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Beyond Teaching the Test*Improving Teaching and Learning in Baltimore***Introduction**

Pressures of the Season: A Descriptive Look at Classroom Quality in Second and Third Grade Classrooms, a study conducted by the Baltimore Educational Research Consortium (BERC), concludes that there is work to be done in improving Baltimore students' education experience. In evaluating 347 observations of 23 second and third grade classrooms, interviews with principals, and questionnaires distributed to teachers based on three domains, emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support, BERC finds room for improvement in all areas.

Findings

The BERC study's most striking finding is the low level of classroom instruction in third grade. Due to pressure to perform well on the state tests, teachers do little more in the classroom than prepare students for the MSA. Teachers did not engage in best practices such as teaching higher-order concepts, adequate use of teacher-student feedback, or language modeling. BERC recommends building teachers' abilities in this domain in order to improve instruction. We know from BERC and others that the best way to teach includes teaching higher-order concepts and adequate use of teacher-student feedback, or language modeling.

Authors of the study suggest building on best practices while continuing to prepare for tests by: coordinating curricula across kindergarten and third grade to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills, and promoting whole-class or small-group interactive instruction rather than independent practice even while preparing students for tests to enhance the emotional and conceptual environment.¹

Teachers may receive training in these areas, but that training is not well linked to performance on standardized tests; teaching using best practices is rather often thought of as the opposite of preparing students for standardized tests. Since there is so

much weight placed on improving test scores, professional development that seeks to do something else is often considered pie-in-the-sky.

Baltimore City must invest in professional development on best teaching practices. To convince teachers it is worth investing in, one of two things needs to happen: (1) Teachers need to see the link between the best practices and test performance, or (2) Test scores need to become less important. With 50 percent of the new evaluation measured by student growth on the state exams, this is a real challenge.

What We Know About Prepping for the Test

Experiences in Houston, Atlanta, DC, Baltimore City, Philadelphia, New York, and countless other examples show that the pressure to improve test scores pushes schools and school districts to cheat. Teachers in Houston were caught "tubing" test booklets to decipher the test's questions in order to prepare their students due to the pressure and incentives placed on high test scores.²

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution questions whether cheating scandals similar to that experienced in Atlanta, where 178 educators in 44 city schools were found to have cheated due to intense pressures to report high test scores, would become more evident as such pressure continues.³

Additionally, a 2011 USA Today investigation of DC public schools uncovered abnormally high instances of wrong answers being erased and changed to right answers, calling DC schools' claimed performance gains into question.⁴ Baltimore City also experienced test tampering at several city schools from 2008-2010.⁵

¹ Plank, Stephen B., Condliffe, Barbara "Pressures of the Season: A Descriptive Look at Classroom Quality in Second and Third Grade Classrooms" p.22-23

² Trip Gabriel "Pressed to Show Progress, Educators Tamper With Test Scores." The New York Times 6-11-2010 Sec A; Column 0; National Desk pg 1

³ Jaime Sarrio "Atlanta's Testing Scandal Adds Fuel to U.S. Debate" The Atlantic Journal-Constitution 7-13-2011 <http://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta/atlantas-testing-scandal-adds-1007201.html>

⁴ Jack Gillum and Marisol Bello "When Standardized Test Scores Soared in D.C., Were the Gains Real?" USA Today 3-30-2011 http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2011-03-28-1Aschooltesting28_CV_N.htm

⁵ Erica L. Green "City School System Looks to Rebound After MSA Disappointment" The Baltimore Sun 7-3-2011



Currently Pennsylvania is investigating at least three dozen school districts, including Philadelphia, accused of suspicious answer patterns and erasures.⁶ Suspicious testing practices were also discovered in New York City involving similar questions from year to year and the lowering of official “cut scores” to show more students passing.⁷

The bottom line is that there is too much pressure on schools to improve standardized test scores. The Baltimore Sun reports, “educators say they are not surprised to learn of incidents of cheating, given the rising importance of test scores—often to the exclusion of other forms of assessing how students, teachers, and schools are doing.”⁸

Accusations of cheating potentially mar a district’s reputation and call its performance in all schools into question. Such emphasis on test scores not only encourages cheating, but it appears to be misplaced as a valid measure of student performance. Daniel Koretz and Diane Ravitch, two education researchers and writers, believe schools with high test scores are turning out students with “glaring gaps in their knowledge,” and that some who pass the tests “arrive in college needing remedial work in basics such as math and reading.”⁹

Clearly the current system of assessing the quality of education based solely on test scores has not proved entirely effective. Broadening the scope of subject areas covered and the methods of instruction utilized will enhance the student’s educational experience.

