
vms News

Educational Perspectives for our Community

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Director's Note: Thoughts on Standardized Testing

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During the past year, the media has deluged us with information about the need for more and better tests to accurately measure our students' performance in school. After much thought and deliberation, I put forth the following for your consideration.

Recently, I found myself reading the Labor Department Web Page on skills needed in the "new" workforce. I was curious as to what different skills were viewed as necessary in this new millennium and what insight the Labor Department would have for me to apply in our school community. Quite honestly what I read was a shock! The information reported is not in sync with Public Education's recent frenzy to improve test scores! . The *Labor Department, Workforce on Education, The Center for Political and Economic Studies* want a workforce of **individuals who are able to solve problems, make decisions and work together**. I felt as if I'd just read from Montessori's Own Handbook. Yet most standardized tests used are very quantitative in their approach. Students are asked to correctly **answer** the questions set forth in the tests. The process used to solve a math problem on a norm-referenced test is not analyzed, the answer is scored. The curriculum adopted to support classrooms where testing is used, requires more rote learning not critical thinking. Why then is there such a disconnect in goals between the Labor Department and the Education Department? Is getting the correct answer to the question on a test a skill that enables a child to be successful given those Labor Department guidelines?

Repeatedly in the research over the past few years, especially in the grade school arena (K-12), one finds evidence that traditional tests reinforce passive, rote learning of facts and formulas, quite contrary to the active, critical thinking skills many educators now believe schools should be encouraging. (1)

Tests appear to have a predictability factor, but the predictability has little to do with academic success. The SAT, while originally used to predict success in college, now seems to predict that the students' parents attended college! In short, scoring high on standardized tests is a good predictor of one's ability to score high on standardized tests. (2)

In the Saturday, June 6, 2001 Valley Times, an article appeared about the new 'exit exam' that is being given at the high school level. During the first year, students volunteered to take the test. Next year it will be mandatory. The results, according to the article, indicate that students will be required to get a 55% to 60% on this test. Last year's volunteers did not achieve that score. The principal quoted cautions that we not worry about the scores achieved seeming to be low. Since the sample questions indicate critical thinking skills are needed, I am worried. Would a curriculum that always challenges students to think be a better preparation for life? We are, after all, educating for the future, not for the 2001 standardized test.

Alternatives

If tests are not used to measure learning, how can parents be confident that their students are learning? The use of narratives is perhaps the best way to evaluate student's progress. Continuous observation of the children and their activities is what teachers' report in

written descriptions. Of course, that does assume that we trust the insight and evaluation offered in a teacher's assessment. Most of us trust attorneys and physicians with their assessments of our legal and physical state, so it would make sense to trust the educators' assessment. Tests do not provide a broad enough picture. A broader picture is achieved when the summation of a students' work is appraised. Through this means, a partnership between teacher, child and parent is forged so that a team is involved in the educational efforts.

Somewhere along the way teachers have been led to discount their own impressions of students, formed and reformed through months of up-close observations and interactions. Instead many are asked to defer to the results of a one-shot, high pressure, machine scored exam.(2)

A decade or so ago, the "portfolio" was introduced as an assessment tool. This method allows for the child and teacher to make selections of their work over a span of a semester or year. By using a collection of their best work, students become active participants in evaluating their school progress and can assess their biggest challenges. They are able to demonstrate to themselves, and others, what they consider their greatest work. Of course, these written narratives and portfolios do take more time, but they integrate learning into the assessment process - an added value to any future employer!

Heartwarming

A few months ago, a recent college graduate visited our admissions office asking how she might become a Montessori teacher. When asked what led her on this search, she told

us how she had observed the students in her classes at college. Some seemed to always be on the hunt for that deep understanding of events and information. They were less interested in the correct answer and more interested in the challenge of integrating information into their framework of knowledge. She later found that many of these students had come from a Montessori experience. As a future teacher, she wanted to develop those types of critical thinkers that she'd witnessed in her own college classmates.

I surely don't expect that testing will be abandoned as an assessment tool in this country. The testing services have reached annual revenues in the billions of dollars. Often the test writers themselves provide resource materials to help improve test scores. Our culture places high value on the notion of potential to achieve (gifted programs) rather than achievement. My experience shows that almost all students benefit from a rich, challenging, supportive environment.

Finally, I spent a number of years as a parent watching my own children plod through GRE's, MCAT's, SAT's and more. Can I deny that I felt pleased when my children did well on a test? No, but I also had the better reassurance that the test did not provide a full picture of the strengths and challenges of my children. I depended on teachers and myself for that insight. I regret that as a culture we do not use the tools we have in teachers, parents and children to facilitate evaluations of competency. These are the students who will ultimately become our leaders, our voice and our team builders. Surely they deserve more than just a test score!

- (1) [The Case Against Standardized Testing – Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools.](#) Alfie Kohn
- (2) [Standardized Minds – The High Price America's Testing Culture and What we Can do to Change it,](#) Peter Sacks
- (3) [The American Workforce in the New Millennium: The Growing Demand for Skills,](#) Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies
- (4) [High Skills, High Wages – Washington's Comprehensive Plan for Training and Education](#)
- (5) [The Times, Exit Exam Draws out Differing Opinions,](#) June 9, 2001, Lisa Shafer.