

WE NEED A NEW TEST

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We know that on international comparisons of educational achievement, the average test scores of United States students are low, below not only other developed or industrialized nations, but even below a significant number of underdeveloped or newly-developing nations. Many of these other nations have the same kind of compulsory education laws that we have, so we cannot claim that their better results come from their being more selective in sorting the children who will go to school. In any country, *all*—as in compulsory education for all—is *all*.

Are their students smarter than ours are? Surely, they are not. The difference in results cannot be attributed to a difference in intellectual endowment.

In actuality, the explanation for the academic superiority of so many nations to us is straightforward. Their results are better because their students are better educated.

How do they accomplish this? They do it through the following combination of ingredients:

(1) They select teachers because of their academic subject competence. Teachers are prized because of what they know, not because of what they are: They are prized for their intellects, not for their personalities.

(2) They formulate comprehensive, detailed, sequential, and coherent curricula that are nationally mandated. The emphasis of these curricula is concrete content, not abstract skills.

(3) They provide for nationally uniform and rigorous batteries of examinations that cover the full range of the school curriculum. These examinations are the sine qua non for future societal success.

Of these ingredients, the one that furnishes the most immediately accessible window into the range and depth of a school system's curriculum is the battery of tests that it offers. Those who complain about the burden of our system of standardized tests need to become familiar with how other nations test.

The system in Israel is instructive in this regard. In Israel, a high school final certificate (the equivalent to our diploma) means little for one's future success in society. Far more important is the comprehensive array of tests formulated by the National Examining Board of the Israeli Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport. These tests are called the *bagrut* in casual conversation, convenient shorthand for Teudat Bagrut (Certificate of Majority or Maturity). This is analogous to the French Baccalauréat, the German Abitur, and the British "A-levels" (which the British are currently in the process of making even more rigorous).

The bagrut is composed of tests on: (1) Bible, (2) Hebrew grammar, (3) Hebrew composition, (4) English language (written and oral), (5) world literature (with an emphasis on Hebrew literature), (6) mathematics, (7) Israeli government (civics and minorities studies), (8) Jewish history, (9) world history, (10) science (physics, chemistry, and biology), and (11) one facultative subject (equivalent to our electives and including such choices as geography, another language, computer science, etc.). Each test is offered in multiple versions ranked by units of study from one (basic/least difficult) to five (high/most difficult). The student must select a test combination that generates at least 21 units, with at least one test at the most difficult level.

The bagrut is not required, but it carries such an obligatory quality in Israeli culture that it does not need to be. No Israeli can hope to pursue a good university education or a meaningful career in the army or the private sector without doing well on the bagrut. Some years ago, when I taught at a Jewish day school in suburban Philadelphia, I had an Israeli student who was visiting with family here. Although he did not feel this way about my course—and therefore felt free to discuss it with me—he told me that he was worried that his other courses were hindering his being adequately prepared for the bagrut since they were on a level far below comparable courses in Israel.

The bagrut is so powerful that even someone without a high school transcript—say, an Israeli home schooled student—who does well on the tests will see education and career paths open unproblematically. Similarly, someone with a mediocre high school record who excels on the bagrut will fare equally well. On the other hand, someone who has the Israeli equivalent of a 4.0 high school GPA (grade point average), but who does poorly on the bagrut, will find those same paths blocked or even closed.

We need a system like this. However, because we do not value education as the Israelis do, we would need to mandate the test, at least for the dozen or so years that would be required for it to become institutionalized.

Without such a system of national control of educational content and its assessment, we will continue to flail vainly in the darkness of educational failure.