

The Fault(s) in Our STAARs

By Melissa McCann Cooper¹ | April 26, 2014

MADNESS FROM THE MIDDLE BLOG

<http://madnessfromthemiddle.wordpress.com/2014/04/26/the-faults-in-our-staars/>

At least a dozen of my seventh-grade students are reading John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. But the STAAR test has inflicted damage on all Texas schoolchildren. The fault lies not with the students, the teachers, or even the test, but with the way STAAR has taken over our educational system. Don't believe me? Search Google Images for "STAAR" and you will find not only the Texas Education Agency's official logos, but an enormous industry of t-shirts, motivational posters, practice materials, boot camps, pep rallies, and apps geared toward this one test. This cursory search doesn't include benchmark tests and other superficial practice exercises foisted on students in place of insightful, critical teaching and learning.

And then there's test day itself. Or test days, depending on the grade level—my students endured four days of STAAR testing this year. But do you really know what that looks like? It looks like this:

7:30 A.M.: "Attention faculty and staff. You may now pick up your testing materials in room 111."

7:35 A.M.: I arrive at the classroom-turned-testing-command-center where the seventh grade counselor hands me a plastic tub filled with test booklets, answer documents, rosters, pink and blue restroom passes, restroom tracking sheet, and seating charts. I count materials, compare test ID numbers to the numbers listed on the Materials Control Form, and sign the check-out sheet. I feel like I'm signing away my firstborn child to Rumpelstiltskin.

That's because prior to the test, I'd completed STAAR administration training. First, I took an online course consisting of three modules, each with about 35 screens, videos, and quizzes. After each module, I was required to print the certificate and turn it in to the school office. Next, I viewed a 180-screen slide show, reviewed the [testing manual](#), and signed an [oath](#) confirming that my failure to avoid "[testing irregularities](#)" "could result in criminal prosecution" and/or the loss of my teaching license. So as I initial the Materials Control Form this morning, the threats to my career echo through my brain.

7:45 A.M.: I carry my Bucket o' STAAR upstairs. I'm not allowed to simply lock the materials in my classroom—if I need leave the room, all materials must be locked in a cabinet. So to avoid that, I drag the bucket with me to the faculty restroom, knowing I won't have a break for the next three hours. And then I head to my classroom to work on the mandatory TEA-provided seating chart. Today I have 30 students assigned to my room, although for the most part this is a different group from those who tested with me yesterday, which means I must create a separate seating chart for today. And that seating chart? It shows seven rows of six desks. But my room is configured into eight rows of four or five desks. I can't make the seating chart fit the desks, so I have to make the desks fit the seating chart by either moving the desks from that last row into other rows or

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ignoring the last row altogether. Because my afternoon classes will meet later in the day, I opt for ignoring the last row instead of moving furniture, and I assign my 30 testers to the first seven rows only. This leaves narrow aisles, but my options are limited.

8:15 A.M.: Students arrive. They take out their pencils, erasers, and cell phones from their backpacks. Then I send everyone to the restroom because once we start the test, I don't want a parade of kids asking to leave. STAAR is timed, and students do not get credited any minutes spent waiting in line for the restroom.

When seventh-graders took the two-day writing STAAR back in March, all upstairs restrooms were locked before school—only the restrooms downstairs near the office could be used, which meant in a school of more than 1300 kids, there was quite a line. Fortunately, today they're open and kids return quickly—although by about 8:30 all campus restrooms will either be locked or guarded by a staff member who will allow students to enter one at a time.

8: 25 A.M.: I instruct everyone to turn off—not just silence—their cell phones and drop them in my Little Red Riding Hood basket for safekeeping during the test. Ringing phones, pinging texts, camera or internet usage all fall under the aforementioned “testing irregularities.” All backpacks are lined up against the wall. Students are allowed only pencils, erasers, highlighters, and library books at their desks. I lend pencils to about fifteen kids who didn't bring anything to write with.

8:35 A.M.: I begin reading instructions from the manual. Students write their names on the test booklets, copy a number from the test booklet to the answer document, and bubble in the Form Number, which presumably tells the test scorers which answer key to use. I see dozens of different form numbers.

8:40A.M.: Students finally get to break the seal on their reading test booklets. I read two more pages of instructions, mostly reminders to “make your marks dark and neat” and “be sure to erase any stray marks you may have accidentally made.” The last paragraph starts with “You will now take the [subject-area] test” which causes kids to think about beginning, but it's a false start because I really have three more sentences to read.

8:45 A.M.: I write “4:00” on the board, document the starting time on the seating chart, and begin active monitoring.

