Five Ways to Prepare for Standardized Tests Without Sacrificing Best Practice

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After teaching for eight years, I left the classroom to embark on a career in educational research. My work has led me to analyze academic content standards for individual states and then to align those standards with state assessments. I facilitate teams of teachers and school administrators, discussing test items, negotiating student performance level descriptors, and, ultimately, setting cut scores for accountability purposes with personnel from state departments of education. As I go about this work, I am troubled by what teachers tell me about how students are being prepared for test taking in this era of accountability. Many educators report feeling compelled to abandon what they know to be the best ways to teach reading in exchange for a test-preparation curriculum designed to raise test scores. Other schools have hired independent consulting firms, staffed by well-meaning, smart people who nevertheless have no classroom experience or educational background, to coach veteran teachers on how to teach test-taking strategies to increase reading scores. Why are educators so ready to turn over their professional voices and expertise?

The atmosphere the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) created in classrooms across the United States can explain this sudden lack of confidence. Many teachers find themselves judged by the test scores of their students-test scores that are affected by factors beyond their control: students' academic history, students' abilities, school facilities and equipment, transience of the population, socioeconomic class, and so on. It is not surprising that teachers who are threatened with pay for performance incentives or reorganization based on the student body's annual yearly progress (AYP) would feel compelled to change how they teach for the promise of improved test scores, even if it means giving up strategies for teaching reading and writing that research and experience show are effective.

Five Suggestions

Short of decreasing class sizes or other solutions that would require substantial changes in school finance, what can teachers do in their classrooms to help students prepare for a high-stakes, standardized, multiple-choice reading test without sacrificing what they know to be best practice? The following are five suggestions:

Suggestion 1: Look at the State's Academic Content Standards for Reading. Before the entire reading curriculum is scrapped in exchange for a full-blown test-preparation package, check to see if some smaller adjustments can be made by adding a unit or a few lessons in the areas that are going to be tested. The high-stakes reading tests that are given in each state are aligned to the state's academic content standards for language arts. Know how reading is defined. Especially in the primary grades, some states have a heavy emphasis on concepts in print while others focus on vocabulary. The standards and grade-level indicators list the expectations at each grade level and are designed to help schools make curricular decisions. The reports that go to the U.S. Department of Education about student achievement in each state are based on alignment studies that are conducted using these grade-by-grade performance standards. Gaps between the intended curriculum (what the state department of education expects is being taught) and the enacted curriculum (what actually is taught) can sometimes explain low test scores.

You can conduct your own alignment study between the curriculum standards and your lesson plans to ensure everything that is expected in your state at each grade level is being taught. In short, an alignment study requires a team of curriculum experts to

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review the connection between the state standards that describe what should be taught and the school curriculum that describes what is actually taught and match that against what is tested. These validity studies take many forms (e.g., Baker, 2004; Bhola, Impara, & Buckendahl, 2003; Rothman, 2003; Webb, 1999), but most alignment studies require at their core an item-to-standard mapping in which individual test items are evaluated with respect to one or more academic content standards.

Sometimes it's just a matter of adding a few lessons to make sure teachers have taught everything that is going to be on the test. For example, maybe the grade-level indicators for third grade say that students will know to capitalize the names of cities and states. Because this will most likely also appear on the state assessment, teachers can include it in writing lessons along with the capitalization lessons already offered.

There is a difference between teaching to the test and teaching what is going to be on the test. Popham (2005) wrote that if a teacher is "teaching to the content represented by the test" it is good teaching (p. 312). But if a teacher is directing instruction specifically toward the items on the test, it is bad instruction. If a high-stakes test is going to measure the student's abilities to find facts from a passage or make inferences about characters then by all means practice that in class. The state test should serve as a summative assessment that provides evidence of how students are growing from year to year. This can only happen if what is being taught all year is in line with what is going to being tested.

Suggestion 2: Give Students Formative Assessments in Class to Provide Feedback on Their Reading and Writing Performance. Formative assessments can raise standards of achievement and lead to higher quality learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, (2004). Formative assessments are self-reflective, metacognitive tools designed to support instruction to create a learning profile for students to track their progress over time. Good teaching requires frequent feedback from students to check not only their progress as learners but also teacher progress. Encourage teachers to hold individual conferences with students in which performance on classroom assessments is reviewed. In this way, student strengths and weaknesses can be identified and strategies for improvement can be developed. With curriculum-based, formative assessments, academic goals for the students are made clear before, during, and after a unit of instruction, allowing teachers to target specific lessons to just the students who need them. The results of these formative assessments can also be reported to parents to help them see a trajectory of student learning throughout the year.

