

Opting Out

An Activist Educator-Mother's Arguments Against Standardized Testing

As a teacher educator, I have always believed we need education that helps children find their own voices and communicate their own messages; in my considered opinion, we should not try to force our children to be the same, to do the same things in the same way at the same time. Instead, we should help children to be gloriously different individuals who will enrich our world by posing and solving problems in ways we have never tried. This orientation aligns with a liberatory political and educational position, and argues for schooling that enhances rather than seeks to eliminate diversity. Using my life story as the mother of a daughter who struggles with schooling, I argue that one way to move toward this kind of education is to challenge the dominance of standardized testing, and I make a few suggestions to that end.

Introduction

As a former preschool teacher and a current teacher educator, I have long been opposed to standardized testing. I knew all the reasons such tests weren't good for young children or for education (see, e.g., Kohn; McNeil; Ohanian). Briefly, these include the following: they have a narrowing effect both on teaching and learning; they assess a narrow range of knowledge and performance; they are culturally biased; and they do not allow for variations in learning style. I have several files full of information about testing, I am a member of more than one anti-testing group, I have written letters to the editor about the dangers of high-stakes testing, and I teach about and ask my students, pre- and in-service teachers, to raise questions about the purposes and impacts of such testing. But it wasn't until my daughter, Lydia, started school that I became an ardent opponent of standardized testing for real rather than in the abstract.

Before I go any further, I must acknowledge the many privileges I have that make it easier for me to oppose such testing. First, I am white, middle-class, and have a doctorate in Education. In addition, English is my first language and I am a teacher educator so I am very comfortable in schools. And, although I have raised Lydia by myself since she was three, her father and other family members are supportive both educationally and financially. In addition, although she has some challenging behaviors and schooling is often a struggle for her, her disabilities are certainly not as severe as many others', and she has a number of academic strengths (e.g., in reading). And so, while I find it relatively easy to resist what I perceive as harmful demands from school, others may find it much more difficult to "just say no."

Lydia, a high school senior, is currently eligible for special education services in the state of New York, where we live, under the category of "specific learning disability," in her case, in math (dyscalculia). Because of her disability, she has been evaluated every year (in one form or another) from the time she was two. For children who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a surfeit of information on their strengths and weaknesses is available. Thus, standardized testing seems at best pointless and at worst cruel for children like Lydia.

However, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) provides no formal "opt-out" provision although a few states (e.g., Washington) do. As is typical around the United States, standardized tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math are required of *all* children in public schools grades three to eight. (My focus, due to where I live and work, is on the U.S., but the use of standardized testing in Canada is a growing concern. See, for example, a mother's site, *Standardized Testing in Canada* (Moll). Although as an educator I knew this, the third-grade tests got past me somehow. However, I was ready to "opt Lydia out" when fourth grade rolled around, but during the spring of my daughter's fourth-grade year, when the tests were being given, we lived in Sweden and it became a moot point. (Ironically, just as we were gearing up to resist the tests, Sweden was moving swiftly toward implementing—and publicizing scores on—standardized tests across the compulsory-schooling years.)

During the years Lydia was in fifth and sixth grade, we lived in New Jersey. There, her elementary school talked us into letting her take the state tests by saying she would feel "left out" if she didn't do what the others were doing and assuring us that they would give her lots of breaks and snacks. Nonetheless, the night before the scheduled fifth-grade testing, Lydia cried and cried. Finally she articulated her fear that if she didn't "do well" she wouldn't graduate from high school. High stakes, indeed! Following this experience, I said I didn't want her to take the tests in sixth grade, her first year of middle school. I'm not sure

how the school did it, and didn't much care, but somehow they managed not to give her the tests at all.

Back in New York for Lydia's seventh-grade schooling, I once again missed the fact that state testing would be conducted. And so she took the tests and we got the results: She had "performed" (I use the word deliberately) adequately on the ELA portion of the test, but, not surprisingly given her learning disability in math, scored in the lowest quartile on the math test. After some dialogue, the school and I figured out that she didn't have to receive the Academic Intervention Services (AIS) she was "eligible" for given her score since, again not surprisingly, she was already receiving resource-room math.

When Lydia began eighth grade, I was more aware of the dangers, more experienced in saying no, and hence more prepared to resist. First, I asked one of my former students who I knew had "opted her children out" of the state tests how she had gone about it. We talked and she forwarded me a copy of the letter she had sent her daughter's principal. I revised the letter and mailed it to Lydia's principal, then waited for his response. I wrote:

September 14, 2007

Dear Mr. _____,

My daughter, Lydia _____, will not be participating in the New York State Eighth Grade Assessments this year. I believe that the efforts by the State Education Department in this area are misguided and that the assessments are wrong on a number of levels.