Moreover, the best school systems in the world do not use standardized tests. Finland and South Korea, for example, eliminated tests and invested in their teachers’ professional development, allowing teachers to create assessments they thought best for their students. The teachers in these countries evaluate their students through formative assessment.

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-ma-score-follow-20110703,0,6996176.story>

⁶ Benjamin Herold and Dale Mezzacappa “2009 Report Identified Dozens of Pa. Schools For Possible Cheating” Philadelphia Public School The Notebook 7-8-2011 <http://www.thenotebook.org/blog/113871/2009-report-identified-pa-schools-possible-cheating>

⁷ Walt Gardner “Opinion: Scandal Debunks Education Miracles” 3-1-2011 aolnews <http://www.aolnews.com/2011/03/01/opinion-scandal-exposes-phony-education-miracle/>

⁸ Jean Marbella, “Cheating Scandals Put Tests in the Spotlight.” The Baltimore Sun 6-11 www.baltimoresun.com

⁹ Marbella

A Better Way: Formative Assessment

Rather than assessing what students know at one point in time through standardized tests, formative assessment involves teachers receiving continuous feedback from students that assesses their comprehension. This allows teachers to determine whether lessons were successfully learned or if they need elaboration. Implementing this emphasis on formative assessment will require two main shifts in policy: (1) ensuring teachers are well-versed in the methods of formative assessment; and (2) encouraging and promoting collaboration among teachers to share successful experiences and methods so that all students may benefit.

Utilizing formative assessments of students based on their year-round performance on various assignments and classroom tasks, as opposed to a single summative test performance, allows for a more well-rounded assessment of student achievement and ability. Additionally, assessing teachers based on how they perform within the classroom setting and how their students perform year-round, as opposed to relying on test scores, will encourage teachers to expand their curricula to include a broader array of concepts; ultimately improving the overall education of our students.

Training teachers to be adept at formative assessment will also improve their instructional abilities. Recently, much research has focused on the benefits of utilizing formative assessment measures over summative assessment measures to gain results in student performance. Formative assessment “links instruction and curriculum with assessment in order to support individual learning in the social setting of the classroom.”¹⁰

Summative assessment is the “attempt to summarize student learning at some point in time;” and is “not designed to provide the immediate, contextualized feedback useful for helping teacher and student during the learning process.”¹¹

Especially Effective for Low-Achieving Students

Studies have shown that lower-achieving students benefit the most from formative assessment

¹⁰ Ian Clark. “Formative assessment: ‘There is Nothing So Practical as a Good Theory.’” Australian Journal of Education 54 (2010) 341.

¹¹ FairTest, “The Value of Formative Assessment.” www.fairtest.org

practices¹² because students receive feedback and assistance when providing incorrect responses. Black and Wiliam argue that low-achieving students repeatedly receiving failing marks on tests from incorrect answers are likely to lose interest in education out of a false belief that they are incapable of learning.¹³ The formative assessment practice of incorporating feedback and building problem-solving skills allows teachers to interact with these students to develop the necessary steps that lead to understanding.

Relying solely on summative assessments such as standardized tests leads teachers to focus primarily on preparing students for the tests; they have little time to spend explaining the reasoning and developing the concepts behind the answers. Therefore when a child is consistently wrong and does not receive feedback on how or why they are wrong, they are likely to determine that they cannot know the correct answer and become detached. Formative assessment provides the feedback to these lower-achieving students that can potentially keep them engaged in the learning process longer and increase their chances of success.

Pilot Teacher Evaluation is a Golden Opportunity

Maryland's new teacher evaluation system provides a unique opportunity to provide teachers with the professional development they will need to succeed on their evaluations, but it needs to be done carefully. Fifty percent of the evaluation is based on student test scores, and the other fifty percent includes a variety of measures, including ones developed at the local level. However, if teachers do not improve student test scores, they can be deemed ineffective, making test scores actually 100% of a teacher evaluation.

All of the professional development in the world will not be effective if teachers know the bottom line is to improve scores. Since the evaluation is only in a pilot period now, advocates have an opportunity to push back on this plan to lean so heavily on test scores, which we know are not accurate measures of what students know.

Advocates should push for the use of formative assessments, so that teachers and students can be evaluated in a variety of ways. Advocates should urge Baltimore City to lead this charge and argue that professional development is a better investment in teachers and students than test scores.

¹² Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment." Kappan 92 (1998): 83

¹³ Black and Wiliam 83