

This article was written by Lillie Jessie as a school board member. Ms. Jessie is also the CEO/President of High Ex. learning.

Testing in Our Schools...Don't Throw the Baby Out with the Bathwater

How many times have you heard the following from teachers and now parents and State Legislators: "There is too much testing...just let them teach!" I hear this mantra as a consultant and as a member of the school board. Imaging a surgeon saying, "I don't have time to run tests, just let me cut!" The public would not think of telling surgeons what to do but nor would surgeons consider conducting surgery without diagnostic data. Unfortunately, there is some truth in what teachers are saying because, in some instances, we have become what I call "Data Collectors!" I have seen this pattern in my national travels as a consultant and during my tenure in this school systems. Sometimes, because of the intense accountability in our profession we collect data for no other reason than to showcase it for central office staff, which then presents it to superintendents and school boards for publication. Little or nothing changes in some classrooms but the amount of data, its intensity, and dazzling graphic displays are, confusing and downright overwhelming to the average parent and the some of the teachers who produce it. Many parents of low achieving students lack what John Hattie calls the "Language of School." They do not know how to advocate for their child. In many instances they blame the child and/or accept his failure as an indication of low ability. The patient of a of a failed surgery on the other hand would be outraged and file action if a surgery went wrong and it was evident the diagnostic testing information was only collected, never used and instead sent to a hospital administrator's office. On the other hand when some teachers say that it is a "waste" of time, it is just that, if the only purpose for giving it is to fulfill a requirement or the test given does not align with instruction in their classroom.

One of my colleagues, Steve Edwards, responded to a teacher's concern that there is too much testing said, "One test is too much if it does not change your practices." The real question is not how many tests are used. The question is whether we are using the "right" test for the 'right' purpose. The right test is one that makes teaching more precise, reduce teacher workload and improve student learning. The latter has and should be the goal of all school divisions.

Accountability for student learning verses teaching (I taught it, he just did not get it) is alive and well and will prevail. Those who spout the phrase "just let teachers teach" should remind themselves that no industry allows its employees to work without some type of accountability and/or supervision. I am reminded of the *I Love Lucy* episode where she and Ethel were trying to wrap all of the chocolate bon-bons on a conveyor belt. Eventually the two were not able to hide, eat or throw away enough and were relieved of their position. We are not talking about chocolates in this profession. We are talking about changing the lives of students and developing their giftedness. I have had the wonderful experience of working with hundreds of teachers. I was amazed at the level of giftedness and insight they had when given the opportunity to showcase their talents. There were times that the goals set for student learning by my staff was so high that it was just plain scary. When I displayed concern that a 100% goal was too high, they responded, "We may not make it but we will be in the ball park," and they were. They

presented data in such a professional manner. They came to the data room and answered the four critical questions of a Professional Learning Community (in the Strategic Plan of our school system.

1. What is that we want students to learn (guaranteed and viable curriculum)?
2. How will we know when they have learned it (on-going assessment)?
3. What will we do if they do not learn it (focus of learning not what was taught)?
4. What will we do if they already know it?

Another argument I have heard over the years is that we are “teaching to the test!” One has to remind themselves when they prepare for a written drivers test that they want some knowledge of how the test works and how it is scored. I advocate teachers, parents and students knowing how the test is going to be measured, nature of the content and the passing rate requirements (Go to Virginia Department of Education). Our problem, however, is our present test content does not always measure what will be required in order for our children to compete on a global level. That requirement is the ability to think, synthesize information, and communicate in a succinct and meaningful manner and with the ultimate goal of being creative in an ever and quickly changing world. As you know the United States is not keeping pace with the international community. Keep in mind, our children and grandchildren will enter a global workforce that we cannot begin to imagine. As I watch us compete in the Winter Olympics I am not only amazed at the physical competitiveness but the high level of thinking and design that went into the pre-game show. Children of the future will no longer look at a skyscraper and think only of its beauty. Instead they will ask themselves these questions...how was this designed conceived? What was the picture in the head of the architect? How were the dimensions conceived? This type of thinking cannot be measured in a fill in the blank testing format. In other words, the meta-cognitive or “thinking about your thinking” is the ‘right’ testing environment referred to earlier. In order to answer the four critical questions above teachers will have to use some type of ongoing assessment that allows students who have learned how to read at a higher level, move on to the next level and those who have not receive the support they need.

Testing for testing sake is a waste of time but testing that provides insight into how and what students need to learn and how they are responding in the learning environment is critical.

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