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Blind, severely disabled boy forced to take standardized test

By Marion Brady

Remember Rick Roach? He’s the Orange County, Florida, school board member I wrote on The Answer Sheet a while ago. Upset by the fact that thousands of kids in Orange County with excellent academic records were failing Florida’s annual high-stakes test and suffering dire consequences, he took a test[†] similar to the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

He squeaked by the reading portion with a grade of 62, but failed the math section, this despite the fact that he has two masters degrees, a successful career behind him, and is in his third four-year term on the county school board that has responsibility for overseeing the ninth-largest school system in America and a \$2.5 billion budget.

In the months since he took the test, he’s talked to thousands—students, parents, reading teachers, principals, members of business and professional organizations, testing experts, consultants, radio, television, and print reporters, and others—not just in Florida but nationwide. His message: Many high-achieving middle and high school kids score poorly on the tests. Except for their test scores, they are making excellent grades in advanced placement, honors, and other accelerated classes. They can demonstrate on the spot that they can read college-age material fluently and explain without difficulty what they’ve just read. Obviously, there’s something seriously wrong—not with the kids but with the tests, the testing procedures, or the scoring methodologies.



Rick called me a few days ago. He had, he said, been contacted by Linda Stewart, a member of the Florida legislature. She was looking into a constituent’s school-related complaint, and wondered if Rick would check the matter out for her.

The constituent is an administrator in a special school that serves the educational needs of kids who for one reason or another can’t be served by the county’s regular public schools. The school, however, is under school board jurisdiction and therefore subject to the same rules and regulations as all others.

* See http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/revealed-school-board-member-who-took-standardized-test/2011/12/06/gIQAbIcxZO_blog.html

† http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/when-an-adult-took-standardized-tests-forced-on-kids/2011/12/05/gIQApTDuUO_blog.html

One of those regulations is that every kid has to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in order for the school to receive state support. That creates a problem, the school administrator tells Stewart. The problem: Michael. He has a disability.

Contacted, state officials cite state statutes. Michael has no options. He has to take the test.

Michael is nine years old. Born prematurely, he weighed four pounds. He has a brain stem but, according to doctors, most of his brain is missing.

No problem, says the state. An alternative version will be sent—pictures that Michael can describe.

Unfortunately, Michael is blind.

No problem, says the State. There's a Braille version.

Michael doesn't know Braille, and is unlikely to ever be able to learn it.

Amanda, Michael's teacher, is frustrated. She really cares about the kids she teaches, and resists deliberately setting them up to fail. She also knows that Florida's legislature, ignoring the research, has jumped on the merit pay bandwagon, which requires that teachers evaluated in large part by the standardized test scores of their students. So Michael's test score—a zero—and the scores of other disabled kids for whom she's responsible, can set her up for a poor review or even get her fired.

This isn't an isolated case.

This is the inevitable result of reforms being led by policymakers—pressured by leaders of business and industry—to do exactly the wrong thing. They try to micromanage classrooms, claiming that teacher incompetence and irresponsibility make intervention necessary. Teachers need to be told exactly what to teach, the policymakers say, and their performance must be constantly monitored to make sure they're following orders.

Amanda, Orange County's teacher for the hospitalized and homebound, is, by training, experience, temperament, and past performance, in a far better position than anybody else to make decisions about her students' capabilities. But so effective has been the propaganda campaign to convince the general public that teachers can't be trusted, and so serious are the consequences for not adhering to policies and procedures imposed from above, every situation like Michael's triggers a lengthy procedure of committee meetings, second and third opinions, and letter exchanges. Then, if the state Department of Education finally gives in and grants a waiver, it's ordinarily for only one year.

The mother of another of Amanda's students showed Rick the extensive paper trail she'd traveled to exempt her son from testing. In one of the letters to state education officials, she wrote:

...Through intensive physical, occupational, and speech therapy, along with meticulous efforts of his Hospital/Homebound teachers for the past seven years, Ethan has achieved very limited and rudimentary communication skills. He has a very slight thumb lift with his left hand to indicate 'yes' or 'no.'

Ethan has been required to take the Florida Alternate Assessment for the past two years, and in addition to the questions being entirely inappropriate for his level of cognition (he cannot comprehend questions about math, staplers, clocks, shoes, or even food) there is no way to accurately assess his understanding of the material being presented... Additionally, the testing procedure is extremely physically taxing for him, requiring him to sit in his wheelchair for long periods of time and focus on black and white pictures which are difficult for him to perceive at best... After the testing sessions, he is physically exhausted and often develops pressure sores from sitting in his wheelchair. He also has developed respiratory infections from fluid pooling in his lungs from the long testing sessions.

Ethan's mother even made a trip to Tallahassee to make her case. She managed to get a waiver, but it's only good for this year. The state is relentless in its determination to put Michael and Ethan on course for college and career.

Rick told me he'd hoped that because a state representative had asked for his involvement, there was a chance the law would be rewritten and inject some common sense into testing procedures.

Fat chance of that, given the money and power behind the drive to use standardized tests as clubs to centralize and privatize America's public schools.

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