What is active monitoring? Walking up and down the aisles, observing students while they work, avoiding “testing irregularities.” I am required—by virtue of that oath I signed—to ensure students are working on the reading test. They cannot review yesterday's math test, and they must bubble today's responses in the correct section of the answer document. However, there's an element of clairvoyance required, since I am also—by virtue of that oath I signed—not permitted to look at their tests.

9:15 A.M.: I write “3:30” on the board and continue walking up and down the aisles.

9:30 A.M.: The first student raises her hand to turn in her test. I check that she has bubbled in all answers on the answer document (without actually looking at her answers, remember), erased all stray marks, and wrote the test booklet number and the form number on the answer document. I bubble in the “score” circle, which

tells TEA that this student was present and her test should be scored. My failure to do any of these things is a “testing irregularity.”

9:45 A.M.: I write “3:00” on the board and make another circuit of the room. I know teachers who use pedometers on test days; some count more than eight thousand steps.

Between 10:00 A.M. And 11:00 A.M.: students periodically raise their hands to turn in their completed tests. I repeat the checking procedure each time, then stack test booklets numerically and answer documents alphabetically. Students who are finished read their books or put their heads down. Some choose to sleep rather than read a book. One boy stares into space for more than two hours. Another becomes restless and tries to communicate with a classmate across the room. The restroom parade begins, each request documented on the restroom log. Every 30 minutes I write the time remaining on the board.

11:00 A.M.: Another teacher gives me a 30-minute break. Other than a 25-minute lunch at around 2:00, this is my only break of the day. On the seating chart, I sign out and she signs in. Everyone in the room is accounted for at all times.

11:30 A.M.: When I return, I learn that all 30 students have completed their tests. I write the ending time on my seating chart. The relief teacher stays with my class while I return my materials to the command center. The counselor counts the test booklets and compares their numbers to the numbers on the Materials Control Form. She hands me a roster and asks me to read each student’s name while she checks the corresponding answer documents for booklet numbers, form numbers, and score codes. I turn in my seating chart, my restroom log, and my test manual.

11:40 A.M.: I return to my classroom. But the school remains in “testing mode” because we’re still within the four-hour testing window, and in some classrooms not all students have finished. This means that for the next hour, my students must sit silently at their desks to avoid disturbing those working in adjacent classrooms. A few read quietly, but many say they “don’t read” and are bored. A couple of boys gesture to each other across the room. One kid snores softly while another slowly dismantles his mechanical pencil. I am no longer required to perform active monitoring so I open my book and sit down for the first time all morning.

11:50 A.M.: A student asks the time.

12:00 P.M.: The same student asks the time. “Ten minutes later than the last time you asked,” I reply.

12:10 P.M.: The same student asks the time. “Ten minutes later than the last time you asked,” I reply.

12:15 P.M.: A student asks if they can have snacks. I have no snacks to give them, and they’re not allowed into their backpacks while the school remains in testing mode. I hear a couple of stomachs growl.

12:15 – 12:45: Fidgeting and squirming has reached critical mass. Most of my students—the eleven I actually teach—have tried to follow instructions, but after more than four hours, they are sick of being trapped in here. Those who don’t know me figure they have nothing to lose—some gesture silently across the room while others turn around to whisper to neighbors.

12:45 P.M.: “Teachers and staff, please excuse this interruption.” Shouts of “Yessssssss!” bounce around the room. Kids stand up. “At this time, all eighth graders should report to the cafeteria. Everyone else is to remain in their testing rooms.” Groans replace the cheers.

12:55 P.M.: The PA system dismisses seventh-graders to their sixth period classes. Fifteen students wait at my desk to retrieve their cell phones.

1:00 P.M.: I inform my sixth period that to encourage them to blow off some steam, we’re going out to the track. Some of them play Frisbee with another class, some walk the track, others just stand around. Many of them raid their backpacks and lunch bags for something to eat.

1:45 – 2:15 P.M.: More than two hours after our usual lunchtime, ravenous adolescents descend upon the cafeteria. I sympathize, but I also know that in high school, kids don’t get lunch until closer to 3PM. I briefly wonder why STAAR days aren’t half-days. Then I remember that about 25% of our students qualify for special education testing accommodations, which means they test in small groups to receive extended time. Not everyone finishes within the four-hour window.

2:20 – 3:30 P.M.: Eighth period. Yes, after testing all morning and waiting until 2:00 for lunch, this group of adolescents is expected to attend their last period class for more than an hour. Many teachers show movies; others take kids outside. This is one of my advanced classes and they’ve been working on a project the last few days. Today they present their work—some projects are serious and some are hilarious, and we have fun with something instructional while also letting loose a bit after testing. Seeing kids genuinely interested in their work, in their classmates’ work, and in the concept they’ve been studying is the only redeeming part of my day.

Tomorrow? We start a book study. No STAAR practice, no benchmarks, no test strategies or formula essays. Real teaching, real learning. Finally.