

Teaching to the Test

Increasingly, schools are finding it just makes sense to align curriculum and assessment.

By Kevin Bushweller

Teaching to the test--the very words have always been heresy to educators. Teaching to the test puts too much emphasis on standardized tests that are poorly constructed and largely irrelevant, the theory goes; it stifles creativity and encourages cheating. m m m m m iBut today a new perspective (and a new education buzz phrase) is emerging. It's called curriculum alignment, and it means teaching knowledge and skills that are assessed by tests designed largely around academic standards set by the state.

In other words, teaching to the test.

Better alignment, proponents argue, will make better schools. And indeed, ignoring the link between what is taught in the classroom and what is tested can have painful consequences. In Texas, principals can lose their jobs if their schools' standardized test scores don't measure up; superintendents can be fired and school boards can be dissolved if districts perform poorly. In Maryland, schools that don't do well on tests forfeit thousands of dollars in reward money; if their performance is consistently dismal, they can be taken over by the state. And beginning this school year in Broward County, Fla., one indicator of a teacher's overall evaluation will be based on standardized test scores, a significant motivator for teaching to the test.

The push to forge tighter links between instruction and assessment is sparking a fierce intellectual battle that is being waged in newspapers and teacher lounges across the country. In an opinion piece for the *Houston Chronicle*, for instance, teacher Clara Dobay dubbed the trend "alignment mania," saying "it has created a nightmare of paperwork for school personnel and teachers--with the purpose of proving to auditors they were teaching the test."

But others see curriculum alignment quite differently.

"There is a big difference between teaching to the test and teaching *the* test," says Nancy Grasmick, Maryland's state superintendent of schools. "If you're teaching to the test and you're mirroring good teaching that will enhance learning, then we don't see anything wrong with that."

And Grasmick does not buy the argument that teaching to the test stifles innovation. Educators who hold that opinion, she says, should take a look at schools like Fullerton Elementary School in Baltimore County,

Md.

Achieving daily results

Stretching six feet across a baby-blue concrete wall in the lobby is an oversized rendition of a check for \$24,519 made out to Fullerton Elementary School. It is a reward from Maryland's education department for performing well on the state's standardized tests. But more than that, it is a reminder for teachers at the school to stay focused on teaching the skills the state tests.

The teachers grow slightly defensive--some even cringe a bit--at the idea they might be teaching to the test. But whether you call it teaching to the test or curriculum alignment, the bottom line is that it's paying off at Fullerton. The school was one of only four elementary schools in the state to meet or surpass the state's expectations for third-graders on the 1996 Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), and it was one of only eight schools in the state to show improvement for three consecutive years. Neither particularly wealthy nor particularly poor, it stands as a model for the scores of schools across the state that serve working, middle-class families.

Fullerton Principal John Hutchinson, who retired at the end of the 1996-97 school year, says the school was once so enamored of creative teaching methods that classes were slighting core academic skills such as reading, writing, and math.

Now, pinned up somewhere in every classroom are two daily reminders. One emphasizes what students should know after the day's lesson, and the other says what they should be able to do with that knowledge. That double-edged "know and do" emphasis is the foundation of the school's experiential learning program, which emphasizes teaching lessons that apply to real life--and that are almost always linked in some way to skills tested by the state.

The students in Carla Harner's fifth-grade class, for instance, were responsible for running the Fullerton school store last year. When business lagged and the kids suggested designing advertisements, Harner assigned them to find written advertisements and study them. Which advertisements were persuasive? What was it about how they were written that made them persuasive?

One of the skills tested by the MSPAP is persuasive writing. So after analyzing the impact of real advertisements, Harner's students were required to write short persuasive essays about the store. The essays had to be grammatically correct, and general statements had to be supported by examples--just the things MSPAP test graders look for. The MSPAP has no multiple-choice questions.

After the completed advertisements were placed around the school, the store started to make money again. The kids were thrilled, and Harner had taken advantage of the opportunity to hone their abilities to write persuasively and to apply academic skills to a real-life situation.

Harner's colleagues at Fullerton also believe that learning how to take tests is a valuable skill in the real world. So they also teach kids how to outsmart tests by honing their test-taking skills. For example, classes review vocabulary words that are likely to be used in test questions on the MSPAP--the different meanings of *compare* and *contrast*, for instance, and words like *graph*, *advantage*, and *disadvantage*. The kids also learn the most efficient ways to pace themselves on a test. They are taught not to worry over difficult questions for too long for fear they won't have enough time to answer questions they find easier. To sharpen these skills, they take practice tests that use questions developed by the Fullerton teachers.

Because the Maryland test has essay-style questions with multistep directions (as well as short-answer questions), the students are taught to circle "do" words in the directions and to check them off after they accomplish what the question asked them to do. Otherwise, teachers say the kids are likely to complete only part of the question and miss the other parts.

