

Fixing the Fixation on Testing

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President Obama got high marks from teachers and parents when he said in his recent State of the Union address that schools should stop teaching to the test and instead give teachers latitude to teach with creativity and passion.

I immediately recalled times as a teacher when I thought my students learned the most. It wasn't when we were intensely preparing for the Regents exams or any other standardized tests. My students were most engaged during project-based learning, when they worked in teams and wrestled with complex topics, such as the decision to drop the atomic bomb during World War II. My proudest moment as an educator was watching my students compete in the We the People civics competition and observing--after all their preparation--the confidence with which our teams debated constitutional issues.

Those are the kinds of educational experiences that excite students and teachers alike. Teachers don't want to spend valuable time endlessly preparing for "the test." They want to guide their students to ask insightful questions, offer well-reasoned opinions, and work diligently until they master content. Those are the types of classroom experiences that unleash students' ingenuity and reveal their understanding of the material.

And that's the kind of learning that is being stamped out by the current pervasive fixation on testing. Test-based accountability is out of balance, and parents, teachers and public officials--from President Obama to California Gov. Jerry Brown to Texas Commissioner of Education Robert Scott--are speaking out about it.

Obama was right when he spoke last year about using standardized tests appropriately--to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses, not to punish students or schools. Yet, numerous policies enacted by the U.S. Department of Education since No Child Left Behind have skewed the emphasis toward testing and sanctions.

Look at the difference between private and public schools in our country. Most private schools do not administer high-stakes tests, and that is reflected in their curriculum and culture. Freedom from test fixation allows them to provide enriching experiences and in-depth instruction in an array of subjects.

Public schools, in contrast, are required by federal and state laws to administer what numerous experts consider to be too many low-quality standardized assessments, which have significant consequences. This, in turn, drives an excessive focus on the tests, test preparation and tested subjects.

Indeed, evidence supports teachers' and parents' concerns. An examination of National Assessment of Educational Progress results by Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute shows that disadvantaged students have made significant progress in the last generation, but that such progress has stalled in the decade since NCLB and its unprecedented test-based accountability measures were enacted.

Proper accountability is extremely important. But current public school accountability mechanisms don't gauge good teaching or deep acquisition of knowledge. The Common Core State Standards, and the assessments being developed as part of their implementation, can help bridge that divide by focusing on deeper understanding of core content that students then can apply broadly.

Nations that outperform the United States have gotten this balance right--emphasizing teaching and learning versus testing and blaming. In Singapore, for example, where I spent time with teachers and students last week, schools are focused intently on growth and achievement. However, as I observed numerous diverse groups of children deeply engaged in learning, nothing I saw could be construed as teaching to the test.

Test mania won't get our children or our country where we need to go. Obama made a good case for this when he recently honored science fair winners from across the country at the White House. The president was clearly impressed by the innovative projects--he even shot a marshmallow from a small but powerful air cannon. The ingenuity on display at the White House should be cultivated in every public school in America.

We hope that the views expressed from the bully pulpit of the presidency will be matched with state and federal action that moves away from the excessive fixation on testing and toward the appropriate use of assessments to support teaching and learning. That's what parents of advantaged kids seek when enrolling them in private schools, and that's what the highest-achieving countries do. And it's what we can and should do in every American public school.

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