

Voices

The Principal

ALLAN S. VANN

Testing Gone Mad

Elementary schoolchildren in New York State presently take statewide tests in four different grades—reading and mathematics in grade 3, science in grade 4, writing in grade 5, and reading, mathematics, and social studies in grade 6. The stated purpose for administering these tests is to allow local educators to evaluate pupil progress and program needs that, in turn, will lead to higher standards and quality education for all students. However, the result of this testing policy is education of lower standards and quality.

In many schools, valuable instructional time already stretched too thin by ever-increasing state curriculum mandates is now set aside for blatant prepping for these tests. Since "what gets tested" is perceived as most important, this now defines "what gets taught." Disheartened administrators and teachers soon become pressured into "playing the game"; they learn the rules of this new game quickly, pay little attention to how well kids learn or how well they understand concepts, toss out the curriculum enrichment activities, and focus solely on the one objective of the game: Prep children to pass the state test. Everything else must take a back seat. And keep in mind, we are not talking about preparing children how to think inductively or deductively, how to analyze analogies, nor how to synthesize information to any great degree; we are talking about preparing children, largely by repetitious drill, to pass *minimum competency* tests.

When educators begin to focus their energies on minimum competency test scores almost to the exclusion of all other performance criteria, creative instruction is diminished. We are not serving our children well when teachers devote increasingly more time to teach 8-, 9-, and 10-year-old children how to pass a state test, time that can

be found only by eliminating basic foundation or enrichment activities. When the testing program becomes the center of attention, academic and cognitive learning outcomes that are not measured on the tests, as well as affective goals and socialization needs, get pushed to the side because there is "no time." Ironically, important instructional strands, themselves added to the curriculum because of new state mandates, also get pushed to the side—drug and alcohol abuse, personal safety, AIDS—by time-pressed teachers.

A look at the New York regulations for test storage illustrates nicely the extremes we now go to. Here is the first of eight ominous paragraphs from the instruction sheet—remember, this is for a *3rd grade test*:

The cardboard boxes containing the sealed packages of secure Pupil Evaluation Program test materials must be stored in a burglarproof safe or in a vault that has both reinforced concrete or cement block walls with no windows, and a metal door with built-in combination or key lock.

We are talking about 3rd grade tests, not college entrance examinations!

Trust me, the remaining seven paragraphs reveal the same paranoia. Perhaps state education officials have been working in reinforced concrete windowless rooms too long. Maybe they have visions of 3rd graders attempting a 2:00 a.m. break-in of my office closet. (Having no safe or vault that meets state education department criteria, I had to make arrangements to store test booklets in the vault of a nearby school.) Or perhaps the storage precautions were to prevent *teachers* from "sneaking a peek." Or to keep me, the *principal*, from looking and then pressuring the teachers to prep even more.

And what's to keep me from storing, opening, and even disseminating the tests in advance, other than my word

and dutiful certification of compliance? Nothing, really. That's part of the reason this whole test storage directive is so absurd. Any administrator who wants to circumvent regulations can do so with little worry about being "found out."

Something is terribly wrong with our priorities when principals are issued a state education department directive to store elementary school tests as if they were top secret documents vital to the security of this nation when they are, after all, only ineffectual indicators of learning. We put too much time and effort into preparing for these tests as it is, to the exclusion of much more important work. Has the testing craze gone too far? You be the judge. □

Allan S. Vann is Principal, Elwood School District, James H. Boyd Elementary School, 286 Cuba Hill Rd., Huntington, NY 11743.

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