

## Five Parallels to Know About SOLs so Child Won't be Testing in the Dark

I have written about testing before but wanted to provide what I hope is useful information as we are upon the wonderful season of mandated testing. I guess by now that most of you know that I live by analogies. Question, "What does parallel parking have to do with Standards of Learning Testing? Well here goes. As you know by now I came to this county in the early seventies by way of Chicago where my work with special needs students began. Each morning I would begin my daily commute to work with the help of a newspaper for reading during this one and a half hour commute. Few of us living in apartments had cars because finding parking spaces was close to impossible. Thus, I did not possess a car license. Early days in the Woodbridge area required an ability to parallel park. I knew to metrics had to be mastered if I wanted a driver's license, passing the written exam and successfully parallel parking. The first was easy because I studied the manual and passed with flying colors. The second I thought would be easy but my rubric and preparation was a "fill in the blank" technique.

First and foremost my husband knew he should not teach me how to drive. My driver's instructor gave me the following step by step instruction. "Line your car up with this crack in the sidewalk...back up while cutting your wheel hard to the left and then hard to the right and you will be in the space." We practiced at the test site several times and it seemed very easy. On test day I followed the instruction, jumped out of my car only to find that I was not even close to the space outlined on the pavement. I failed the test and was told I could re-take it. My driving instructor and I revisited the site. I walked him through what happened. When I showed him how I lined my car with the crack in the side walked he slapped his forehead in sheer disbelief and said "That was the wrong crack!" I took the test a second time, lined up with the right crack and passed. The problem, to this day I continue to have problems parallel parking because I was taught at a very surface level.

Parallel Parking Lesson 1 -Depth of the updated SOL: The new SOLs and Common Core standards will require your child to think beyond the "look for the crack" or fill in the blank level. They will need to solve multi-step problems. Years ago, I had an Indiana Professor, Dr. Roger Farr, conduct a county-wide workshop on the value of "Think-Alouds" where you read a passage from a fiction text and stop, point to a child at random and ask "What are you thinking?" You instructed them at the beginning that it was okay to say "Nothing!" Another question related to prediction, "What do you think will happen next?" Simply stated all tests are about the "Picture" in a person's head" when they read text. Our picture has everything to do with our ability to analyze text, our skills as a reader and our vocabulary we bring to the text. So another question was "What does that remind you of?" I am sure when you read my story at the beginning of this article, it reminded you of something in your past experience.

Parallel Parking Lesson 2- Expedited Retakes: As many of you know, I have the honor of being on the Governor's SOL Innovation Committee. One of our

recommendations was that students at the elementary and middle school levels be allowed to retake key content area tests if they failed but were in reach of passing or have extenuating circumstances. Your school will provide you with more detail later. High school students have always had this option. Some may say this is “dumbing down the test.” I contend that it is just like my being given an opportunity parallel park a second time.

Parallel Parking Lesson 3- Authentic Testing; The SOL Innovation Committee and Testing is psychometrics are now looking at what I called more “Performance-based” assessment and testing not based on seat time. In other words we know that taking having to actually parallel park makes more sense than a written test. Some students are better using visual models to demonstrate their skills. I see it at the robotic competitions all of the time. Again, thinking at the highest level is the goal. Don’t forget, I aced the written test but had no idea how to actually park. We are relooking at seat time because we know that some students may be ready to take the test early and better use their time in an elective and/or dual enrollment (college) course. Please not more than sixty percent of the SOLs require students to read non-fiction text.

Parallel Parking Lesson 4- Teaching To the test: How many times have I heard that? What would have happened if I did not have a driver’s manual or if my instructor spent all of my time teaching me how to pull into a parking space. Teaching has to be “aligned” with the test. I had a teacher who came to me from another country where the structure of government was a part of the third grade curriculum. Each week during my tenure at Vaughan Elementary, teachers came to the data room and shared their data. They once asked me what my favorite type of graph was and my response was “Tall.” That became the standard joke because they knew that they could share “Short” graphs as long as we knew why they were short and had a plan of intervention in mind. There were real problems is an individual’s graph was “short” for a long period of time. I knew there was a problem but the teachers at her grade level revealed what was going on upon her resignation and return to her country. They said she came to the planning meeting, agreed to teach the same objectives as others at the grade level but behind closed doors she was teaching the three branches of government to her students. She resigned saying, “I am going home to my country where I am free to teach whatever I want....there is too much emphasis of testing in this school.”

You will receive a great deal of information from your school but visit the Virginia Department of Education’s SOL website for information about the content of the SOL for each grade level, and the weight given (SOL Blue Prints). A listing and information about each objective is also available.

Parallel Parking Lesson 5- Know the Rubric for Passing- I was very clear on the rubric. I knew that my car had to be in that yellow square painted on the pavement. Knowing that helped but my heart still skips a beat whenever I have to parallel park. I will drive around forever trying to avoid that open space. My husband breathes

heavily when he is in the car because thinks I am still looking for that crack in the pavement.

A score of four hundred is required for students to pass. There are usually about 50 to 60 items on each test. These are called scaled scores. There is a place on the website called "Cut Score." This lists every SOL test and how many items you need in order to pass, score at the pass advance level (500) or achieve a perfect score (600). For example in order for your child to obtain pass advance in third grade reading he or she has to get 23 of the 35 test items correct. There are sometimes ten "Field items" on the test. These are not noted but tested. That may result in 45 items instead of 35. Talk to your child's teacher. She would know.

Time vs Untimed Tests- The SOLs are not timed so remind your child not to rush. Unlike some tests, wrong answers do not count against you but your child needs to avoid wild guessing. I have strategies that I used when I was a principal to use this principle to our advantage but I will not share that because it may contradict what your child is being told by his teacher.

Finally, the mantra "There are too many tests!" We are eliminating some tests at the State level but at the end of the day, life is about passing tests. Imaging having a doctor who has not passed the certification requirements, or a lawyer who has not passed the bar. I wrote in an earlier about throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I always want to know the qualifications of any person providing a service. I leave you with a quote from a former teacher in my school that was published in my anthology, *Teaching in the dark*"

"I could never go back to teaching without  
the use of data. Teaching without data would  
be like *getting dressed in the dark*"  
Myesha Taylor-Pryor, first grade teacher 2008

Testing students without the knowledge of what is expected or conducting instruction that are not aligned with the end of the year is like "getting dressed in the dark." Most importantly, it is so unfair to expect students to look for "cracks in the sidewalk" instead of looking for what is inside their reservoir of knowledge. Reminder: ALL means ALL student have a right to learn at high levels.