

Don't Judge a Fish by a STAAR Test

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There's a popular saying: Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.

I want my students to be thinkers, creators and world-changers. But the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, program has convinced many of them that their intelligence is determined by this test. Throughout the year, some of my fish stay near the surface, absorbing sunlight and nourishment, while others take risks and venture further into the depths. Sometimes they ride the current wherever it takes them, pursuing learning and following dreams. But because of high-stakes testing, all of these fish must squeeze into a strict formation — school, if you will — where their talents are judged solely on their ability to fill in a series of multiple-choice bubbles.

Each seventh-grade STAAR test has a four-hour time limit, but it costs students far more than the 12 hours they spend taking the actual tests. Each semester, my students lose at least 90 minutes of instructional time per subject to reading, writing, math, science, and (new this year) social studies practice tests. In fact, for the writing benchmarks, my school took seventh-graders out of their regular classes, sorted them into testing rooms, and required them each to answer 50 multiple choice questions and write an essay. Bells were turned off, bathrooms were supervised in case students tried to discuss the test, and all instruction stopped, not just for seventh graders, but for sixth and eighth also, since they couldn't attend regular classes for fear of disrupting the testing environment (that's a "testing irregularity.") The reason for this full-scale dress rehearsal? Our students, who are used to 90-minute block classes, needed practice sitting and focusing on their tests from 8:15 to 12:45, since that's what STAAR requires.

Let me repeat that. We completely halted instruction for more than 1,400 students so that seventh-graders could practice sitting quietly for four hours.

How else do these tests impact student learning? In many cases, teachers' performance evaluations (and in some places, salaries) are tied to STAAR scores. This breeds incentive for teachers to use only STAAR-length reading passages, demonstrate only STAAR strategies (*Highlight the title! Number the paragraphs! Cross out the answer choices you know are wrong!*) and assign only STAAR-style 26-line formula essays. Gone are fish tales, fairy tales, suspense stories, mythology, and "Jabberwocky" parodies. Gone is Poetry March Madness, a 64-poem tournament that consumes STAAR review time. Gone is imagery analysis through art and photography, color and shape. None of that is on STAAR, and when a teacher's performance is judged by test scores, test scores become the primary goal. Because of the overwhelming nature of this one test, students don't just spend occasional time learning test-taking strategies. The

classroom's overall focus becomes student proficiency on narrow test objectives rather than immersion in holistic education, deep with problem-solving and critical thinking.

And the Catch-22? Students who struggle on these tests lose electives, rescheduled into “improvement” classes, and they are assigned after-school prep sessions with clever names like SuperSTAAR Camp that focus on — you guessed it — test-taking strategies. These students are so busy reviewing STAAR objectives they have no time to attend subject-area tutorials that would improve learning and skills, let alone explore creative or intellectual interests such as art, music, theater and world languages. Their entire academic existence revolves around passing STAAR. No following the current for these kids. Just a swirling vortex of terror.

Standardized testing has become much more than a gauge of students' learning from one year to the next. It drives teaching and learning. As a result, the State of Texas judges my fish on their ability to climb trees — their STAAR results — and not the distance they've traveled, the depths they've reached, the navigation skills they used to get there, and the perseverance it took to just keep swimming.

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