Fighting the Tests: A Practical Guide to Rescuing Our Schools
Fighting the Texts
A Position Paper by the Parents of the Students

First, if you are a teacher, you should do what is necessary to prepare students for the tests — and then get back to the standardized version of school reform that is driven by testing. That's why all of us, despite our disparate agendas, are in a sense fighting the same battle. If we don't do something now to stem the tide, the schools will truly be in serious trouble. People are already talking about the kind of reforms that can truly improve learning. We must act now before it is too late.

One first-grade teacher in Kentucky helped her students develop their own reading program, which moves them faster and furthers understanding. Test results were up, but the program was not. It was the opposite relationship. It was a case of "dumbing down" instruction to meet the test. The solution, quickly, was to get back to the basal reader program on a prescribed weekly schedule. "My job is to teach, not to get involved in political disputes." The reason I'm concerned is that I'm fearful the teaching staff's preoccupation with raising scores on those tests may be generating widespread support. For example, even those who are supposed to be great educators keep silent on this issue.

The problem is that the test results are all that counts. The teaching staff is under such pressure to meet the test that they simply don't have the time to teach well. The pressure is even on the top teachers to perform the same way. They are using their students as tools to get them to the top. Some are even offering students substantial scholarships for high scores. The situation is not only bad, it is economically counterproductive and bad for all children. It is a case of "cannibalizing" the curriculum.

Unfortunately, even some well-intentioned educators who understand the threat posed by testing never get to that point. Here are some of the justifications they offer for their inaction:

1. "But teachers just don't have enough time to take it seriously. They have to cover so much content, the tests are so hard, the stakes are so high."

2. "No single test score can be considered a definitive measure of a student's knowledge," so "an educational decision should be based on multiple indicators." According to Jay P. Heubert and Robert M. Hauser, eds., Potential, 24 April 2000, p. A19. Another study looked just at the poverty level in each of 593 districts in Ohio and found a .80 correlation between poverty and test scores. See Randy L. Hoover, "Forces That Are Queering the Bubble," Education Week, vol. 20, 1999, pp. 514-23. The correlation was .28, significant at p<.001.

3. "There are already many programs that can help us to prepare students for the tests."

4. "We have a wide range of educational programs available and can just select the best ones."

5. "We have to train the teachers to prepare students for the tests."

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7. "The nature and extent of those flaws vary with the nature of the testing program, of course. Exams that are focused narrowly on decoding skills, for example, are particularly unhelpful."

8. "We have to train the teachers to prepare students for the tests."

9. "We have a wide range of educational programs available and can just select the best ones."

10. "No educational program can help if the students don't come to school." In Defense of Good Teaching: What Teachers Need to Know About the "Reading Wars," Vol. 80, 1988, pp. 514-23. The correlation was .28, significant at p<.001.

11. "The dictates to which we are supposed to be aligning the curriculum are often pedagogically suspect, and the motive for doing so may have more to do with compliance than with what is in the students' best interest." Bougas received a two-week suspension without pay in May 2000 but, at this writing, still has his job. Several other Massachusetts teachers have faced similar actions. See, for example, Peter Sacks, "Massachusetts Teachers Sue to Stop Testing," Education Week, vol. 20, 1999, pp. 60, 46, 47; Swope and Miner; and McNeil.

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