

Testing: One, Two, Three
By Anna Quindlen
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It's that time of year again, when the sweaters come off, the annuals come out, and the students prepare. For the test, for the test scores, for the test schedule for next year. The kids of America are drowning in multiple-choice questions, No. 2 pencils and acronyms. Along with the ABCs, there are the GQEs (Graduation Qualifying Exam), the SOLs (Standards of Learning), the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) and of course the SAT. A group called the National Center for Fair & Open Testing estimates that public schools give more than 100 million standardized tests each year.

Full disclosure: in the interests of informed punditry I recently took a practice SAT test, the first standardized test I have taken since 1969, and by the end I thought the top of my head would blow off. Perhaps it was the reading-comp section on Keats. Perhaps it was the fact that I believe geometry is the Devil's work. Perhaps it was simply that doing any task for nearly five hours challenges what Mother Theodosia used to call the ants in my pants.

But more than anything I was enraged by the process, and by the forced march that seems to have replaced creative thought, critical thinking and joyful learning for so many kids. In "High Stakes," a look at the issue aired recently by CNN's documentary unit, one teacher in Florida reported third graders sobbing because they were so unhinged by the prospect of yet another standardized test. "These kids are just tested out," the teacher said. Third grade?!

Our education system is broken; accountability and standards will fix it. This is the mantra of government testing programs, from local certifications to the federal No Child Left Behind program, which might as well be called No Child Left Untested. That last grew out of something called the Texas Miracle, in which the use of standardized tests in that state quickly led to marked increases in student scores in a way that seemed too good to be true. And it was. Whistle-blowers reported that teachers helped some kids to cheat in elementary and middle schools, and that some ninth graders were being repeatedly held back so their performance wouldn't depress scores for tests administered in 10th grade. The CNN documentary reported that Austin High School, for instance, had 1,160 ninth graders in 2000, yet fewer than 300 were enrolled in 10th grade the next year. Figuring that one out would make an interesting SAT problem.

But even with testing free of that sort of fraud, the useful endpoint of all this remains unclear. If test results were deconstructed to reveal that

phonics, say, was a weak point in a classroom, there might be curricular value, but most of the time the tests are merely scored up or down for the sake of the system-and the press conferences. Teachers are under so much pressure to teach to the test that they are sometimes forced to move on hastily and concentrate on the narrow and tedious, to skip over the interesting side issues or questions that make for dynamic learning.

And what does this metastasizing testing, for every subject, at every level, at every time of the year, do to kids? It has to mean that students absorb the message that learning is a joyless succession of hoops through which they must jump, rather than a way of understanding and mastering the world. Every question has one right answer; the measure of a person is a number. Being insightful, or creative, or, heaven forfend, counterintuitive counts for nothing. This is: (a) benighted; (b) ridiculous; (c) sad; (d) all of the above.

You know the answer.

Of course it is important to know that all students have learned to read, that everyone can manage multiplication. But constant testing will no more address the problems with our education system than constantly putting an overweight person on the scale will cure obesity. Proponents trumpet the end to social promotion. They are less outspoken about what comes next, about what provisions are to be made for a student who is held back twice and then drops out of school. The bureaucrats who have built their programs on test results seem to have lost sight of any overarching point of education. Who cares if the light comes on in their eyes if the numbers are good?

I wish more parents could find a way to protest this educational form of child abuse. Some states are beginning to do so; Utah was willing to face the loss of \$76 million in federal education funds because officials there decided not to follow federal testing standards. The Bush administration insists that support for No Child Left Behind, which is largely a massive testing program, is nevertheless widespread. Officials point to a national survey that offered respondents this choice: which is the bigger problem, children passing through U.S. schools without learning to read, or children being forced to take too many tests? Of course any smart kid would see that there's something wrong with that draconian choice, and that the inquiring mind looks for answers somewhere in the middle. The real question for the future is whether, after this barrage of mindless and endless assessment, there will be any inquiring minds left.

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