

Feb. 25, 2013

Dear Representatives of the Education Committee,

Thank you for taking the time to discuss and address the concerns and effects that high-stakes testing is having on our public education system. I am a teacher of 14 years both as a media specialist and a Language Arts teacher. I have taught pre-No Child Left Behind and through it. I have seen the damage it has caused to the vibrancy of our public education system, and high-stakes testing is the root of such a shift. In order to change for the better, we must end our use of high-stakes testing to determine the success of our children, teachers, and schools.

Tonight, I am working on writing lesson plans. It is "testing season" so to speak, and it is clearly affecting my desire to teach a well-thought out and relevant lesson to my students. Here's why: First of all, I am required to review the practice test with my students. How long should I do this? Some teachers spend 4-6 weeks of instructional time doing this. They are worried about how the state test in reading which is 50 random questions based on OAKS standards, but are out of context, will reflect not only on their teaching, but also their students and school. We are asked to give our kids pep talks to do their best and to let them know what their growth targets are to show success (and let me just say, those numbers are mysteriously formatted, make little sense but seem to be determined by which subgroups you are in (such as race, SPED, ELL) and our higher level kids are not asked to grow as much, and could in fact show it is okay to go backward according to the formula. Huh?

So I am trying to plan a lesson. My students need to write a personal narrative. This takes time. Time I thought I had, but I am worried about the pressures of the state test, so I wonder if I should also be spending weeks teaching to it: practice tests, review, and test taking strategies. I try to avoid it and just keep teaching my kids Common Core skills that I am now required to teach by my district---which do not match up with the OAKS test: a complete disconnect. I thought I had a great plan to have kids review and apply some narrative vocabulary with their paper, so I could revisit all of that and get a paper in before we lose 5 day of testing plus 2 or more days of test prep, but time is running out. We have early release days, activity days to reward and celebrate our students and their behavior, I want to get my kids into the school library to check out and learn some library skills since they haven't had them for four years due to budget cuts and the elementary library teachers were cut. I teach at a high-poverty and diverse school. I love my students and school, but my kids are so far behind in experiences and vocabulary and until this year, few even saw themselves as readers until they came into my classroom: this took time. Good teaching and learning takes time. Time to build relationships, time to learn the new standards, time to find out student abilities and see how much you have to build in to even get to grade level instruction. Time to review, learn from each other, and eventually become independent in proving one's skills and knowledge learned. Time.

So I am trying to plan a lesson: all my project-based learning ideas are falling by the wayside as I try to isolate skills needed to pass the state test because even though I have taught well and thoroughly, there is still much to do, and a bit of test fear has crept into my psyche. Even if I wanted to start a unit, it will be interrupted by the 5 days of testing and two or more days of practice, and then I have a week before Spring break to teach something that I can wrap up before vacation, because it just won't carry over after students have been gone for over a week. I have seen what a three-day weekend will do, let alone a week-long break. After spring break, we start our non-fiction, biography and research unit that takes up the rest of the school year. So my kids are being tested with three months of school left and non-fiction won't be addressed much because we traditionally teach it in the spring with their big rite of passage 7<sup>th</sup> grade project that they LOVE. I will touch on non-fiction text and hope my colleagues in Social Studies and Science have helped teach those skills, but in the end, I wonder why our society does not trust its teachers to assess on units taught in class that cover state standards with their authentic and relevant assessments? If we took a step back and asked how we would want to show our learning on what we know on things, my guess is that a random standardized test wouldn't be at the forefront. We need to find other ways to show students are learning, and it needs to be in context with their school units taught by their professional teacher: a portfolio of student work samples would be ideal as it can show quizzes, writing samples, and other assessments the teacher has created, and it can show the growth made throughout the year.

So back to my lesson planning....I could have my Advanced students do a debate with research so they can write a persuasive piece and a speech, but that will take at least two weeks, most likely longer, and I don't have access to computers for the amount of time I will need because I can only use the library computers and they are not always available. The two other labs will be set up for testing. Testing takes away precious time and resources to teach our students technology skills in an authentic way with project-based learning. Computers that could be used to do research projects, create multi-media presentations, and learn other important 21<sup>st</sup> Century information skills, are lost for months of the year. So, the cost is not just money: it is also access to resources. Also, it is expensive to purchase and implement the test., but there are also additional costs for districts as they have to purchase technology to support it. Our school just went the inexpensive route with some refurbished PC computers for two of our computer labs. We have had to hire more district technology people to support it as the Mac labs we had previously hardly ever had problems, and if we did have any, our library media specialist could easily handle it in house. In addition, the time it takes to now write up SPED, ELL and general education accommodations to have on file as proof of what students could have assistance with during the test is time-consuming, tedious, and shows a lack of trust in the process. In short, the costs for testing go far beyond the basic cost of the program to run it.

So back to my lessons...do I assign the paper? Do I really think we can do it? Maybe they will do it as homework? Based on past experience, this cannot be relied upon. Hmm...maybe booktalks so they can share their books with the class and get a speech grade? Maybe, but the test is looming. I will say that high-stakes testing creates a world of fear, stress, and disinterest at the same time. Teachers who normally would be excited to teach, worry about how the tests will reflect on them, and they start teaching to the test. Students click answers with out much thought because they are sick and tired of the test and how it fails to promote authentic learning. Collaboration among colleagues also disintegrates as teachers look out for their own teaching and students because in the end it all comes down to five days in March. Kids could be sick, hungry, dealing with stress at home, or absent a lot. All of this could also affect the test, but instead of putting resources in to help these students with such issues, and instead of giving schools the resources to have time to collaborate, plan and analyze their teaching and students, the state wants to fund and value high-stakes testing to prove success or failure. There are too many variables with our humans to put so much value in the tests. This is detrimental to the success and health of our students, teachers, and schools. This must change. We must find a better way.

Thank you for your time, I have to finally make some decisions about my lesson plans: do I want to give them or authentic learning or do I want to review test-taking skills? Can I do both? What would inspire you? What would you want for your children?

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