

The Insanity of Testing Mania

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By Irv Besecker

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice falls into a hole and alternately grows larger and then smaller. As she grows larger, she cannot find her feet, which is when she forgot proper grammar and remarked that things were getting "curiouser and curiouser." Carroll demonstrates a prescient understanding of modern education in his Alice books by supporting the idea that a child's imagination has value. Here in the 21st century, North Carolina lawmakers and bureaucrats have discarded this notion by promoting a draconian accountability system known as the ABCs. My own extrapolation of Alice's utterance is that things are getting "insaner and insaner."

If you are a person who is interested in real learning, take your allergy medication this week because the testing season is in full bloom. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction is invading our schools with the dreaded monster—the ABC's. In another state, a student facing the end-of-the-year tests actually drew a picture of the state testing program as a monster, but I doubt that he will be rewarded for his creativity.

Each year the state gets more frantic in its efforts to convince people that the tests actually mean something. The propaganda machine shifts into high gear as state officials try to persuade the taxpayers of North Carolina that they are getting their money's worth for the millions of dollars they are investing in testing and accountability. Here is a radical notion. If you want to know how your child is doing in my class, ask me. I can tell you (as most good teachers can) how he or she is doing in a few minutes, without a test and without using any numbers.

The state should provide us with a few additional numbers. How many students cry before, during or after the test? How many teachers leave their school or the profession because of the tests? How many exceptional children are improperly evaluated by these silly tests? How many students will be pushed, by failing the test, into summer school, a retake of the test, or a remediation program, all of which are wasteful and useless? How much valuable instructional time, for science, social studies, the arts and creative thinking activities, will be lost because teachers are forced to teach to the test? At my high school, sophomores, the most heavily tested class, missed between 15 and 24 class periods of instruction this school year because they were taking tests mandated by the state. This does not even include the end-of-course-tests they are taking this week. These are numbers that will not see the light of day.

In a recent editorial, Superintendent of Education Mike Ward said that teacher support of the ABC's was high. He got his information from a panel discussion. This is pretty sloppy research for somebody that puts so much trust in quantitative analysis of students. A recent study, published in an education journal, *Phi Delta Kappan*, reported that 77% of teachers surveyed felt that teacher morale was lower as a result of the ABCs program. Also, 76% of the responding teachers stated that they believed that the accountability program would *not* improve the quality of education in their schools. Most teachers also reported that their jobs were now more stressful (Kappan, November, 1999). I am sure that most students would say the same thing.

As the stakes get higher, the pressure increases to improve scores, and the pressure to cheat escalates. The state then responds by adding more tests and more rules. It is truly insane. This year, for the first time, I cannot correct my students during the test if they are putting their answers on the wrong line of the bubble sheet. I am not permitted to review for the test with my students during the study period that precedes the test. I am not even allowed to answer their questions! To prevent me from cheating, another teacher at my school must be present during the study period and during the test. Next year they probably will require a third person to be present to prevent the two of us from cheating. The year after that, the sheriff will post deputies. Do state officials realize how ridiculous this is? I doubt it.

The tests are excessive. They are overrated, relative to the useful information that they provide, and the cost is enormous. They are epistemologically unsound, that is, they violate sound principles of what it means to learn, or know, something. They are created and promoted by a bureaucracy that knows very little about the real meaning of teaching and learning. I am the state coordinator for North Carolina Citizens for Democratic Schools (NCCDS), an organization that has been formed to reverse the ABCs and replace it with a more humane and meaningful learning system. We can, and we will, put an end to this insanity. Help us. Contact me at besecker@sprynet.com.

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