

# School Problems

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of school problems, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Assessment
2. Tracking
3. Grade Inflation
4. Student Passivity

## 1. ASSESSMENT

There are several school problems, or social problems that are related to the school system and educational institutions in American society. One of the major problems with schools is assessment, or the measurement of skills, knowledge, and abilities. In modern society, people need to be able to objectively display their learning; they need to be able to rank themselves.

➦ **EXAMPLE** What are you going to put on a resume? Perhaps you got a B in one subject, and an A in another subject. You need to be able to differentiate yourself, because society is anonymous, and people don't know each other, so you need to be able to put your skills out on display.

How does society assess your learning? This is a problem that society has to solve. There are different ways to do this, but in the U.S., grades, scores, and percentile ranks are commonly employed to assess students' abilities. Standardized assessments are designed to ensure that people have basic reading, writing, and math skills--the skills necessary to function in society, such that no child gets left behind, as the policy is called.

### IN CONTEXT

There are assessments in place in elementary schools and in high schools to make sure that you meet a certain standard. If you can't, then you can't move on. In order to move on, you've got to be able to pass a certain test to ensure that you are learning and you have the skills necessary to succeed--that you're not left behind. This is the goal of standardized assessments.

In doing so, society wants to avoid **functional illiteracy**, which is the absence of basic, reading, writing, and math skills that are necessary to function in society. Functional illiteracy is, hopefully, mitigated by the idea of 'No Child Left Behind,' to ensure that nobody slips through the cracks without being able to master these basic skills.

Assessment does have some associated problems, one being the standards themselves. Tests are created to teach to the standards, so often, teachers find fault with having to simply teach to the test. You can't be spontaneous and varied with your education--you've got to focus it on a certain test, if this test is going to be of critical importance. Therefore, teachers teach to the test, and often, there's been policy put in place so that teachers' pay is tethered to the performance of their students on these standardized tests. It follows, then, that teachers have an incentive to falsify the scores of their students in order to make themselves look better, get paid more, and advance.



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This has been documented in an economics book called *Freakonomics*, in which the author shows that teachers were falsifying their students' standardized test scores because there was an incentive structure in place for them to do so.

Also, because cultures are varied in the United States and the standardized test is created by somebody specifically to measure some standardized knowledge, it has been argued that standardized assessment can even discriminate against certain students because of their culture. The culture of the test creators is the dominant American culture that might not necessarily be as easily understood by somebody from a different culture. Therefore, it has been argued that the assessments are biased against some students.



TERM TO KNOW

#### Functional Illiteracy

The absence of the basic reading and writing skills needed for everyday life.

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## 2. TRACKING

Standardized testing can also be used to track students and engage in **tracking**. You can use these assessments, you can separate the gifted from the average, the exceptional from the everyday, and place them on different educational tracks--special courses for the gifted or regular courses for the average.

However, research shows that students actually do better when everyone is present in the same classroom. Students that are not as far advanced as other students can see how the advanced students are using the concepts, and can copy the way that the more advanced kids learn--everybody benefits from being in the same classroom. Likewise, it is said that if you can teach material, then you remember much more of the material that you taught. Therefore, it's also beneficial for more advanced students to engage in discussion with less advanced students.



TERM TO KNOW

#### Tracking

Separating students by virtue of their scores on standardized tests.

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## 3. GRADE INFLATION

If there are standards in place and everybody has to achieve a certain level to get by, this can cause what is known as **grade inflation**. Grade inflation is the tendency for work of similar quality to get rewarded higher.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Suppose you do work that earns a B+, yet over time, that same work earns an A. The standards, in effect, get lower when this happens. If everyone's got to make the standard, perhaps this can be eased by pushing the standard down over time--a hotly debated public topic, even at universities.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Grade Inflation

The tendency to give work of comparable quality proportionately higher marks over time.

## 4. STUDENT PASSIVITY

Another problem associated with schooling is **student passivity**. Society doesn't want students who simply go through the motions and are disinterested in their education. Ideally, students are passionate about learning and invested in their future and educational achievement--they actually care and want to be there.

Yet disinterested, passive students are a real problem for schools. Schools struggle at times to make students care about their education, such that they can connect it to their future and invest the time, energy, and effort into learning.

#### IN CONTEXT

Suppose in high school, you didn't mature quickly enough to truly care about it. You knew that you could just show up, go through the motions, and you'd get a B, which would be good enough. You weren't overly concerned about putting any effort into trying to get better grades. Because of your passivity in high school, you get into a mediocre college.

Fortunately, though, at college, you're able to turn your passivity around. You work hard, you're able to connect your education to your future, and proceed to be accepted into a better school for your graduate degree. The potential was there all along, but your initial passivity prevented you from realizing that potential from the start.

Often, students don't realize that their education matters for their future life chances, so they are passive and non-committal. Student passivity is a school problem, and society wants to work against it.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Student Passivity

Bored, disinterested students who are passive about their educational success.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about school problems, or social problems that are related to the school system and educational institutions in American society. You explored areas of student engagement and

assessment, as well as tracking, grade inflation and student passivity.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Functional Illiteracy**

The absence of the basic reading and writing skills needed for everyday life.

### **Grade Inflation**

The tendency to give work of comparable quality proportionately higher marks over time.

### **Student Passivity**

Bored, disinterested students who are passive about their educational success.

### **Tracking**

Separating students by virtue of their scores on standardized tests.