

Why Did the Test Come Back?



Built from *The Test Comes Back* by Isaac Kim, Education Editor

Grades 4–8 · About 45 minutes · ★ everyone · ★★ older readers

Name _____

Date _____

1. Before You Read

★ Have you ever taken a test that counted for a lot? How did it feel?

★ If a college could look at only one thing about you, what should it be? Why?

2. The Short Version

Read this first. Older readers: read the full article too.

In spring 2020, test centers closed during the pandemic. So nearly every selective American college stopped requiring test scores. This was called going **test-optional**. At the peak, more than 1,800 colleges were test-optional, including every school in the Ivy League. Many people said the change would be permanent and would make admissions fairer.

Now the most selective colleges are bringing the test back. Their reason: scores helped them find talented students, especially from schools they knew nothing about.

Isaac Kim compares three systems. In Korea, one big exam, the Suneung, has always counted for a lot, and people there have long argued about that. Its defense is that a hard number is the same hard number for everyone. In Britain and the IB world, outside exams have always been the main measure. When teachers gave the grades during the pandemic, grades rose so much that exams came back. Only America tried taking the test away and judging students on everything else: grades, essays, activities, and recommendations.

What happened? Without scores, grades kept rising until whole schools were bunched at the top, and essays could be coached. But the test has problems too. Scores follow family income, and coaching works.

Isaac says colleges chose the test because it is **legible**: a score means the same thing in Seoul, in a small Georgia town, and at a Connecticut boarding school. Legible, he points out, does not mean fair.

3. Word Bank

Word	What it means
admissions	the way a college chooses which students get in
equity	fairness; giving everyone a real chance
inflation	when something keeps going up; grade inflation means grades rise so high they stop telling you much
reinstate	to bring back a rule that had been dropped
legible	easy to read and understand; here, a signal that means the same thing everywhere

★ Use **reinstate** in a sentence of your own.

4. Check Your Understanding

★ 1. Why did nearly every selective American college stop requiring test scores in the spring of 2020?

★ 2. Which country's system tried removing the test entirely and judging students on everything else?

☐ Korea ☐ Britain ☐ America

★ 3. Name two things colleges looked at instead of test scores.

★ 4. Isaac calls the case for bringing testing back "Exhibit A." Name two things that went wrong when colleges stopped looking at scores.

★★ 5. Isaac says colleges did not choose the test "because it is fair." They chose it because it is "legible." What does he mean? Why would an admissions office reading sixty thousand files need that?

5. Isaac's Side by Side

Isaac compares school systems the way an archivist compares documents: filed side by side, with the details on the record. Fill in each column using the article. In the last column, file your own school's approach.

	Korea	Britain and IB	America	My school
How students are measured				
What it gets right				
What can go wrong				
What it thinks a test is for				

★ Which system is your school's way of measuring students closest to?

○ one big exam (Korea) ○ outside exams (Britain and IB) ○ everything else (America) ○ a mix

6. Think Deeper

★ Isaac writes that a high score from an unknown rural school was information, but "its absence was silence." What do you think he means? Who could be missed when there is no score?

★★ Isaac sums up the research this way: the test is "an imperfect measure that adds real information." Can something be imperfect and still useful? Explain, using one fact from Exhibit A and one from Exhibit B.

7. Write Your Report

Write a short report answering this question: **Should colleges require a test score from every student who applies?**

- **My answer:**
- **Reason 1 (from the article):**
- **Reason 2 (from the article):**
- **One thing the other side would say:**
- **My conclusion:**

For Teachers and Parents: Answer Key

Word bank sentence: Answers vary; check that the student uses reinstate to mean bringing back a rule that had been dropped.

1. The test centers were closed during the pandemic, so students could not take the test.
2. America.
3. Any two: grades, essays, activities, or recommendations.
4. Any two: grades kept rising until whole schools were bunched at the top of the scale; essays became something that could be coached on a huge scale; research some colleges cited found that scores predicted college performance better than inflated grades did; going test-optional had not made the students more varied by family income, as promised.
5. Legible means easy to read: a score means the same thing no matter where the student comes from, whether Seoul, a small town in Georgia, or a Connecticut boarding school. An office reading sixty thousand files needs at least one signal it can compare across all of them. Isaac says this describes how big systems actually behave; he does not mean the test is fair.

Side by side (sample answers): Korea: one big national exam, the Suneung, decides a lot; gets right that a hard number is the same hard number for everyone; can go wrong because one exam decides so much, which Koreans have argued about for a long time; a test is for measuring everyone the same way. Britain and IB: outside exams are the main measure; gets right that grades keep their meaning; when teachers had to give grades during the pandemic, grades went up so much that the exams came back (the article does not name a problem with the exams themselves); a test is for checking students from outside the school. America: went test-optional and judged students on grades, essays, activities, and recommendations, and now the top colleges require the test again; gets right that it tried to look at the whole student and aimed for fairness; went wrong because everything else became easier to buy or coach, and grades inflated; a test is for being legible, one signal that means the same thing everywhere and helps find talented students from unknown schools. My school: answers vary; check that the student describes how their school really measures students and judges it fairly.

Think deeper: Open answers. For the first, strong answers explain that a high score told colleges a student from a little-known school was talented; without a score, the college had nothing to go on, so that student could be overlooked. For the second, strong answers use Exhibit A (scores add information and predicted college performance better than inflated grades) and Exhibit B (score gaps follow family income, and coaching works) to show the test is useful but not perfectly fair.

Report: Look for a clear yes or no, two reasons taken from the article, a fair statement of the other side (for example, that scores follow family income and coaching works, or that without scores grades and essays became easier to buy), and a conclusion that matches the answer.