First, I object to the emphasis on test scores published in newspapers and touted by some schools and school districts (not to mention real estate offices). These are not accurate measures of how good a school or school district is.

I also object to certain "academic" subjects being focused on when many children's strengths lie in music, art, physical education, and vocational skills. These should be equally valued. Lydia, for instance, did very poorly on the state Math tests (which was no surprise to her, me, or, I'm sure, her teachers), but gets high 90s in her chorus and show choir classes—which she loves.

As a parent and teacher educator, I value education tremendously, but I place a higher value on a true love of learning. I believe this is not promoted by testing and more testing. I understand that the district is mandated to collect such test data, but I prefer that my daughter be engaged in learning activities during test times. I have discussed this matter with Lydia and would like to meet with her teachers so that we can develop a plan for her during testing times that will work for everyone.

I appreciate the positive and rich learning environment that you help

create and support at [the school] and hope we can work together to find a solution to this issue.

Sincerely,

Leigh M. O'Brien

When I didn't hear back, I sent the principal an e-mail message reiterating my concerns. Next I called his office and left a message, then finally I spoke to his secretary and we scheduled a time we could meet with him.

Despite the delays, he was very welcoming and sympathetic to our concerns—in fact noting that he deplored the fact that *his* daughter (in another district) “had” to take the tests—and he asked if he could have a little time to review the options. When we spoke next, he outlined what he saw as the three choices available to Lydia: (1) take the tests but don't worry about how you do; (2) stay home on the day of the tests; and (3), “sit for” the tests (that is, she would put her name on the papers) but don't actually do them. Lydia and I chose option three.

Lydia's Story (As I Heard It and Understood It)

During the testing, Lydia stayed in the room with the rest of her peers. She said she just put her name at the top and wrote, as was suggested, “I do not want to take these tests” on the test paper itself. Then she began reading a book; afterward, a few of the other students asked her why *she* didn't have to take the tests. “My mom thinks they're dumb,” she told me she responded. Pretty much.

I thought we were done with the eighth-grade tests but then a letter came from the school stating that, due to her low test scores, especially in Math, she was once more eligible for AIS. I found this odd for a couple of reasons: First, she did not actually take the tests so we would expect a “low score,” and second, she was already getting something very much like AIS in the form of her resource-room math. I didn't think any more about it until we got her initial schedule for ninth grade and she had AIS on her schedule. Lydia was distressed because chorus—something she loves and does well in—had to be taken out of her schedule to put in the AIS classes. I called the counselor who had prepared the schedule. We talked for some time and I was able to state my concerns. Fortunately, the school is quite responsive and sensible, so we were able to drop the mandated AIS classes and reinstate chorus. It appears to come down to this: The tests aren't going away on their own; resistance is an ongoing process, and looks like it's not going to end until Lydia finishes high school....

When Lydia began eleventh grade, the pressure mounted because students in New York, as is so across the country, must take and pass the state exams

in order to graduate with a “regular” diploma—no matter how well they do in their classes during high school. Here’s an example of the confusing (and, in my opinion, silly) nature of the requirements for students with disabilities for the NYSED website:

For students with disabilities who first enter grade nine in or after September 1996 and prior to September 2010 and who fail the Regents comprehensive examination in English, the English requirements for a local diploma may be met by passing the Regents competency test in reading and the Regents competency test in writing or their equivalents. For students with disabilities who first enter grade nine in September 2005 and thereafter, the English requirements for a local diploma may also be met by passing the Regents comprehensive examination in English with a score of 55-64. This provision shall apply only to students with disabilities who are entitled to attend school pursuant to Education Law, section 3202 or 4402(5). (12)

Although there used to be more flexibility in terms of who had to take the “regular” tests, note that now a student has to *fail* the Regents exam first before being allowed to use a different assessment, and that this passage only refers to the English exam; the requirements for other subject areas are slightly different—although failing first is still required. Also note that only students who are significantly delayed are eligible for the IEP Diploma. This process is insulting to both students and to teachers!

Reality Check

Despite the foregoing, beginning in ninth grade, Lydia began to sit for the state exams given at the end of each year of high school. We made this decision together, in consultation with the counselors and principal. Although we both still find the exams foolish in the extreme, Lydia will need to have taken them to attend most colleges in our state. As I write this, Lydia has taken and passed all but one—in math!—and has one more chance to take the math exam in order to get a Regents diploma. She has been accepted to college in New York, but it’s a matter of pride for her now: being able to say, I did it!