The importance of teaching academic skills tested by the state--and of teaching test-taking skills--became apparent to teachers and parents alike once they saw test questions released by the state, says Hutchinson: "People had no idea how demanding these tests were. They're tough. Some parents had difficulty answering some of these questions." If the school did not do a better job of aligning its curriculum with the state tests, Hutchinson knew, the results would surely be disappointing at best, and possibly devastating.

Balancing innovation and accountability

At the nationally recognized Key Renaissance Middle School in Indianapolis--where the curriculum is framed around Harvard University professor Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences--the link between instruction and standardized tests is much looser than it is at Fullerton.

But even the loose connection is a change from a few years ago, when there was no link and nearly half of the student body was rated below average on basic skills on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP). Indianapolis Superintendent Esperanza Zendejas--who had just instituted tough new accountability measures in the district--placed the school on academic probation, along with 50 of the district's 85 schools.

Key is no longer on probation, but the staff has had to make some adjustments to make sure the city's emphasis on standardized tests doesn't tarnish the school's reputation for innovation--or give its critics fodder for closing down the school.

"We don't believe standardized tests are the guiding light, but they're a reality," says Patricia Bolanos, principal of Key, which has a sister elementary school that uses a similar curriculum. "Standardized tests are very, very powerful, and they're used extensively for decisions in our system. We've lost some really good principals in our system due to the fact that standardized tests were not what the system thought they should be." Fed up with what they believed was an overemphasis on standardized tests, those principals decided to take jobs in different districts, Bolanos says.

But Bolanos says teachers at her school are "too stubborn to be stifled" by the demands of standardized tests. The school is committed to a theme-driven, community-oriented curriculum that centers on Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, an educational philosophy that says children learn in seven different ways and that each of the seven intelligences must be equally developed and encouraged by teachers.

Even so, the school has made adjustments to make sure basic academic skills are covered. For instance, Bolanos says a number of Key students were having difficulty with subtraction of large numbers, a skill tested by ISTEP. So those kids spent extra time working on that specific skill. "We offer extra tutoring to any child who is weak in an ISTEP skill, without exclusively requiring the student to do only that," Bolanos says. The school may have also benefited from a change in the format of the ISTEP test from a primarily multiple-choice test to a newer exam with more written responses and more items requiring the kinds of problem-solving skills emphasized at Key.

The school also has its own assessment program, which is different from that in other middle schools in the district. The students are assessed in 14 areas, and some assessments are recorded on video. For instance, in foreign language, students are rated primarily on how well they speak the language, so there is no written test. In music, they are assessed on how well they can play a musical instrument. And in English, students are evaluated on their ability to develop a variety of writing techniques, including crafting poetry, fictional stories, plays, and essays.

"That's much different from a standardized test," says Bolanos. "That's why it's difficult to compare us against other schools."

Stan Bibbs, a former Indianapolis school board member who is now the district's academic achievement plan manager, says test scores are the "driving force" behind the superintendent's accountability plan. And

that's how it should be, Bibbs says, because the tests measure basic academic skills that all students should learn, whether they attend a school with a traditional curriculum or one with a newer, more experimental learning program.

"Our objective is not to quash innovation," Bibbs says. "But we don't want to lose sight of our primary mission: to give kids a solid academic foundation."

David Shane, president of Community Leaders Allied for Superior Schools (CLASS), which works to bring community resources to Indianapolis area schools, echoes Bibbs. Shane says that with the nation heading toward a more knowledge-based, technologically savvy economy, it will be difficult for schools to justify developing a unique curriculum while ignoring what is necessary to remain accountable. These days, he says, the main ingredient for remaining accountable is good performance on standardized tests.

"You can't opt out of measuring results," Shane says. "If you do that, then you're in never-never land."

Test scores and teacher evaluations

This year, some teachers in Broward County, Fla., might be wishing they were in never-never land. The school board recently revised the district's teacher evaluation program to hold teachers accountable for standardized test scores. The new measure is only one of many factors in evaluating teachers, but after local newspapers and CNN covered the story, teachers were up in arms, saying the policy would force them to spend inordinate amounts of time teaching to the test and teaching test-taking skills.

"This is absolutely the single most controversial thing we've ever done," says Anthony Gentile, president of the Broward Teachers Union, which agreed to the new accountability measure. "There is tremendous anger throughout our membership, and there's still resentment and mistrust. This will put more pressure on teachers to teach to the test."

Even so, Gentile says he believes it was the right move. The public's thirst for accountability in Florida is growing, he says, and Broward Superintendent Frank Petruzielo is "high on the accountability bandwagon." A significant element of that bandwagon, Gentile says, is creating a tighter link between instruction and assessment.

