results would provide incontrovertible proof of the decline of Boston’s schools and, thus, overwhelmingly support his broader reform agenda: age-graded classrooms, standardized assessments, centralized administration.

When word of the plan got out, the outcry from the schoolmasters, as Reese documents in exquisite detail, was immense. Despite a raging debate in newspapers and pamphlets, Mann and his colleagues succeeded in outmaneuvering their opponents politically, if not rhetorically, clearing the way for the first ever standardized assessment of a district. Thus, in the summer of 1845, 530 Boston students sat for the test. The results were everything Mann and his allies hoped for and everything the schoolmasters feared: Boston’s top students had managed to score, on average, only 30% correct.

Reformers argued that these results provided definitive proof that Boston’s schools were not the terrific institutions that many assumed. Newspapers published the results along with ranked lists of the best and worst performing schools, some of the lowest performing teachers were fired, and soon calls for reform became studded with test scores and the accompanying narrative of decline. In the aftermath of the Boston experiment, Reese observes, “There was no turning back to a world where impressions about schools sufficed” (p. 166). Word of the Boston experiment spread quickly and soon cities nationwide were following the “Boston” method of standardized assessments. The era of testing had arrived and with it the era of modern schools and school reform.

The history of modern school reform is in large part a history of unintended consequences and, as Reese deftly illustrates, the case was no different for standardized tests. Though reformers believed tests would do away with dull pedagogy and rote memorization, officials were soon fending off charges that written examinations and the standardized curriculums that came with them had served only to reinforce and reward these pedagogical tendencies. Within a generation, reformers of all stripes “agreed that rote teaching, text books, and written exams were inextricably bound” (p. 200). Standardized examinations required
more standardized classrooms and standardized curriculums and the more school reform efforts and accountability efforts were informed by test scores, the more superintendents, principals, teachers, and students became concerned with improving them. Publishers flooded the market with test prep guides; students spent hours cramming for tests; and physicians worried openly about the effects of “over-study”—a medicalized expression of how deeply tests had penetrated the culture and the deep anxiety they had induced. Despite proliferation of consequences stemming from the introduction of tests, the solution more often than not was more of the same—more centralization, more standardization, and more testing. “Whenever awakened by their creators,” Reese concludes, “the genies of testing promised all manner of school improvement” (p. 157). A century and a half later, our school system is a portrait of the consequences of those promises.

In recounting this forgotten history, Reese has done a great service for historians, policy makers, and observers of the American education system. Testing Wars offers a terrific example of how nuanced contextual history can speak powerfully to current policy debates. There are certain aspects of reforms that are only visible at great distances and here Reese has demonstrated convincingly that tests are so intertwined with the development of the American school system and so implicated in its current shape that it belies contemporary claims that this generation’s tests will succeed where the previous generations’ have failed.

The history recounted in Testing Wars also serves as a reminder that testing at its core is a political enterprise. Indeed, Mann and his colleagues were the first, though certainly not the last to intuit that, like the power to tax, the power to test is the power to destroy. Despite the wishes of mid-nineteenth century reformers and countless others since, tests are never able to present facts “in black and white.” At a distance of a century and a half it is easier than usual to see how tightly interwoven ideology and particular tests become as with Mann’s ally who, Reese recounts, was confident “the ‘facts’ about the schools would support the ‘opinion’ of those who knew that Boston’s schools were in a state of decline” (p. 97).

For all its success in tracing the origins of standardized testing and providing historical perspective to modern debates, Testing Wars is not without a few limitations. Reese renders the battle over tests in Boston in such rich detail that the breezy explanation for the rapid adoption of tests elsewhere in the country—even when taking into account robust reformer networks and the pressure of rising enrollments—is a little unsatisfying. Explaining how these factors came together and contended with traditional social norms in a variety of contexts around the country will be a welcome contribution by future historians. Relatedly, in making the case that the history of schools is a history of testing, Reese
makes an equally compelling case that the history of schools is a history of quantification. Though the theme is present throughout *Testing Wars*, it would have benefited from more systematic treatment. This is especially true given that the traditional dynamic of quantification and professionalization is here complicated by the relative newness of statistics, the entrenched position of school masters, and the vested interests of parents and students already in the school. Given the importance of quantification both to the story of the American school system and American society at large in the nineteenth and twentieth century, education historians seem uniquely positioned to influence the broader scholarship in this field—building up from the foundation laid by Reese would certainly be a good start.

In 1845, Horace Mann announced that the “the mode of examination by printed questions and written answers will constitute a new era in the history of our schools.” As Reese shows us in *Testing Wars*, that era continues to the present day—characterized by the imperial ambitions of reformers to use tests to measure, control, and reform schools. After reading *Testing Wars*, one is left to face the difficult conclusion that, after generations of unfulfilled promises, finding the resolve to change our course remains our biggest test.

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