

## STANDARDIZED TESTING FAILS TO MAKE THE GRADE

By Don Gilman

Recently, I've been hearing from a lot of very frustrated teachers. These are teachers whom I greatly respect. They are at the top of their industry, and consistently receive high marks from parents, administrators, and the kids they teach. So what's causing their frustration?

Standardized testing, or, more specifically, being forced to "teach to the test." One teacher lamented that, "Test preparation begins on the first day of class, and continues throughout the rest of the year." In California, how well a school performs on these standardized tests is published in newspapers, along with a ranking of the local schools, for everyone to see. In Florida, each school earns a "grade" based in large part on results from standardized testing. Schools who receive an "A" get extra state funding. Schools who receive an "F" have one year to improve, or else the state starts offering vouchers to parents so their kids can attend private schools.

Obviously, the pressure on teachers and administrators is enormous. But is "teaching to the test" really the best method to help kids learn? Many studies over the years have shown that different children learn in different ways (as any parent of more than one child can confirm!). Some learn best by hearing the information, some by writing it down, some by seeing it on the blackboard, whiteboard, overhead projector, or computer screen, and some learn best by a combination of these, and other, methods. By teaching to the test, educators are given little leeway to accommodate each child's individual learning style. Add to that the fact that many standardized tests largely measure only how well a child can memorize facts, and you are starting to see a recipe for disaster.

One recent college graduate in Michigan had received his teaching credential and was looking forward to his first interview and his first job. As he was waiting outside the room where he was to be interviewed, he looked over his portfolio, reviewing his teaching philosophy, and mentally listing some creative ways to help the kids learn the material. As his name was called, and he entered the interview room, he was genuinely excited. But when he exited the interview room, he was frustrated and seriously questioning whether he wanted to abandon his dream of teaching altogether. Instead of being asked about his teaching philosophy or how he planned on adapting lesson plans to each child's unique learning style, he was peppered with questions asking him how familiar he was with the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test, and how he planned on making sure his students scored well on the specific sections of the exam. It became clear to him that the students in the classroom were secondary to how well they performed on the standardized test.

When I was growing up, there were students in my classes who were especially skilled at taking tests. I'm not sure how they did it, since often they weren't the most academically gifted students in the class, and yet they consistently did phenomenally well on test day. Studies over the years have shown that some of the brightest individuals in America who have gone on to incredible success have done very poorly on standardized tests.

Asa Hilliard, III, of Georgia State University, states in the *Journal of Teacher Education*, "The evidence is missing for high-stakes standardized testing of either intelligence or achievement as a reform tool, a tool for producing higher student achievement." He goes on to say, "There is no doubt that teachers can become powerful agents in raising the academic performance of children to high levels, regardless of common impediments such as poverty, bilingualism, and so forth. With the extreme and almost

exclusive focus on high-stakes testing, we lose the opportunity to support valid staff development that would make all our teachers powerful.”

It would be one thing if school administrators were focusing so much on standardized testing because they firmly believed in the educational value for the students. Instead, the focus on testing is based on assuring their school’s financial survival, since significant levels of funding are tied to how well the school performs. Administrators rightfully fear that they will lose resources and perhaps even be shut down if their school is not deemed “proficient.” And on the subject of funding, just imagine what teachers could do with the billions of dollars that have been spent on preparing for and administering these standardized tests.

So what can we do about this? The first thing to realize is that we have the power. In many states, we, as parents, can opt to have our child not take the standardized tests. We can organize meetings between parents, teachers, administrators, and our elected officials to brainstorm real techniques for effective education of our children. And we can demand that our state produce a cost/benefit analysis for compliance with the No Child Left Behind legislation that mandates standardized testing. It’s time to stand up and take back our educational system...for the sake of our children!