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Guest Editorial
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The Truth About High-Stakes Testing

Quite simply, high-stakes testing is sucking the individuality and creativity out of classrooms all across the state, and I'm not just talking about those classes that are subjected to the state tests. This issue affects the ENTIRE state, EVERY campus, EVERY classroom, EVERY teacher and EVERY student. How? Let me give you a few examples from what I've personally witnessed and what others have shared with me.

Let's start at the state level.

The problem starts at the State Board of Education. Our TEKS are too long and too convoluted. How is this related to testing? Longer TEKS means less time for teachers to ensure students are MASTERING content instead of skimming across the grass tops. Right now, on the first day of school you can almost hear the starting pistol go off. From that point forward, teachers and students make a mad dash all the way to test day if they ever hope to cover the entire mandated curriculum. This leads to failure rates on the state tests and remediation when the students arrive at college.

The problem is exacerbated when the Texas Legislature makes the state's tests count for 15% of the student's final grade at the local level. Don't forget that every school in Texas gives semester grades, not yearly grades, so the 1,000+ school districts have many different ways of calculating this, with many having to calculate the grade by hand due to the computerized systems that don't calculate yearly grades.

Let's move down to the campus level.

When test days roll around, campuses go into "lockdown" mode and the entire building is transformed into a state mandated testing factory. No bells ringing, students have to be completely quiet in the halls so they don't disrupt those students taking the state's test, schools that have multiple floors will separate testing kids from non-testing kids by floor. Lunch schedules are changed. Teachers are asked to "leave their office" and all of their resources behind and work from another classroom to accommodate this change. School billboards ask for prayers and support from the community. Parents are asked to send lemon drops or other things that are supposed to help their kids perform well on the test. Again, as you can see, it affects more than just those students who are taking the test.

How about the classroom level?

My wife teaches Spanish I at Chapel Hill High School. Her classes typically have a mix of freshmen, sophomores and the occasional junior. When test days roll around, her classes get ripped apart while some of her students are out testing. When the freshmen are testing, should she keep moving forward on lessons with the other students and leave the freshmen behind? The same goes for the other grades when they are out taking the state's test. This is assuming, of course, that she hasn't been asked to get a substitute to cover her class while she helps monitor those students being tested or helps a disabled student with a modified or alternate TAKS or STAAR test. These are just a few more examples of the many unintended consequences of high-stakes testing.

What about the individual student?

The best visuals I can think of are two real-life stories. Last year my wife was asked to monitor a state-mandated test at our school. As she was walking up and down the aisles on the basketball court she noticed a student writing with one hand while holding and rubbing his rosary beads with the other. Another story involves a student whose nose begins to bleed when the test starts because of the increased stress. Needless to say, students respond to this stress in many different ways, but these examples shed some light on the unhealthy level of stress and emphasis placed on these tests.

All of these things shed light on what happens on test days. I haven't even begun to talk about the increased pressure and scheduling conflicts that come with re-tests for those students who don't pass the first or second time.

Keep in mind, when you hear people talk about the number of test days in our schools, they only talk about those students who are actually taking the test. Those days don't take into account the other implications I've listed above. In other words, estimates of "testing days" don't provide an accurate or complete picture of what's really happening.

Now let's take a step back for a second.

Is the test really the problem? Personally, I don't think so. Testing is a form of accountability and measurement. It's always been a part of an education and it always will be. Despite what the Texas Association of Business wants you to believe, parents ARE NOT against testing or accountability. What parents ARE against are the stakes riding on the outcome of those tests and the fact that those tests are currently the only way a student, teacher, campus or district is deemed to be a success or failure in the eyes of the Legislature, the TEA and the public.

What's the solution to this situation? As you might expect, I have a few ideas.

- 1) We need the Legislature to repeal the 15% grade requirement. Simple enough.
- 2) We need the SBOE to start reducing the length of the TEKS as they come back up for renewal. TEKS are supposed to stand for the Texas ESSENTIAL Knowledge and Skills. They go well beyond what's essential in my opinion.
- 3) We need an accountability system that contains elements that have nothing to do with the standardized test. Graduation rates, UIL participation, National Merit Scholars, CTE participation, service hours, dual credit enrollment are just a few suggestions. We also need to stop grading campuses and districts on their lowest performing sub-group. I know Commissioner Williams and the TEA are working on this and they are headed in the right direction. I just hope they go far enough to make meaningful change.
- 4) We simply have too many state-mandated tests. Massachusetts, which is supposedly the envy of all public schools systems in the United States, has 3 state-mandated standardized tests. Finland, which is supposedly the envy of all public school systems in the world, has one. That's right, one. This reminds me of an old saying, "The cow doesn't get heavier just because you weigh it more." So, I'd like to conclude with another farming analogy. It's time to put the high-stakes testing regime out to pasture.