

## Teaching to the Test vs Teaching How the Test Works

By

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It's that time again! Your child is now ready for what for many is one of those "Teaching to the test" exams, also known as Standards of Learning (SOL) tests. Many of you may be a part of the crowd participating in the "Too many tests" mantra. By now most of you know that the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) has reduced the number of tests required and have also increased the level of rigor on tests. This article is written with a different mantra. That mantra is "From the Institute of C.S. or common sense." Some of you may have read that my parents were not educated in the sense of obtaining a high school diploma but my father often reminded me not to let my degree from Northwestern University interfere with my common sense. We were watching skiing on television during one of my visits and I pointed out what a phenomenon flying off a ski slope was. His exact words were "Child do you believe that people can fly through the air?" By his tone I knew my answer had to be "No daddy." His reply was "Good because I thought you done gone off to college and lost your common sense." I still smile and lament when I think that his horizons were so limited that he honestly did not believe "people could fly in the air," but I never forgot his warning of never lose your common sense. During my tenure as an educator I am known for reminding teachers that you can have a B.S. or M.S. but never lose your C.S. A frequent phrase was, "Common Sense dictates..." That type of thinking has never let me down. This article outlines some "Common sense strategies for students and parents involved in the testing cycle.

This article is not meant to interfere with the wonderful work that teachers do in preparing students for the SOLs; however, it always amazes me that students and sometimes teachers take or administer tests without knowing what the criteria for passing is, how the test works or share that with students. Lets run a quick test. If you are the parent or grandparent of a student taking the SOLs asks first ask him or her what is a passing score for the test? Follow up with the next questions which is how many answers do you need to get right in order to obtain that score? The next and final question is it timed or not? For the most part, we know more about what is required to pass a driver's license test than we do about an exam that has far more important implications. If you were driving to New York you would first look at a map to determine your exact final destination and the quickest and safest route. Yet for some students their only strategy is what I call the "Hoping strategy." As educators, especially in middle and high schools we sometimes blame the students saying, "They have to be more responsible for their learning." Part of what we need to teach our students is how to be more strategic when taking any test, or how to navigate a test. These are life skills that will enhance his ability to problem-solve.

Yes, we students to be life-long learners and they will take tests of some sort the rest of their lives. Amy Green and Melton Glennon remind us that standardized reading tests are a genre (category) not a mystery. In other words it is probably not going to be fun reading. Tests have their own vocabulary. In all tests, students must know what the central idea is. They must ask themselves the question “what is this mainly about? They must be able to navigate the text and determine what is most important and eliminate what is not. In other words, they must be able to “Think” while reading.

Now on to the answer to the three simple, must know answer questions.

1. What is a passing score? Most of this information is available to parents on VDOE website. Students whose goal is passing must score at least 400 on all of the tests. Students having a goal of “Pass Advance” must score at the 500 level. A score of 600 is a perfect score.
2. How many answers do you need correct in order to obtain the score? The second question is the most important. This information is also on the VDOE website. Go to Virginia Standards of Learning and do a search for “Cut Scores.” Information for every subject and grade level is available for public use. This should be a part of a student’s roadmap. For example, in the reading category for third grade reading you need to answer at least 25 of the 40 items correctly to achieve a passing score of 400. If the goal is 500 or Pass/Advanced 35 of the 40 items must be correct. Some tests will have an additional ten field items that will not count. Since we do not know which ones are field items, those ten must be added. How do parents use this information...ask your child tell you how many he thinks he got correct. If they count they will be able to tell you. This is a very simple C.S. strategy. I call it the “Counting strategy.” I repeat, children cannot be expected to be “responsible for their own learning when they do not know what a passing score is. This is a rudimentary fact taught in all sports, yet sometimes we allow students to “Take tests in the dark.”
3. Is the test timed is the third question? The SOLs are not. I have seen students take a full day when they learned the importance of taking their time. You may be surprised to learn that the most frequent students that I observed to be scanners and they thought “This is easy...I want to be the first to finish”, are the honor and/gifted kids. They have to know that “Smart kids” re-read their answers. Teaching students this skill is as important as teaching the information. It was always frustrating for me when I knew students had the ability to perform at a higher level but were in the “I am first to finish and I am done mode,”

Thinking while reading is the most important strategy we can teach students. Thinking about what how to navigate a timed test (do the easy ones first) verses an untimed combined with no penalties for wrong answer test are two different genres. On the latter, students need to know that leaving blanks is not in their best interest. Remembering my fathers admonition I remind parents to do the following: Before your child goes to school on test day

remind him to “not leave blanks on SOLs” and to confirm that he or she did not when they returned home.

We say students should be “responsible for their own learning” but that will not happen if we have not provided them with support and strategies. This weekend we had visitors to my home and the child, a kindergartner, was told to tie up his shoe laces. It was obvious that his mom had demonstrated this skill several times before he mastered it. What would have happened if she had instead said “You need to be more responsible for tying your shoes” without providing guidance. She did not because “Common-sense would dictate” prior modeling. This article is dedicated to my dad who possessed a higher level of literacy than any degree could have given to him.