Another important point to note is that the kinds of questions that are asked on these assessments should require students to think about what they have read and not just recall the text. As Allington (2001) pointed out, adults do not quiz one another about facts from magazine articles they just read, they discuss them. Classroom literacy assessments should model this kind of real-world pattern of making connections to texts and self via conversations and not just recalling facts from texts.

Suggestion 3: Connect Your Reading Units to Real-World Contexts. The reading passages that are chosen for high-stakes, multiple-choice tests are selected for their obscurity so that the materials are novel to all test takers. Otherwise, students who have seen the passages previously would be privileged in the test taking. The kind of reading that is done on standardized tests is a genre all its own, and it is not fair to teachers or students to limit classroom reading selections to "basalized," short pieces with questions at the end. Real readers read real books and select books about topics that are interesting to them. The most effective and memorable moments in school happen when students are actively engaged as learners and can see the connections between what they are doing and the world outside the classroom. When the curriculum is narrowed down to test-preparation worksheets and skills and drills, teachers lose the heart and soul of what they should be focusing on in their classrooms. What is more, there is a large body of literacy research that demonstrates the connection between reading achievement and reading in real-world contexts (e.g., Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Cipielewski & Stanovich, 1992; Gottfried, 1990).

Suggestion 4: Set the Tone With Advance Planning and Motivation. I used to have a poster in my classroom that said, "Attitude is the mind's paintbrush: It can color any situation." If teachers and students regard the testing program as an extra burden then most of its potential value will be lost. The role

of the school administrator is to help teachers understand how good tests can contribute to the effectiveness of teaching and how scores can aid in individualizing instruction. Schools should hold informal conversations with students about the nature and purposes of the tests that will be given. The goal of these conversations should be to build up feelings of confidence, not to make comments that might make students anxious. Teachers and students alike should understand why the tests are going to be given and how the results will be used.

Suggestion 5: Don't Compromise What You Know to Be Best Practice in Teaching Literacy. So many of us feel the pressure from the high-stakes accountability system that we desperately search for any quick curriculum fix, especially if our school is not making AYP. One school in which I was conducting field research switched to a test-preparation curriculum that consisted of two hours worth of worksheets in the weeks leading up to the state test and then switched back to their regular curriculum, which was based on Harvey and Goudvis's *Strategies That Work* (2000), as soon as the test was over. For both the students and the teachers, the worksheets were like a nasty, bad-tasting medicine. When I asked the teachers why they switched, they said it was because they were afraid that if their school didn't make AYP for a second year it would be reorganized by the state. This absolutely baffled me. If what you've been doing during the year is what you know to be the best way to teach, how are skill-and-drill worksheets better right before the test? Have confidence in yourself as a professional. Best practice is best practice year round.

Teachers Must Hold Their Ground

NCLB has had a myriad of unintended consequences for literacy educators, especially in schools in danger of not meeting AYP. An overemphasis on teaching the portions of the reading domain that are testable with large-scale assessments, like spelling and finding facts from a reading passage, narrows the language arts curriculum in ways that go against what teachers know is the best way to teach. For example, in order to target reading instruction at students at varying developmental levels, some schools have adopted reading curricula that limit the choices for children's literature if the books are not on a reading level that has been determined by a publishing company to be academically appropriate. Adult readers don't chose books that way so why should we train our children that books must be challenging to be worth reading? Students don't develop a lifelong love of reading without practicing reading what interests them.

Educators should hold their ground as professionals and refuse to compromise their teaching practice in the name of higher test scores. The tests themselves are not the problem; in fact, the test scores can provide teachers with valuable information about student performance on basic language arts skills. But teaching only the skills that can be tested leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and to the "deprofessionalization" of teachers. When the NCLB act comes up for reauthorization, it is crucial that administrators, parents, and policymakers realize that the expertise of teachers must be brought to bear on curriculum decisions at the classroom level.

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