If a person were to come to America to observe its education system one thing that he/she would notice, and most likely be amazed at, is the emphasis put on standardized testing. In the state of Minnesota, as well as many other states, schools are required to meet a set of federal and state standards in order to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). If schools don’t meet their AYP, state and federal funds that are designated for that school will be reduced. There is a serious problem with the current system using threats of revoking school funds as a way of demanding results. Consider the case of the St. Charles Elementary school struggling to make AYP last year. St. Charles Elementary school is a Title One facility that is located in a rural town of south-eastern Minnesota. It serves five hundred and sixty eight students whose near futures are uncertain. St. Charles Elementary hasn’t made AYP for four consecutive years according to state wide test results published in the Twin Cities Pioneer Press. The Minnesota Department of Education’s website states that a school that doesn’t make AYP for its fourth consecutive year must report its status to the public, implement a corrective action plan, set aside twenty percent of its Title One allocations for student choice, and ten percent of Title One allocations for professional development. This takes away thirty percent of the Title One funds that the school is accustomed using elsewhere in its budget making a bad situation worse. This makes one wonder if the students of struggling schools are being best served by withholding resources instead of providing additional assistance to help remedy the problem.
The small rural schools such as St. Charles Elementary are not the only schools who struggle to make AYP in the last couple of years. A study, published by Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2008), compared thirty six schools from across the country and found that nine out of eighteen elementary schools and sixteen out of eighteen middle schools didn’t meet AYP when compared to Minnesota’s standards (p. 1). If AYP isn’t met two consecutive years, students are allowed to transfer to another school at their current school’s expense. This places additional burdens on an already troubled school district by taking essential funds away. It also tends to segregate the school’s population all the more by leaving students belonging to less fortunate families in the struggling school system. In the book “Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America’s Schools” the authors touch on a couple of issues that have become prevalent for the public school system as a result of high-stakes testing. Authors Sharon Nichols and David Berliner (2007) dedicate three chapters to the issue of “cheating” in the public schools. They mention that the current system, which puts such a great emphasis on high-stakes testing, is cheating society, teachers, and most of all the students.

Educators should ask the question of who is to blame for the dysfunctional program that is our public school system. The first assumption is that teachers aren’t teaching their students well enough. If a person takes a critical look at the construct of the school system he/she will find that standardized tests and the emphasis that is put on high-stakes testing are responsible for most of the issues that plague our public schools. If a school doesn’t make AYP two years in a row they are stripped of essential funds that they depend on for daily operations and students are allowed to attend a better performing school. Theoretically, this is a plausible idea. The problem is that only the more privileged students, who have sufficient means have the option of attending a different school, thus leaving the less privileged and more often underperforming students in
the struggling school creating a vicious cycle. This leads to teachers having more pressure put on them to provide results. For many schools, particularly small rural and poor urban schools, the budget is already stretched, leaving faculty no choice other than to ensure good scores from their students by teaching to the test. Some teachers have much more to worry about. When considering a student’s best interest one has to determine what is ultimately best for that student. There are a lot of extenuating circumstances that might account for a student doing poorly. The resulting consequence of holding them back might impact that child’s life more than if they had been pushed along. Most would question the integrity of the teachers as a result, which is understandable, but Nichols and Berliner (2007) combated that stance with a passage that states, “The dilemma of teachers and administrators under NCLB is similar to those posed by Kohlberg in his studies of moral development many years ago. One of those dilemmas posed the question of whether it is right or wrong to steal medicine you can’t afford in order to save your own wife or husband. Obviously, this dilemma pushed respondents to deal with whether or not the biblical admonition “thou shall not steal” is inviolable. Under the conditions described, many deeply religious people forgave the theft of the medicine. Teachers are in a similar bind. Teachers are faced with the dilemma of cheating to help a struggling student or to ensure stability in their own family, or not cheating and watching a student falter or their family harmed. Under these circumstances, many teachers may come to the conclusion that cheating on the test, like stealing the medicine, can be justified” (p. 35). It does not imply that teachers who believe this are necessarily right, only that it is because of a flawed system that they are forced to do so. As a teacher, it is important to ask yourself, is it right to sacrifice a child’s future and potential in order to maintain a system of accountability?
Possible Solutions

