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Statewide test of students not totally accurate

By B.L. "Buddy" Fish, Ed.D.
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Teachers, administrators, and parents have just received new Mississippi Curriculum Tests scores that theoretically tell us how well our schools, districts, and state educational systems are doing.

This new annual exercise creates pride when our particular educational entity improves and sorrow when scores are disappointing.

I like to look at the scores, too, but I must remind myself that they reflect only a portion of the curriculum.

If our students are improving in science, social studies, critical thinking, the arts, or emotional skills, the scores don't reflect that. There are many areas that are not addressed by the tests.

In fact, what we may be measuring is how well teachers teach to the test.

Other skills are not tested

Further, the scores don't reflect whether our children are developing a love for learning.

Schools that are successful in promoting student interest in learning and a love for reading, along with skills in cooperation, conflict resolution, tolerance and self-discipline, should get credit too. Unfortunately, assessments in these areas are too messy — sometimes they can't be quantified.

We make testing compromises for many reasons. In a recent interview, our new state superintendent of education, Hank Bounds, referenced time and energy involved in the testing. He was very careful not to mention cost.

Other states have found the cost of testing almost prohibitive, but little has been said about this issue in Mississippi.

Regardless of cost, the testing compromises involve the need for authentic assessment tools that test children's knowledge in real classroom situations. Reading an excerpt from a short story requires different skills than reading a novel or a news article. Answering questions about units of measurement is not the same as actual measuring.

We are comparing children, schools and districts in a fluid system that cannot be statistically controlled.

Thus, no allowance is made for children moving from one district to another or schools that change personnel. Once again, we may not be measuring what we think we are.

Causes of scores vary

Another consideration is the cause of changes in scores. Recently, the New York schools encountered a rise in the scores of fourth graders. A closer look showed that huge numbers of third graders were held back because they had not performed well on the third grade tests.

At the outset of our new Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Houston was lauded as exemplary because of its progress in the testing arena. Further research showed wholesale cheating and lying on reports. The scores were then lowered. In Mississippi, changes in attendance zones have affected the scores of schools. Thus, the changes in scores may not be directly related to children's learning.

Finally, of the highest importance, I want to look at the teachers and the students. Are we losing teachers to the new scripted programs that teach only that which is tested? Are we losing students to boredom through teaching limited curricula? Are young students losing self-confidence because they are not performing well on these tests?

Will our democratic society suffer in the future from a culture of citizens who test well, but have no other skills?

These questions should be considered when the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act comes around in 2007.

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