

Perils of Current Testing Mandates

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Recently, school districts, state education authorities, and the federal Department of Education have promulgated rules and procedures greatly increasing the frequency of student testing in the schools of America. The amount of time used to prepare for such testing and the testing itself occupies an alarming proportion of class time for teachers and students. This article posits the belief that such testing is counterproductive due to its frequency, content and question style, and stress it places on students and teachers. It is apparent that results are being used by many politicians eager to be seen as “education friendly” to voters in scurrilous ways and that advancing students’ learning is not being achieved as advertised.

President George W. Bush’s “No child left behind” program now mandated across the nation was heralded as a means to provably and measurably improve student academic performance and to increase student retention rates. This program is modeled after Dr. Ron Paige’s program when he headed Houston’s, Texas Education Department. The program looked promising as Mr. Bush became President; however, soon thereafter, complaints about the program from teachers, students, and parents began to surface. Complaints centered about matters of lack of teacher preparation in administering and evaluating the tests; the enormous time such test preparation and administration took away from class instruction; and students exhibiting debilitating evidence of testing fatigue.

In 2004-2005, evidence of testing fraud by administrators and teachers in order to achieve “satisfactory” or better results is emerging. Teachers fabricating results, changing test pages, and inappropriately prompting students during test taking; school administrators making (and in many cases being enabled by state and federal rules) decisions as to what constitutes student drop outs, failure, and exemptions from such testing in such ways as to advantageously and outrageously manipulate test achievement records for individual students, schools, and school system advantage. Some of these manipulating measures border on, if not actually are, criminal. One school district held back 40% of its 3rd grade students so it would not have to give these low achievers the important 4th grade achievement tests. Some students have been held back more than one year even though they achieved high class grades over the year.¹ Retention rates were manipulated by creatively defining jailed students as non-dropouts.² Many

other students with marginal learning disabilities were characterized as exempt from regular testing and therefore were not included in testing statistics thus making a class or school seem better prepared than reality suggests.³

The troubling aspects of excessive class time spent on tests, the increased stress to teachers and students, the fact that many teachers concentrate on teaching the test rather than on material classically assumed to be the proper substance of class time, and the corrupt teacher, school, and system practices now being reported are alarming enough; but there is an even more alarming feature of this mandated over testing: it is highly questionable in terms of educational validity.

Mandated tests are all similar – not exactly alike – in that they are objective in form; mostly multiple choice, true-false, and fill in the blank in style; and tightly times in administration. For each item, there is a single correct response; no deviation is allowed or expected. Students are expected to recall previously encountered facts or to recall encountered facts from a list. This is **not** what life after school is like and what and how we teach and students learn in class has to have greater relationship to life if we are to produce graduates capable and eager to compete in an ever more competitive world. Test timing has caused many students to fail or to do more poorly as well as raise stress levels. Not everyone works at the same speed; some flexibility reflects the real world.

Many needed classroom learning strategies, values, and skills do not lend themselves to objective paper and pencil normative tests. Students need to learn good listening skills; These include abilities to pay attention, organize data, being able and willing to paraphrase, ask good questions, summarize and evaluate what is digested, and articulate clearly, directly, and cogently what students are thinking.⁴ Students need to be taught and allowed to demonstrate in and out of class sharpened critical thinking skills. These include evaluating what is presented to them; being appropriately skeptical, searching for deeper meaning than many initially superficial presentations; seeking additional supporting or invalidating sources, and testing out ideas.⁵ Sitting silently taking tests that have little relevance to future life questions the ethicality of such practice. Silent, solo activity is neither formative nor useful.⁶ Mass testing does not instruct students in cognitive complexity, gaining, appreciating, and using multiple approaches to desired ends. We can not afford to teach our young that all questions/ problems have answers; that only one

answer resolves all questions; nor that answers come mainly from memorizing or recognizing “right answers” from a provided list.

Testing is valuable and needs to be supported and used. Guiding students to see, use, and enjoy the connections between assigned readings, class discussions of readings and student observations and experiences, and subsequent testing is vital as this is closer to real life expectations and demands later in life.⁷ This obviously takes greater class time than objective tests but they are far more useful and provide genuine knowledge and skills needed later in life.

Students also need greater instruction in and role modeling of intellectual honesty. Far too many students have little appreciation for and have received too little discussion about honesty.⁸ Honesty is a value, a practice, and a mandate for successful living. Some people believe it is inappropriate to teach values like honesty in school; that such instruction belongs at home or in church. Reality tells that such is not the case for far too many children and a paucity of values education is a potent problem. With care, supervision, and openness, some values belong in the classroom.⁹

Students need to be taught how to work together to solve problems. Group or team skills and values are called for in an ever increasing number of vocations and professions. Group techniques, strategies and tactics, leadership, building cohesion and cooperation, dealing with compromise, and reporting group results are necessary ingredients for later success and need to be taught and experienced in school.¹⁰

Current mandated testing and much contemporary classroom testing is inadequate for the genuine needs of tomorrow’s citizens. Mandated testing is weak on validity, subject to corruption, causing excessive teacher and student stress, and usurps time needed for more dynamic and essential instruction for students’ futures.

¹ These facts were reported in a CNN special on High Risk Testing; 7 May, 2005.

² CNN report, 7 May 2005.

³ CNN report, 7 May 2005.

⁴ See Ken Petress. (1999). Listening: A Vital Skill. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 26 (4): 261-262.

⁵ See Ken Petress. (2004). Critical Thinking: An Extended Definition. *Education*, 124 (3): 461-466.

⁶ See Ken Petress. (2001). The Ethics of Classroom Silence. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 28 (2): 104-107.

⁷ (2003). The Nexus Between Assigned Class Readings, Analysis, Discussions, and Testing. *Reading Improvement*, 40 (2): 29-32.

⁸ Ken Petress. (2003). Academic Dishonesty: A Plague On Our Profession. *Education*, 123 (3): 624-627.

⁹ Arthur J. Schwartz. (2000, June 9). It's Not Too Late to Teach College Students About Values. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, A68.

¹⁰ Ken Petress. (2004). The Benefits of Group Study. *Education*. 124 (4): 587-589.