One might state that the obvious solution to the problem of educational corruption is to change the current system of assessment and evaluation. The practice of using high stakes tests to hold teachers and schools accountable to determine the allocation of funds has undermined the true intentions of the educational system. In order to resolve the current issues that are being dealt with in our school systems we must first look at the basic philosophy we structure our educational system around. In the article, “High-Stakes Testing and the Default Philosophy”, author Michael Gunzenhauser talks about the need to redefine society’s philosophy on education. He states that “in a democratic society the philosophy of education arises from an ongoing conversation with others, our students, colleagues, and the public” (Gunzenhauser, 2003, p.52). The current philosophy of accountability through high-stakes testing comes from the functionalist point of view that of everyone deserving what they get based on their accomplishments. This system offers an objective method of evaluation that clearly defines what constitutes success and failure. The problem with this line of thought is that there is more than one definition of success in our society.

The conflict theorist would argue that there are too many variables to take into consideration when evaluating students which makes it almost impossible to create a universal definition of what makes a student a success. A conflict theorist believes that there are power differentials in our society which give the dominant group power to impose their ideas and will over the population in an attempt to create social hegemony. This means that there are often gaps in the system of evaluation that do not account for the great diversity that is found in American school systems. Gunzenhauser (2003) states that “some of the most difficult philosophies to implement and articulate are those consistent with the idea of increased accountability,
noticeably the documented gaps in achievement between students of different ethnicities, economic, and racial backgrounds” (p. 54). A way to account for ethnic, economic, and racial backgrounds in order to best educate our students would be to approach educational assessment through a different scope. Instead of administering a “one size fits all” type of standardized testing, scholars should adopt more individualized assessment procedures such as formative assessments or performance based tests in which students use projects and portfolios to display their knowledge.

In a short overview of their book Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America’s School found in the Harvard Education Letter, Nichols and Berliner (2007) describe formative assessments as “being tests that are designed to tell us what and how much students know at any one point in time” (p.2). Formative assessments give the instructor a chance to make and assessment for learning instead, not of learning, so they take place throughout the year and help to guide the teacher’s delivery of content. Some of the strongest aspects of formative assessments are that students are tested periodically, giving the teacher an accurate measurement of student learning, and the assessments are individually tailored to fit the school, classroom, or student that is being assessed. By allowing a teacher to tailor the delivery of their material to each specific class, they are treated as moral agents and given the ability to help their students attain a higher order of thinking. The current system of high-stakes testing has teachers so focused on student performance that they often teach to the summative standardized test, which leaves the students with a shallow knowledge base, inhibiting conceptualization of the main ideas. Through the use of formative assessments the teacher is able to go more in depth and help the student develop hypothetical thinking skills because of the student’s understanding of the
underlying concepts that tie the material together. The use of formative assessments coupled with a summative test would give the best representation of where the students are at.

When viewing the idea of formative assessments through a theoretical perspective it seems to align best with the idea of interpretivism. The theory of interpretivism acknowledges that education can mean many different things to many different people. An interpretivist understands that what might work in a predominantly white suburban school in terms of content delivery may be drastically different from what works in a diverse urban community. A functionalist would see the use of formative assessments as being a way to maintain the norms of independence and achievement since students and teachers are still held accountable for their performance. The only problem with formative assessments from a functionalist perspective is that it defies the theories of universalism and assimilation since the teachers are given the power to modify their curriculum and tests to fit their students. Just like functionalists, conflict theorists have ideas that both support and reject the use of formative assessments. From a conflict theorist’s point of view formative assessments could promote a sense of false consciousness and hidden curriculum depending on the personal values and morals of a teacher. On the other hand, when teachers are viewed as moral agents, a conflict theorist could argue that there is no way to maintain the status quo. Since teachers can tailor the delivery of material to a specific student body they are reducing the achievement gap by helping that population boost future test scores. One of the greatest weaknesses of formative assessments is its reliance on teachers acting as moral agents. The problem with assuming that every teacher is acting as a moral agent, holding their student’s best interest at heart, is very naive.

