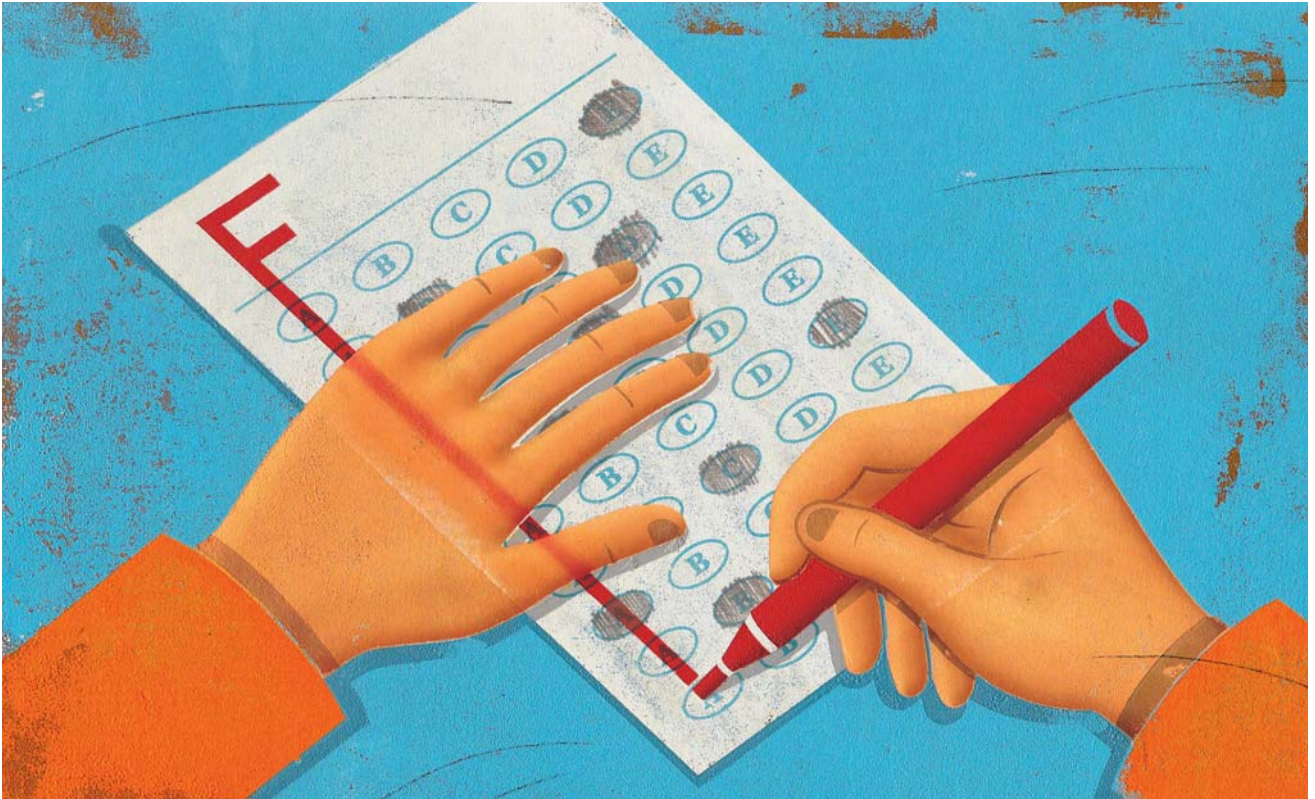


High-stakes testing

A cautionary tale from California



One day in January, I was on deck to follow up the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) preparation activity conducted just before the Christmas break. For one full class period, Grades 9 and 10 teachers had been directed to have their students complete a three to five paragraph opinion piece assignment that was designed to model material they would encounter on the OSSLT. Their efforts were assessed and returned. My job with the students that day in January was to examine the results of their opinion pieces, to model effective pre-writing and writing strategies and then to launch the students into their second attempt at crafting the ideal OSSLT opinion piece response.

The task is straightforward enough, so why was I feeling so paralyzed trying to prepare for it?

I am no stranger to standardized testing. For two years, I had the opportunity to teach in California. Out-of-state/country teachers were actively recruited to work in schools and districts considered “bad” enough that Californians wouldn’t teach there. Upon my acceptance, I received a package in the mail including both the general demographics of the school as well as an overview of the school’s standardized test performance results. I didn’t really give much thought to these scores at the time, but that soon changed.

Immediately after the new school year began, colleagues were abuzz, albeit discretely, with speculation and insider tips concerning the material on the upcoming standardized tests. I quickly noticed that this information wasn’t broadly shared, which I assumed was due to confidentiality. One teacher was kind enough

to share with this Canadian newbie her sneaking suspicion that “the graph on page 37 might be on the test.” The grave delivery of her tip was enough to compel me to include an originally unplanned study of page 37 for the next day.