I’ve semi-jokingly said for years that I should have had a “Parent from Hell” tee shirt made up when Lydia started school. I see the absurd and the harmful, and I’m not afraid to raise questions or state my concerns. In this case I’ve been asking, if students hate these tests and if many (most?) teachers, parents, and school administrators don’t like them—and there is plenty of evidence to

indicate strong dissatisfaction on the part of all these players (see, for example, work by Rethinking Schools, Alfie Kohn, FairTest.org, etc.)—then why do we continue to insist that our children take them? Why do we allow the school curriculum to be narrowed to test preparation as it has been in so many settings, especially where there are high concentrations of poor children? Why don't more teachers—and more parents—just say no?

I think I know why: it's hard. I recently heard a challenging, somewhat critical presentation at a conference for professors of educational studies at which the presenters were stumped by the first question they were asked: "What can we do to resist standardized tests?" If professors of education can't—or won't—answer this question, it's clear how very challenging the situation is.

My theory is that most people are frightened. And of course there are some who don't even think to ask what the options are. But more often I think the tests are viewed as a necessary evil: something to be tolerated, like unpleasant weather or taxes. Or, parents are afraid they'll be viewed as troublemakers, that school people won't like them, or that their children will resent their "interference"—after all, everyone *else* is taking the tests. Teachers and administrators have more at stake. They stand to lose their jobs or at least a couple of weeks' pay as was the case for Carl Chew, the Seattle-area teacher who refused to give the Washington state tests to his students (Shaw).

But how can we *not* resist? How can we *not* point out the absurdity of statements like the following found in a teacher's beginning-of-the-year description of one of my daughter's classes: "When we are not preparing for the tests, we will be working hard at the curriculum"? The tests, although they all too frequently take priority over the curriculum, are clearly *not* the curriculum. So what are they? And why should they be more important than actually learning? Alfie Kohn sums it up this way:

...the rhetoric of "standards" is turning schools into giant test-prep centers, effectively closing off intellectual inquiry and undermining enthusiasm for learning (and teaching)... This is not a fact of life, like the weather—that is, a reality to be coped with—but rather a political movement that must be opposed.

Given my many and mounting concerns about the U.S. education system, I'd like to think that even if Lydia did not have "special needs" I would still oppose the testing juggernaut, but to be honest, I am pretty sure that it would bother me less. Had she been a "super student," I may well have fallen into the trap Bill Ayers almost did. As he notes in his now-classic *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, even knowing better he was sucked into thinking—just

for a minute—that the first standardized tests his son took showed “how brilliant” he was. Fortunately, Lydia’s situation forced me to confront the issue head on—which, as noted above, was rather easy for me given my relatively privileged positioning.

Acknowledging that certainly not all are in a similar position, I offer here a few suggestions for parents who would like (and feel able) to challenge high-stakes standardized testing, but aren’t quite sure where to start. First, know your state’s (or province’s) requirements; see the state’s (or province’s) department of education website, for example, and find out if there is an “opt-out” provision. If there are no specified options, articulate your concerns in writing. This helps you to be clear about your reasons for resisting, and, assuming you are sending your message to the school leader, also gives him or her time to think about how to approach the situation. I’d also recommend joining at least one local and/or state group opposed to testing for moral and practical support (see, e.g., a Rochester, NY, Community Education Task Force website), talk to other parents, or do what so many of us do these days: Do a Google search and see what you can find. These are all also excellent ways to help your child learn about advocacy and the power of pushing back against political and corporate interests. (See, for example, the story of a high school student applying the term “conscientious objector” to resist college admissions testing [Jaschik].)

Opting *In*—To the Struggle

In contrast to “one size fits all” schooling, I believe we need education that helps children find their own voices and communicate their own messages, that celebrates the hundred or more languages of children (Edwards, Gandini and Forman). We should not try to force our children to be the same, to do the same things in the same way at the same time. Instead, we should want—and help—children to be gloriously different individuals who will enrich our world by posing and solving problems in ways we have never tried. That is, we ought to support education that liberates humans rather than domesticates them; that will, to paraphrase Frederick Douglass, unfit them to be slaves. I have suggested that one way to move toward this kind of education is to challenge the dominance of standardized testing.

Borrowing from Marge Piercy’s wonderful 1973 poem, “To Be of Use,” I am suggesting that we jump into this work head-first, strain in the mud and muck to move things forward, do what has to be done, again and again. Effecting change will take time, stamina, strength, and, yes, courage. It always does. But this is a struggle worth engaging in; something worth doing well. I hope you will join my daughter and me in this struggle.

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