Plus, Gentile says the state education commissioner is pushing for a stronger link between test scores and teacher evaluations, and state legislators will be reviewing a proposal that links student performance indicators to teacher evaluations. Gentile says he feels better having a plan already in place--and designed by local officials--rather than having

one imposed on local schools by the state.

"Student test scores are just one piece of the evaluation," says Abraham Fischler, chairman of the Broward school board, who is confident Broward is heading in the right direction. "We have to look at student performance and relate it back to teacher performance. And if the tests are measuring higher-order thinking skills and problem solving, then there's nothing wrong in [teaching to the test]."

Paying the price in Texas

In Texas, principals, superintendents, and even school boards can pay a heavy price--in some cases, losing their positions--if they do not forge a strong link between what is taught in classrooms and what is tested by the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), a state standardized exam. For instance, if a district is rated low three years in a row, state officials can appoint a monitor, who effectively takes the position of the local school board. On the other hand, doing well on the TAAS tests can mean generous cash rewards that are distributed in some districts among schools, superintendents, principals, and teachers.

"We have never had a great deal of stress over teaching to the test," says Jane Backus, director of governmental relations for the Texas Association of School Boards and a former English teacher. "If teachers are teaching to the test but they're teaching good skills, . . . that's OK with us."

It's not OK with a good number of rank-and-file teachers in Texas, however, who say the approach stifles innovation and sparks divisiveness between teachers who get cash rewards for improving test scores and those who don't.

But other teachers have learned to live with the pressure, and some have even exploited it by becoming experts in teaching other teachers how to teach to the test. One such expert is 35-year veteran Shirley Spear, a Wink, Texas, teacher who travels throughout the state showing educators how to help their students master parts of the TAAS.

"Business picks up every year," says Spear. "I have more places to go now than I can go to."

Spear has been criticized for contributing to the state's "alignment mania," which some say has teachers teaching to the test and paying scant attention to developing students' critical thinking skills. But Spear brushes off her critics, saying she is merely providing a service to teachers. And in most cases, she says, she helps schools that are struggling on the TAAS tests, giving them the tools they need to live up to the tough accountability measures imposed by the state.

"These tests are a reality," Spear says. "Everywhere I go, scores go up,

and I haven't brain-damaged anybody."

Getting help for struggling schools

Accepting the reality that standardized tests are here to stay is one of the things the Achievement Group emphasizes to Michigan teachers.

A coalition of educators created by the Wayne Educational Services Agency, the Achievement Group works with schools that score low on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). The group analyzes the schools' test results and develops blueprints for improvement in weak areas.

In the three years it has been in operation, says codirector Olga Moir, the group has worked with 93 schools, helping more than three-quarters of them get off the state's list of unaccredited schools.

In Michigan, test scores are used for school accreditation purposes. Moir says the law allows for schools to be taken over by the state if low test scores put them on the unaccredited list. Over the years, few schools have been held accountable by the state, but Moir says the atmosphere is changing. Michigan Gov. John Engler is now threatening state takeovers of poorly performing schools.

"Very few [of the schools we worked with] were using data to make educational decisions," says Moir. "We go to schools and look at the state testing results, how the schools are teaching, and where the missing pieces are."

Shirley Lusby, principal of Longfellow Middle School in Detroit, sought help from the group after her school failed to meet accreditation standards. The assistance has paid off: The school is now "interim accredited," which is a probationary accreditation just below full accreditation.

At Longfellow, the first order of business was to find out what was wrong. For starters, Lusby says the school had to convince parents and teachers that the MEAP was important. And they especially needed to send that message to the kids.

The Achievement Group analyzed the school's test score data to identify areas where state students did well, but Longfellow students did poorly. Moir's group then developed a school improvement plan for teachers that emphasized the link between instruction and the MEAP.

One of the first steps was to improve the school's reading programs, especially in the core skill of reading for information. Science and social studies books--which are good tools for practicing informational reading--became a staple in reading classes, replacing fictional narratives.

Longfellow students now regularly take practice tests released by MEAP to familiarize themselves with the format of the test. And Lusby says they practice test-taking skills at least one hour a week.

"Before, we were sending mixed signals as to what was really important," Lusby says. "There was a lot of emphasis on social things, and kids didn't see the connection between social behaviors and learning."

Lusby says she wishes she had begun earlier to tighten the alignment between instruction and assessment: "We certainly have not brought ourselves up to the level we want to be. But we're

Sidebar: Good test, bad test: How to tell the difference

Any attempt to align what schools test with what they teach soon runs into the ongoing debate about the quality and value of standardized testing. Some teachers and parents charge that multiple-choice tests require mindless regurgitation and fail to evaluate problem-solving skills. Meanwhile, those who prefer the multiple-choice format say essay tests are grossly subjective and far too expensive to administer.

