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**‘If all of that testing had been improving us, we would have been the highest-achieving nation in the world.’
Here’s what does work in school reform.**

By [Valerie Strauss](#)

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At a recent gathering of school superintendents from throughout the nation, the newly appointed head of the California State Board of Education made an important point about education in this country that is obvious yet long ignored by policymakers.

Linda Darling-Hammond, an internationally recognized educator and researcher who is an expert on teacher preparation and educational equity, appeared at a Feb. 14 conference of AASA, the School Superintendents Association. She spoke about what this country should — and should not — do to improve public schools.

Darling-Hammond, who taught at Stanford University and founded the Center for Opportunity Policy in Education there before establishing the Learning Policy Institute think tank, made clear what shouldn’t be done: continuing to throw standardized tests at students and expecting change.

“If all of that testing had been improving us, we would have been the highest-achieving nation in the world,” she said.

[A comprehensive survey of school districts published in 2015](#) found that the number of standardized tests U.S. public school students take had exploded during the previous decade — and that most schools were requiring tests of questionable value.

The survey by the Council of the Great City Schools found that a typical student took 112 mandated standardized tests between prekindergarten and 12th grade. A testing culture developed in many schools, with excessive test prep and even pep rallies to get kids “up” for taking their exams. Schools cut down or eliminated art, music, science, history, physical education and other subjects in favor of math and English Language Arts, the two tested subjects, Darling-Hammond said.

The testing obsession resulted from the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, which required states to test students for federal accountability purposes, and from President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top initiative. The push during the Obama years effectively coerced

states to assess teachers using standardized tests if those states wanted to access the pot of federal money.

(Incidentally, Darling-Hammond was the education chief of Obama's transition team after his election in 2008, but she was not, as many expected, tapped as education secretary. Arne Duncan, a supporter of testing for accountability purposes, got the job.)

Making matters worse, Darling-Hammond said, was the Great Recession that started in late 2007 and led to more families becoming homeless and to rising child poverty rates. Many schools saw their test scores affected because of the disruptive consequences of the economic upheaval — but the number of standardized tests continued increasing as districts experimented with ways to link test scores to teacher evaluations.

Why didn't the No Child Left Behind/Race to the Top approach work? Darling-Hammond said reasons include sanctions on schools and teachers that left "important factors out of the mix," growing poverty and homelessness, state tests focused on low-level skills, a lack of incentives to enrich curriculum, unhelpful state and district policies, and mandated solutions that were flawed.

After the release of the 2015 survey of school districts and amid a movement by parents to exempt their children from standardized exams, Obama and Duncan conceded that testing had gone too far. Many districts started reducing the number of standardized tests that kids were required to take, but students still take what some critics say is way too many — and the federal testing requirements remain in force.

[\[Are these standardized test questions too hard for kids?\]](#)

So what should this country be doing to improve public schools? For one thing, pay attention to the social and emotional needs of students so that they are prepared to tackle academic work at school, Darling-Hammond said.

Citing high-performing countries such as Finland and Singapore, she said: "They take care of children. Health care is usually universal." And both countries have income security and high-quality preschool.

Darling-Hammond cited these policies in high-performing countries:

- Equitable resources to schools.
- Major investments in educator preparation and ongoing support.
- Schools designed to support teacher and student learning.
- Equitable access to a rich, thinking curriculum.
- Performance assessments focused on higher order skills that are used to guide learning.

Educating the “whole child,” she said, requires a safe school climate where children are not fearful of violence or of being bullied or ostracized for their differences.

It’s just that simple — and just that hard.