

John Oliver is Wrong on Standardized Testing



Tamara Hiler

Deputy Director of Education

[@TamaraHiler](https://twitter.com/TamaraHiler)



Stephenie Johnson

Fellow, Social Policy & Politics Program

On Sunday's *Last Week Tonight*, host John Oliver spent nearly 20 minutes on a segment mocking the use of standardized testing in our K-12 schools. While the topic of testing is often an easy target of the media, John Oliver's attempt to discredit the use of testing altogether was fraught with sensationalized misstatements and flat-out inaccuracies—providing his audience with a one-sided account that failed to mention any of the benefits or progress that has been made over the last decade precisely because of testing. Oliver made four overarching claims in the segment that ranged from wildly oversimplified to flat-out wrong:

Claim 1: There are too many high stakes tests.

Oliver argued that there are too many standardized tests and that tests are so high pressure that students are literally throwing up on them. It's important to put some of these claims into perspective. Oliver is right that *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) increased the number of federal tests from six to 17. However, he failed to disclose that those 17 tests are spread out throughout a child's *entire* K-12 career. In fact, according to recent studies, the average child in the U.S. spends 1.6% to

1.7% of instructional time in standardized testing each year— not exactly a significant amount of time, by any stretch of the imagination. In addition, we know that over-testing is not the result of federal requirements, but rather states and districts that choose to pile on additional tests throughout the year. Even still, a bipartisan update of NCLB currently working its way through the Senate (something Oliver failed to mention) attempts to address these concerns by giving states the flexibility to break up their one high-stakes test at the end of the year into smaller bite-sized chunks that will lessen anxiety as well as the need to layer on other tests throughout the year.

Claim 2: The tests themselves are poorly constructed and don't measure what we need to know.

Perhaps one of the biggest claims Oliver made is that the tests being given to students are so poorly designed that they are utterly useless. But what about the fact that most states have recently transitioned over to new tests that look quite different from the fill-in-the-bubble assessments of years past? He completely disregards this. In fact, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) that he specifically references in the segment was actually phased out of use last year. Now, Florida students take the Florida Standards Assessments, which according to the state's Department of Education will “include more than multiple choice questions” and “assess students' higher-order thinking skills.” A similar trend can be seen around the country, as 27 states are implementing new assessments aligned to college and career ready standards. And in many states, students will use computer-adaptive and competency-based assessments that test more than just rote memorization and rudimentary skills. Tests have come a long way, and they are getting better quickly—a fact John Oliver completely ignores.

Claim 3: The purpose of tests is to punish teachers and make companies rich.

Oliver also maintained that tests only serve two purposes: to punish teachers and make private testing companies rich. Only 3.5% of school districts across the U.S. even attempt to use a merit pay system, as the National Center on Performance Incentives found, so the idea that test scores and pay are linked is not true for the vast majority of teachers. Second, while there may be legitimate questions surrounding who should be responsible for designing tests, Oliver glaringly omits the reality that tests can and do serve an important purpose in providing teachers and parents with critical data about student performance. In fact, the reason annual standardized testing emerged during the NCLB-era was because there were legitimate concerns that many students—often those historically marginalized—were not receiving actual instruction, and expectations for their performance were being set shockingly low. Without annual testing, there was no way to find out how students were doing until it was too late. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests that existed prior to NCLB only tested a small sample of students in various subjects in different years, meaning there was no systematic way to check whether or not a child was on grade level in reading or math. So, unlike what Oliver would have you believe, the actual purpose of testing is to make sure that specific kids, or groups of kids, are not allowed to slip through the cracks year after year.

Claim 4: Standardized tests have not been helpful to anyone.

Lastly, John Oliver uses international test scores to make the claim that standardized testing has had no benefit whatsoever for any student population since the passage of NCLB. The data say otherwise. Under NCLB, students writ large have made crucial gains in reading and math over the last decade, as NAEP data show. The country's 9-year-olds gained on average 9 points in reading and 12 points in math, a significant improvement from the glacial gains seen in the decades prior. More importantly, however, the introduction of standardized testing—and the accountability that came

along with it—helped students of color and high-needs populations fare significantly better than in the decades leading up to NCLB. For example, African American 9-year-olds made twice as much improvement in reading than their white counterparts, the gap between white and Hispanic 9-year-olds in math narrowed by 8 points, and more students with disabilities scored in the “proficient” or higher level in both math and reading than in decades leading up to NCLB. While we still have work to do on this score, particularly to close achievement gaps, it is completely inaccurate to say that no gains been made under NCLB.

While there are legitimate conversations to be had about improving the quality, quantity, and uses of standardized testing, *Last Week Tonight* made no serious effort to address these concerns. Rather than spend time covering both the pros and cons of the testing debate, Oliver sensationalized wild claims and poked fun at schools that encourage their students to do well on the tests or try to make the process less stressful. Oliver asks in his closing remarks, “What can we do to fix this?” Well, for starters, let’s have a conversation that leaves room for reasonable debate on testing and accountability—a conversation that’s happening on Capitol Hill but one that Oliver would prefer to ignore for a few laughs.

TOPICS

K-12 40