

## Movie Review: "The Test And The Art Of Thinking" Comes Out Swinging

Standardized testing is a steadfast controversial topic in the education space. Most of the 80 percent of Americans who take a standardized college entrance exam (SAT or ACT) probably don't think too much about it once they're done. Like chicken pox, the test serves as a transactional rite of passage, an unpleasant but necessary bump on the road to growing up. However, that may be changing.



*The Trailer for The Test and the Art of Thinking*

In SAT documentary "The Test & The Art of Thinking", director Michael Arlen Davis does not straddle the line on the issue. Rather, the film coalesces a comprehensive chorus of voices, building a strong case against the construct that has become a cornerstone of America's college-bound process.

The film's strength lies in its storylines and comprehensive cast of characters that both tell the story of the rise of the standardized test, and attempt to crack it at its very foundation.



*The student voice is most powerful in "The Test"*

The standardized test industry already takes quite a beating on several fronts in the press. Critics have long alleged that the test does not accurately measure proficiency in math, science, or language - rather, it measures how well you prepared for the test. The test doesn't predict college performance. Meanwhile, students allocate substantial time to fret, study, and practice for this test - time that could perhaps be better spent on other pursuits. Cottage industries like test prep have sprung up to ease the feeding frenzy, and selective colleges and prominent ranking sources like the US News and World Report form a cabal, a "Testing-Industrial Complex", if you will. Now, nobody is vigorously defending the system...but it putters along, gaining steam every year.

In a few well-constructed movements, "The Test" orchestrates its way through the history and questionable but perhaps-one-time noble pursuits of the test throughout the years: As higher education became something not just for few, but for more, driven by the GI bill, the film traces how mainstream colleges followed and emulated elite institutions by adopting these tests.

By way of this history lesson, "The Test" also dives into the recent test-optional movement, a growing effort by colleges to reduce admittance reliance on tests. It then cleverly segues into the monetary incentives behind the scenes, identifying four billion-dollar industries around college admissions: enrollment management, test prep, private counseling, and college guides. While that claim is not substantiated, it quickly becomes clear that the players in this space are serious and entrenched. "The Test" closes in outlining a national trend in policy where states are adopting test like the SAT and ACT as bars of state-wide proficiency.

"The Test" also dives into the mindset of students preparing for the test - there are no truly happy students in this documentary. The students are resigned but resilient, if somewhat reluctant, to "play the game" and master the test through practice, practice, practice - and tricks, one of them titled "Black Magic".

A highlight in the film is a recurring round table (literally) of test prep industry professionals. While they benefit from the billion-dollar test prep industry borne from the test's place in admissions, they are perhaps the most vocal critics of the very premise of the test.

The glimpse into this existential crisis is compelling and humorous. "What was amazing...to this day is that they did find out the Emperor has no clothes...but they said 'let's test more!'" says a representative from the Princeton Review on the lack of validity of the test, to laughter and agreement from the room. Also mentioned is the "supremacy" of the US News rankings, where colleges are stuck between a rock and a hard place in choosing between lowering reliance on test scores and risking their rankings. These hardened vets hold no punches in their water cooler conversation. There is no talk of lofty ideals or helping students realize their greater gifts and talents. They too know the game, and they play it.

A second highlight comes via Steven Ma of ThinkTank Learning, a test prep company. Outspoken in his ability to match students with schools, he outlines his money-back guarantee to students - get into a top school, or your money back. The fact that he claims to have collected premiums as high as \$1 million to help students get into their top school is mind-boggling.

There are points in the film where deep, intricate topics are teased but not explored at length. These include directly addressing achievement gaps based on parental income, first-generation students, race, and gender. The film also meanders a bit to drive home just how "game-able" the test is by following a beloved if non-traditional SAT tutor who helps students realize amazing gains through unconventional methods.

In addition, while the documentary showcases footage of College Board CEO and President David Coleman, he is not featured in the documentary to make his case against the wall of noise threatening his institution. It is not clear whether he refused an opportunity or was never given one.

At the end, the real stars are the students, and the student voice is used to great effect by producer Michael Arlen Davis. The students in "The Test" aren't clueless - they're clued in. They're frustrated by the system, but they see the big picture clearly, and they care about their futures. Maybe the test isn't fair, maybe it doesn't mean anything - but isn't it worth it to just keep your head down, do your best, and get to college?

And maybe that attitude is the reason why all of the players in this space continue to support its flawed but robust ecosystem. Even [Amazon](#) is asking cities for student SAT scores to assess the location of their new headquarters. After all, why change the system when you can derive some value from it?

Maybe, with "The Test", that conversation can begin, and colleges can be the ones to answer the call.

"The Test and The Art of Thinking" is now available in theaters. Running time 1 hour and 25 minutes.