

Preparing our students for the big test:

Sustaining test score gains requires good teaching, not skill and drill

Does a high-stakes testing environment have to mean the end of lively classrooms where teachers offer creative lessons that engage their students?

Last month Kimberly Marciniak, a ninth grader in San Antonio, Texas, in an interview aired on National Public Radio's Morning Edition, reported that this is exactly what happened in her middle school and said that she planned to boycott the Texas standardized test.

"This [preparing for the tests] is all we did for the first half of the year," Marciniak said. "Our teachers focused on nothing else. And it's kind of hard sitting there as you're basically drilled and lectured on nothing but this."

This kind of "skill and drill" test preparation is increasingly widespread, especially in urban and rural schools where there are large numbers of students disadvantaged by poverty and where these students too often score poorly on tests.

Unfortunately, they now confront still another disadvantage: an impoverished educational program that narrowly focuses on discrete skills taught in isolation from a rigorous, standards-based curriculum. Such instruction does not help students develop a conceptual understanding of science, history, mathematics, and literature and does not engage their interests, abilities, and knowledge.

Does skill and drill even pay off in sustained improvement on standardized tests?

Not according to research conducted by Research for Action and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education in Philadelphia from 1995 to 2000, the period when both the state and the School District introduced new standardized tests to assess schools' progress.

Typically, test scores plateau after the first three years' implementation of a new test. Overall, this was the pattern in Philadelphia between 1995 and 2000. (The same pattern occurred in Chicago during Mr. Vallas' administration.)

But our research showed that in some Philadelphia schools, student performance continued to climb, even after the first three years.

In these schools, we found that staff took a longer view of school improvement. They put in place the basic building blocks necessary for strengthening their educational program. They looked for challenging curricula that were aligned

with the district's standards and well suited to their students. Teachers participated in ongoing professional development that helped them learn how to use these materials effectively.

School leaders established blocks of time during the school day, after school, and in the summer when teachers could talk about their students' progress, look at student work and review other data about what students were learning. On the basis of these conversations, teachers adapted their instructional practices to help students get to the next level of learning.

These schools did not ignore the tests. To the contrary, staff carefully analyzed student scores and paid close attention to sections on which students scored poorly. Teachers familiarized their students with the format of the tests and they gave their students opportunities to talk about the tests – to raise questions and express worries. Most importantly, teachers capitalized on opportunities to help their students develop test-taking skills and strategies during their regular daily lessons.

Our observation of the sixth grade science classroom of a Philadelphia teacher we'll call Ms. Taylor offers a terrific example of how to ready young people for standardized tests in the process of engaging them in active learning about important and appealing curriculum topics. In their study of the solar system, Ms. Taylor's sixth graders completed individual research projects on our earth's sun; they worked in groups to create papier-mâché mobiles of the solar system. Their classroom was brimming with science materials and the students' work festooned the walls.

With other teachers in her school, Ms. Taylor attended numerous professional development sessions on the school's science curriculum, called AIMS, which is an approved program of the National Science Foundation. At these sessions, teachers talked about how they might incorporate test-taking preparation into their science lessons.

One day, in a lesson on planets and their moons, students practiced the graphing skills that they were also working on in math. Ms. Taylor framed the lesson: "You'll be taking the SAT-9 soon and you'll have some charts and graphs on the test. These problems will look a lot like what we'll be doing in class today."

She asked several students to go to the board and explained, "We're going to draw a graph that shows the number of moons for each planet. What do we do first?" Ms. Taylor asked the

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whole class to help the students at the board figure out the steps for creating the graph. In a few minutes, there were five bar graphs on the board.

In closing the lesson, Ms. Taylor returned to discussing the SAT-9. "When you take the test, there will be questions that ask you to make a graph. They'll give you information in a chart, not unlike the chart that we used to make our graph of planets and moons. And you'll remember what we did today and go through the same steps."

Ms. Taylor's classroom is evidence that the press for improved test scores does not have to toll a death knell for inspired teaching, intellectually rich curriculum, and active learning.

But as a principal explained, it is easy to lose confidence in what we know is good teaching in the face of high stakes accountability systems' demands for immediate and dramatic results. He advised, "Teachers need support in integrating test preparation activities into their regular classroom practice and in helping students to understand how what they are doing in class carries over to the testing situation."

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