Still, I found it amusing how worked up everyone seemed to be over aching this test.

That is, until I was sitting in the first department meeting after the test had been administered and returned, staring in horror at a list of teachers’ names arranged in descending order according to their students’ test scores. My name was listed in the bottom three. The department leader began with glowing praise for the beaming teacher whose students’ test scores were highest, and concluded with a part scolding/part interrogation of those teachers sinking in the rear.

The implication of the results was clear: bad scores = bad teacher.

Shortly after this meeting, a colleague explained the power these test scores held: they directly influence teacher performance evaluations, the allocation of administration, the allotment of school funding and now may even be used to determine teachers' salaries—in other words, merit pay.

Furthermore, test scores were published and used to rank schools. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how a parent or guardian might use this information to determine the "best" school for their son or daughter—and what the long-term implications of these choices have on individual school dynamics.

I began to wonder if test scores were at least one of the reasons my California school and district had been deemed "bad" by the locals. Sure, some teachers' classes had done well compared to others'—but when judging the school's results against the state's, there really wasn't much to brag about.

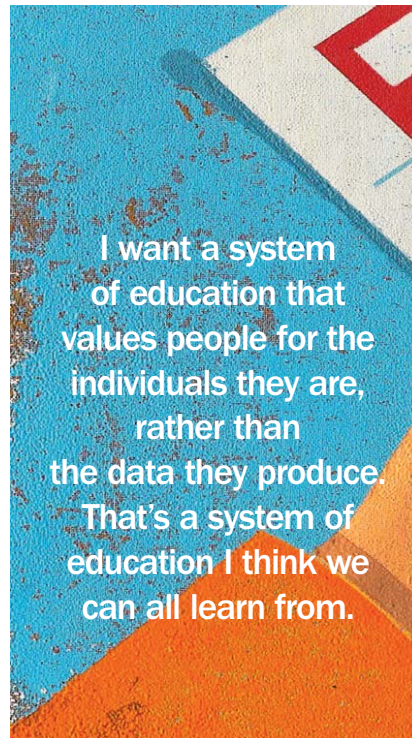
I began to see that such high-stakes testing threatens far more than a teacher's or school's reputation. It's great to be respected for doing a good job, and it's nice to work in a place that's lauded for its accomplishments, but that's not why I became a teacher. I became a teacher because of the kids. And sadly, it's the kids I see suffering the most as education is increasingly defined and determined by the preparation for, and the writing of and results of, these standardized tests.

It seems we are increasingly valuing tasks in education based on the data they can produce, rather than on the actual meaning of, these tasks to individual students. Literacy and numeracy skills are important. But are these skills truly being developed through test preparation, much less being accurately evaluated through test assessment?

And what about the time we increasingly spend teaching to the test? First, students began with just writing the OSSLT. The next year, the school offered and actively encouraged students' participation in an after-school OSSLT preparatory course. This year, in addition to that program, students and teachers will have

lost *four* periods of regular program instruction in order to practise components they will encounter on the OSSLT.

I understand the pressure. Obviously, the greater the implications of test scores to teachers, schools and districts, the more emphasis will be placed on high achievement. But when the preparation for this



test begins to come at the expense of regular programming and the infringement on teachers' instructional time, have we gone too far?

And what do we make of a teacher's performance being reduced to test scores? Are teachers who are hired or retained solely for their ability to elicit the highest test scores really the ones we want teaching our children? Is it possible these test scores may be skewed in the first place? And what are the implications of a system that praises those who perform well on these isolated tasks and penalizes those who don't? Lest we think these things couldn't happen in Ontario, it should be noted that merit pay is rumoured to be a key election issue for the Conservative party and surfaced as a highly publicized issue in the B.C. Liberal party leadership race.

So there I was, ready to go into a science class the next day to continue with the third of four periods devoted to the

OSSLT opinion piece review. I tried to ease my conscience, reassuring myself that a) I was only doing this to support the students; in no way was I lending support to the test, and b) as I often heard teachers lament, the issue truly was out of my hands.

But was it? Isn't it my responsibility as a public educator to stand up for what I feel is right in public education...even if I am just one small voice?

I suppose that's why I'm writing this. Teaching in California opened my eyes to a world where public education has been reduced to standardized tests and test scores. It's not a nice place to teach or be taught. I am sorry to say that I see education in Ontario galloping in the same direction.

I don't know how to make courses like dance, music and visual arts important in a world that is increasingly determined by data—but we need to. I realize it is increasingly difficult to defend the immeasurable in education, but we need to. These subjects breathe life into classes.

Tests may be standardized, but our students aren't. And neither are their teachers. They're unique.

I want a system of education that values people for the individuals they are, rather than the data they produce. That's a system of education I think we can all learn from. ☺

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