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BODY:

Adding to the deluge of confusing and often contradictory **test** data, results from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have arrived. Some commentators see the data as a sign of American mediocrity. Predictably, they call for changes in curriculum and teaching to boost U.S. students' scores.

A more rational response would be to **rethink** the nation's overreliance on **standardized** exams. If scores remain stagnant after a decade of **test**-based "reform," why should anyone expect that an even more intense focus on these narrow tools would lead to real educational improvement? Even **test** junkies have trouble keeping track of the onslaught of conflicting guidance from the alphabet soup of exams, including TIMSS, PISA, NAEP, FCAT, MCAS, I-STEP, SAT and ACT.

But which results should we respond to first, if at all? The truth is these **standardized** measures all offer too limited evidence on which to base policy prescriptions.

If there's one area of agreement, it is that most **tests** reflect the ongoing and savage inequities among American schoolchildren. A closer look at the scores confirms not across-the-board mediocrity but ongoing gaps in educational attainment between rich and poor, white and minority students. In mathematics literacy, for example, U.S. blacks and Hispanics score below average internationally, while U.S. whites are above average. All of the **standardized tests** in the world will not bring clarity to our policies or equity to our schools. That is why more than 30 civil rights, education and disability groups recently called for a

shift away from the overwhelming reliance on **standardized tests**. Instead, their statement endorsed a comprehensive array of achievement measures (see text at www.fairtest.org).

Only by reducing the focus on **standardized tests**, while building the capacity of schools to assess and meet the needs of individual students, can we ensure that all children receive the rich education they deserve to become successful, participating members of our democracy.

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Exams fail to accurately diagnose students' problems.