

The complete list of problems with high-stakes standardized tests

By Marion Brady

In 1949, I was a self-employed trucker, buying and hauling timber for shoring up the roofs of coal mines in West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

A very long United Mine Workers strike put me out of the trucking business. Not having exhausted all the GI Bill benefits due me from a stint in the U.S. Navy, I went back to college, jumped through the necessary certification hoops, and started teaching in 1952 at the high school level.

A few days ago, I went to a reunion of the surviving members of a class that picked up their diplomas 50 years ago, in 1961. They were a smart bunch of kids. The work of a couple of them would be familiar to millions of Americans.

Not surprisingly, a few became teachers. Without exception, those who talked to me at the reunion had no regrets. But also without exception, none of them would now encourage anyone to enter the field. Reason Number One: Standardized, machine-scored, high-stakes tests.

If that comes as a surprise, credit corporate America’s successful promotion of the idea that test scores say something important. Opposition to the present orgy of testing is now wrongly interpreted as unwillingness to be held accountable.

For those who buy that fiction, a list of some of the real reasons for educator opposition may be helpful.

Teachers (at least the ones the public should hope their taxes are supporting) oppose the tests because they focus so narrowly on reading and math that the young are learning to hate reading, math, and school; because they measure only “low level” thinking processes; because they put the wrong people — test manufacturers — in charge of American education; because they allow pass-fail rates to be manipulated by officials for political purposes; because test items simplify and trivialize learning.

Teachers oppose the tests because they provide minimal to no useful feedback; are keyed to a deeply flawed curriculum adopted in 1893; lead to neglect of physical conditioning, music, art, and other, non-verbal ways of learning; unfairly advantage those who can afford test prep; hide problems created by margin-of-error computations in scoring; penalize test-takers who think in non-standard ways.

Teachers oppose the tests because they radically limit their ability to adapt to learner differences; encourage use of threats, bribes, and other extrinsic motivators; wrongly assume that what the young will need to know in the future is already known; emphasize minimum achievement to the neglect of maximum performance; create unreasonable pressures to cheat.

Teachers oppose the tests because they reduce teacher creativity and the appeal of teaching as a profession; are culturally biased; have no “success in life” predictive power; lead to the neglect of the best and worst students as resources are channeled to lift marginal kids above pass-fail “cut lines;” are open to massive scoring errors with life-changing consequences.

Teachers oppose the tests because they’re at odds with deep-seated American values about individual differences and worth; undermine a fundamental democratic principle that those closest to and therefore most knowledgeable about problems are best positioned to deal with them; dump major public money into corporate coffers instead of classrooms.

I, a retired teacher beyond the reach of today’s “reformers,” oppose the tests for those reasons, and for the psychological damage they do to kids not yet able to cope. But my particular, personal beef is that the tests (and the Common Core State Standards on which they’re based) are blocking policymaker consideration of what I believe to be the most promising educational innovation in the last century — the use of general systems theory as it developed during World War II as a tool for reshaping and radically simplifying the “core curriculum.”

If you think that even a couple of those 25 reasons why educators oppose standardized tests are valid, consider getting behind what ought to be an option for every child’s parent or guardian — the right to say, without being pressured or penalized by state or local authority, “Do not subject my child to any test that doesn’t provide useful, same-day or next-day information about performance.”

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