



At last, parent resistance to collective standardized tests

January 21, 2014

BY NAT HENTOFF
Guest Columnist

WASHINGTON D.C —

Huge numbers of students must take high-stakes standardized tests that may shape the rest of their lives. These tests, however, take no account of the differences among the individual students. For particular examples, the tests don't recognize the students' home lives, or the visual or hearing problems that have impeded their learning.

Those students often failing these tests are lower-income blacks and Hispanics, and students with special needs such as English language difficulties. But many other children fail them too.

Furthermore, many of these students who keep failing learn in school that they are dumb and drop out to begin dead-end lives.

But now, parents are actually reading about these tests and increasingly organizing against them. For example, as Bob Peterson, the President of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, commented on his blog last fall, "This year both the state and the school district have increased testing for four-, five-, six- and seven-year-old students in the district" ("Parent Opposition to Early Childhood Testing on the Increase," Bob Peterson, "Public Education: This is what democracy looks like," Oct. 1, 2013).

He went on to write about Milwaukee parent Jasmine Alinder, whose daughter was just starting kindergarten. Alinder, the president of Parents for Public Schools of Milwaukee, explained her frustrations in an essay she posted to Facebook, which Peterson quoted extensively from.

Alinder wrote: "MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) testing for five-year-olds does not test math and reading competency. At best it tests patience and computer literacy, which is more likely an indication of computer access at home.

"At worst it creates a culture of stress and frustration around standardized testing that may scar some of these children for the rest of their school careers" ("A Parent's View: MAP Testing of Five-Year-Old Kindergartners," Jasmine Alinder, Sept. 25, 2013).

I've known older kids taking such tests in higher-income neighborhoods. They get sick to their stomachs taking practice tests in preparation for the actual tests that will be on their permanent records.

What do they really learn from such tests?

But parents are continuing to speak up nationally, as AlterNet reported last October on a school in my city, New York:

"The Castle Bridge Elementary School is a progressive, dual-language K-2 school in the Washington Heights section ... When parents there learned of a plan to give multiple choice tests to children as young as kindergarten, they decided enough was enough. They refused to let their children be tested" ("What Happens When Parents Stand Up and Say No to Testing?" Elizabeth Hines, AlterNet, Oct. 30, 2013).

Actually, as reported in the New York Daily News, "more than 80 percent of parents opted to have their kids sit out the exam" ("Forget teaching to the test -- at this Washington Heights elementary school, parents canceled it!" Rachel Monahan, Oct. 21, 2013).

So the principal canceled the test.

A penetratingly clear, common sense reason for doing away with collective standardized tests is provided by Neal McCluskey, the associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom. (I am a senior fellow at Cato.)

In the November/December 2013 Cato Policy Report, which was on the emergence of the Common Core State Standards, McCluskey wrote: "Why is the idea of common standards (and tests) wrong? Simply put, it's because all children are different. They learn different things at different rates during different times.

"They start from different places. They have different interests. The idea that they should all be fed into some sort of lock-step standardized system doesn't fit with the reality of human beings" ("Common Core: The Great Debate," Cato Policy Report, Nov./Dec. 2013).

For many years, until arthritis limited my traveling, I saw these human differentiations -- from elementary school through high school -- in classrooms around the country. Getting to speak to students outside of their schools, I found some of their homes and neighborhoods were such that they distracted the kids from getting an education. Indeed, I saw individual differences in the children's hearing and vision capabilities that deeply affected how and when they learned.

In addition to McCluskey's views on the various ways children learn how to learn, another beneficial perspective comes from an article sent to me by Nancy Carlsson-Paige, professor emerita of early childhood education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass. The article, on the shortcomings of standardized collective testing, was co-authored with Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

I am often at odds with the American Federation of Teachers, but as I have reported elsewhere, I do agree with Weingarten's efforts to have public schools become part of an evolving interaction with the surrounding community.

In the article, she and Carlsson-Paige explained: "Young kids learn actively, through hands-on experiences in the real world. They develop skills over time through a process of building ideas. But the process is not always linear and is not quantifiable; expecting young children to know specific facts or skills at specified ages is not compatible with how they learn.

"It emphasizes right and wrong answers instead of the developmental progressions that typify their learning ...

"They need to figure out how things work, explore, question and have fun" ("Early Learning: This Is Not a Test," Randi Weingarten and Nancy Carlsson-Paige, aft.org, Nov. 17, 2013).

Instead of "having fun" as a goal, I would emphasize enabling young kids to discover the joy of learning. This leads them to exploring the range of their capacities as knowledgeable individuals in our society on how it works.

Again and again I've seen this dramatic discovery happen when I tell kids why we have, for example, a First Amendment and what it has taken for that right to survive so that they can use it.

For another example, I know an 8-year-old who gets high on science classes, and when I bring her Robert Louis Stevenson's "A Child's Garden of Verses," she dives right in as her imagination flares up.

What too many teachers, principals and school boards have yet to learn is that education can be very exciting for students preparing to be active citizens.

Next week: I report on Carmen Farina, the new chancellor of schools of New York City -- a possible national model for how children can and do experience the joy of learning.