Who's right?

Neither side, says Howard Everson, vice president of the teaching and learning division and chief research scientist of the College Board, which created the Advanced Placement curriculum and administers the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) as well as other standardized assessments. A good test, Everson says, has a mixture of multiple-choice and essay (or extended-response) questions. Fortunately, he says, standardized exams are moving in that direction, although many have a long way to go.

But balancing multiple-choice and extended-response questions isn't the whole story. A good test, Everson says, must also tell teachers how to improve their teaching. If test results don't accomplish that, he says, either the test is poorly constructed or there is a major misalignment between a district's curriculum and the test.

The trouble is, says Everson, many states hold schools accountable on the basis of the results of tests that are taken "right off the shelves of commercial test publishers," without considering whether the test measures what the state has identified as its top academic standards. Local school districts are responsible for doing well on those tests with little guidance or support from the state.

According to Everson, commercial tests are constructed by taking a

national sampling of what is taught at a particular grade in a particular subject. A representative sample of what is taught in most schools then appears on the test. "This is a tricky problem," he says "The problem for teachers is that they may not have taught everything sampled or they may have taught things not sampled. They argue that 'you can't hold me responsible because I didn't teach this stuff,' or 'the stuff I taught, you didn't test.'"

That's why Everson sees the movement to forge a tighter alignment between curriculum and assessment as a distinct plus. Instead of using test results to penalize schools, he says, tests should become stronger tools for improving schools. Says Everson: "Teaching to the test is exactly the right thing to do as long as the test is measuring what you are supposed to learn."

But is it? Monty Neill, executive director of FairTest, an organization that is highly critical of standardized tests, says tighter curriculum alignment "can be good, or it can be really bad news."

In many cases, he says, the standardized tests used to hold schools accountable are predominantly multiple choice, requiring memorization and regurgitation that forces districts to develop a "really tedious and boring" curriculum. Plus, Neill says, "large portions of most state standards are not covered by these state tests. Things not tested are likely not to be taught."--*K.B.*

Sidebar: Cheating creates a kink in the alignment

Chances are your teachers and principals are honest people who would not use dishonest tactics to raise scores on standardized tests. But when you raise the stakes on testing--which often goes hand in hand with aggressive efforts to align curriculum and assessment--the incentives to cheat grow much larger.

The following situations--reported by the Associated Press and other news media--suggest the scope of the problem:

* In Fairmont, W. Va., an elementary school teacher has a letter of reprimand in her personnel file and will not be allowed to be a test proctor for six years, according to the *Gazette-Mail* newspaper. School officials concluded she was helping kids fix wrong answers while they were taking the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), one of the main accountability indicators the state uses. Some parents are angry the teacher is still teaching.

* In Fairfield, Conn., an investigation by district officials into results on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) revealed that answers were five times more likely to be erased at Stratfield School than at other schools.

Of the thousands of changes made at the school, the investigation found, about 90 percent turned wrong answers into correct ones. A follow-up investigation of older tests by a forensic scientist showed tests had been tampered with for years. When the kids were retested under tight security, the school's scores--usually among the highest in the state--slipped below those of other schools. The school's popular principal said he knew nothing of the cheating but retired soon after the scandal.

* In Maryland, state officials grew suspicious this year when they saw noticeably large test score increases at some schools in Baltimore. After an investigation, state officials found that teachers had supplied some answers for kids to use on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) tests and had allowed students to share answers. The teachers were suspended without pay, but not fired.

Nancy Grasmick, Maryland state superintendent, says state officials realize individual cases of cheating are bound to occur but that strict regulations on test security have prevented any schoolwide or systemwide violations so far. She adds that she has the authority to remove a teacher's certificate permanently in Maryland if the teacher is shown to be using dishonest tactics to help kids on the MSPAP. Grasmick has yet to take such an action, however.

* In Kentucky, where there has been a major push for curriculum alignment since the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990, some education activists charge that the state's unwillingness to investigate aggressively and penalize cheaters has become a problem. The *Herald-Leader* newspaper found that the state had received 151 complaints about cheating on the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System tests (KIRIS) since 1993 that deserved to be investigated. But, the newspaper said, state investigators followed up on only 11 of the complaints, leaving the other 140 in the hands of local superintendents, who have a professional stake in seeing their schools do well on the tests.

Schools that do well on the KIRIS tests are eligible for cash bonuses, while teachers and principals in schools that regularly score poorly can be fired.

"This is an area where the state needs to be extremely vigilant," Bob Sexton, executive director of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, told the *Herald-Leader*. Sexton's committee monitors the progress of the Kentucky Education Reform Act. "If you've got 40,000 teachers in a high-pressure, high-stress situation, you have to realize there are going to be some cases where people go too far."--*K.B.*

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