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One Mother's Story: How Overemphasis on Standardized Tests Caused Her 9-Year-Old to Try to Hang Himself

By *Marion Brady* ^[1] / *AlterNet* ^[2]
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"...I received a note from my son's teacher telling me he'd failed the FCAT [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test] by one point. The note said he'd have to take a reading class over the summer and retest...We weren't alarmed as he only had to score one more point to be promoted..."

"...a few weeks later his teacher called. [My son] had failed the test, again by ONE point!"

"...I didn't tell him, but the next day [he] told me he knew he'd failed because if he had passed we'd have been told by the school and be celebrating. I lied—told him it takes several days and we'd know soon, but he insisted he'd failed."

"It was dinner time. I called down the hall and asked what he wanted to drink with dinner. No response. I figured he was watching television in his room and hadn't heard. A few moments later I called again. Again, no response."

"I can't tell you what it was that came over me, just that it was a sick feeling. I threw the hot pads I had in my hands on the counter and ran down the hall to [his] room, banged on the door and called his name. No response. I threw the door open. There was my perfect, nine-year-old freckled son with a belt around his neck hanging from a post on his bunk bed. His eyes were blank, his lips blue, his face emotionless. I don't know how I had the strength to hoist him up and get the belt off but I did, then collapsed on the floor and held [him] as close to my heart as possible. There were no words. He didn't speak and for the life of me I couldn't either. I was physically unable to form words. I shook as I held him and felt his heart racing."

“I’d saved [him]! No, not really... I saved him physically, but mentally he was gone...The next 18 months were terrible. It took him six months to make eye contact with me. He secluded himself from friends and family. He didn’t laugh for almost a year...”

Her son had to repeat the third grade. That happened five years ago, and she says the damage continues: *“Currently, [he] could be driving with a learner’s permit but he refuses. Why? Because ‘eighth grade kids don’t drive.’ If new friends saw him they’d know he’d failed a grade... Retention is repetitive and lasts a lifetime. It’s never far from his mind, just as seeing him blue and hanging from his bunk bed sticks in mine.”*

For years, this story was a family secret. A mutual acquaintance, knowing from my Knight-Ridder/Tribune columns that I had repeatedly attacked the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test not just as a waste of time, money and human potential, but as child abuse, gave this mother my email address and suggested she write me. I met with the mother and child personally and can vouch for the fact that they do indeed exist.

If failing to reach the pass-fail cut score by just one point wasn’t within every standardized test’s margin of error; if research hadn’t established that for the young, retention in grade is as traumatic as fear of going blind or of a parent dying; if standardized tests provided timely, useful feedback that helped teachers decide what to do next; if billions of dollars that America’s chronically underfunded public schools need weren’t being diverted to the standardized testing industry and charter promotion; if a generation of test-and-punish schooling had moved the performance needle even a little; if today’s sneaky, corporately driven education “reform” effort wasn’t driven by blind faith in market ideology and an attempt to privatize public schooling; if test manufacturers didn’t publish guidelines for dealing with vomiting, pants-wetting and other evidences of test-taker trauma; if the Finns hadn’t demonstrated conclusively that fear-free schools, cooperation rather than competition, free play, a recess every hour in elementary school, and that letting educators alone could produce world-class test-takers—if, if, if—then I might cut business leaders and politicians responsible for the America’s current education train wreck a little slack.

But all of the above are demonstrably true. And yet we keep subjecting children to the same dangerous nonsense, year after year.

I’ve no doubt that at least some reformers sincerely believe that America’s schools should be privatized, that educators are unduly attached to the status quo, that unions are a serious problem, and that teachers resist change and must be pressured to perform. I’m sure some are sincere in their belief that the Common Core State Standards actually identify core knowledge, that standardized tests can evaluate complex thought processes, that the reforms they’re pushing, although painful, are essential and right, and that teachers can’t be trusted to judge learner performance.

But willful ignorance from an unwillingness to talk to experienced educators is unacceptable.

Given the money and power behind current corporately driven education policy, few tools for resisting are available. Of those tools, refusal to go along is both the moral and most effective choice. Thoughtful, caring parents won't be bullied by test manufacturer propaganda or threats from those in Washington or state capitols who cling to the quaint notion that test-taking ability is a useful, marketable skill.

Parents, do the right thing for your children, your children's children, and America: Opt your kids out ^[3] of standardized tests. Join the Network for Public Education ^[4], Save Our Schools ^[5].

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