Another solution to the current system of summative high stakes testing in our schools to track student progress is through the use of projects and portfolios. By allowing students to
portray their knowledge through the use of portfolios teaches them real life lessons that will be applicable as they mature. A portfolio would consist of an accumulation of the student’s work throughout the year. The student portfolio is treated like a thesis project consisting of multiple long-term projects requiring the student to involve teamwork, self-directed inquiry, and come up with a tangible product (Brown, 2011, p. 1). The student is allowed to portray their depth of knowledge in a way that is meaningful and easily visible. Assessment of student portfolios is done by a panel of experts that have extensive knowledge in the subject areas being assessed. They are tasked with determining whether the student has mastered a sufficient body of knowledge in order to be considered competent. Teachers are allowed to take the role of a mentor allowing them to help facilitate knowledge while providing assistance with the student’s projects. Often the projects and portfolios are presented to the public providing a democratic form of assessment (Berliner & Nichols, 2007, p. 2).

The practice of using projects and portfolios to represent student learning aligns best with the interpretivist point of view. Interpretivists consider the context of the material and factor in all of the variables into making an assessment or decision. This is clearly visible through the use of projects and portfolios. While they are still guided by a set of standards, students are allowed to put their own personal spin on showing what they know. This is a lot more meaningful and indicative of student learning than the traditional standardized tests. Since interpretivists see both functionalists and conflict theorists as having valid points of view, as long as they are backed up with reason and logic, one could argue that assessing projects and portfolios is supported by either one of those theories. The functionalist would argue that the norms of specificity could apply because outstanding students have the chance to stand out from the rest and create something exceptional that could benefit them down the road. They would also argue that the
norms of achievement and independence apply since students know that they are going to be judged on their performance and held accountable for the final product. The problem with the functionalist view is that there is no universal treatment amongst students and no social solidarity which are a couple fundamental components to the functionalist’s theory. The conflict theorist would argue that there is hidden curriculum in this form of assessment. They would argue that the hidden curriculum is the projects since students learn life-long lessons by completing the projects and constructing their portfolios. The biggest problem viewing the assessment through a conflict theorist’s point of view is that projects and portfolios don’t help create or maintain social stratification. Quit the opposite. They help reduce social stratification by creating a way that every student can learn and effectively be assessed.

Conclusion

When considering the options available as an alternative method of assessment to the current high stakes standardized tests, one has to account for all of the variables that go into implementing that system. Above I talked about two possible alternatives to standardized testing. Formative assessments let the teacher know how a student progresses throughout the course, but they also require more class time to administer the tests and are still based around the traditional form of testing. The use of projects and portfolios would be a breath of fresh air for both the educational system and its students. This is because their coursework is evaluated to assess student learning instead of the traditional tests. That is why I would strongly endorse a system that uses projects and portfolios to assess student learning.

I have been fortunate enough to not only hear first-hand accounts of the effectiveness that using projects and portfolios has on learning from some of my past professors such as John
Deming, but have had a chance to work in a classroom that implemented this idea. During the spring of 2011 I got the opportunity to conduct my field experience at Winona Middle School with Eric Paulsen. He taught a Project Science class which consisted of large student led projects that displayed their learning of scientific procedure, personal ingenuity, and creativeness. The students later entered their projects in the Regional Science Fair hosted by Winona State University where they got a chance to prove what they know to both judges and the public. Aside from helping the students complete their poster boards, I was also a judge at the Science Fair. This gave me a unique opportunity to view the student’s learning from two different vantage points. I got a chance to see the development of critical thinking skills in the classroom as the students worked on their projects as well as a chance to see the culmination of their knowledge through the presentation of their projects. I found that the students were real proud of their projects and could articulate in depth of both the scientific procedure and learning specific to their project to both judges and the general public, which would be hard to find in a conventional classroom.

In order to implement the use of projects and portfolios to replace standardized tests there would have to be a drastic change in the current political, social, and educational view of learning. It would have to be recognized that learning can take place in a multitude of different ways. Although the idea of using projects and portfolios to assess student learning relinquishes a lot of control to the students, there would still be a need for a set of standards by which the projects are guided. This could happen on a local, state, or federal level. I would advocate that there be general guidelines put in place on the federal level in order to align schools across the country, but most of the specifics should be left for the state or local bodies. This is because teaching is a profession and teachers are moral agents with their student’s best interests at heart.


