

Teachers Say the Most Interesting Things — An Alternative View of Testing



Juunlimited/Photodisc Images

In spite of the barrage of anti-testing news, some teachers say tests have not sapped their creativity or hindered collaboration and that they appreciate having useful data, a road map for instruction, and a sense of accountability for all educators.

By **Stuart Buck, Gary W. Ritter, Nathan C. Jensen, and Caleb P. Rose**

It's hard to know what teachers *really* think about testing. On the one hand, teachers are constantly giving tests and quizzes and morning work and a myriad of assessments to ensure that the students are following along and understanding the material. Presumably, the teachers believe in the importance of monitoring student progress on a very regular basis, and testing is one tool that teachers employ to do this.

On the other hand, there's a widespread belief that teachers as a group oppose more standardized testing. Indeed, in the age of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), numerous commentators have criticized testing for forcing teachers to abandon creative lesson plans in exchange for the dreary process of rote memorization and prepping for multiple-choice tests. During his transition into office, even President Obama agreed with these criticisms by stating on his change.gov web site that "teachers should not be forced to spend the academic year preparing students to fill in bubbles on standardized tests." We checked the education literature and found further evidence that educators and faculty in schools of education are resistant to standardized testing. In a cursory review of three policy-oriented education journals (*Educational Researcher*, *Educational Leadership*, and *Phi Delta Kappan*) over the past five years, we found that articles critical to testing outnumbered the favorable articles by an overwhelming 9-to-1 ratio.

Thus, the attitude of teachers toward testing is somewhat puzzling — this is a group that uses testing regularly but is concerned about the potential pitfalls

STUART BUCK is a research associate, **GARY W. RITTER** is a professor of education policy, and **NATHAN C. JENSEN** and **CALEB P. ROSE** are research associates in the College of Education and Health Professions, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Ark.

of assessment-based reform. Indeed, it's not clear why testing and standards would inherently *cause* poor teaching. After all, if a state's standards include the skills that students are required to learn, and if that state's test covers a fair sample of those standards, then teachers will teach the skills that students need to learn. Testing should not hinder good teachers from teaching these skills, whatever they are, in a creative and an intellectually curious manner.

To gain a better understanding of this interesting paradox, we decided to talk to some local teachers to get their views on "teaching to the test." In spring 2009, our team of researchers interviewed 42 teachers in five Arkansas schools to study how testing influenced their classroom instruction. We didn't go into this blind; this was the end of "testing season," and we expected to find, at best, some staunch critics of testing and, at worst, some angry educators.

THE STATE CONTEXT

As is the case in many other states, Arkansas students in grades 3-8 take weeklong, criterion-referenced, benchmark tests. The Arkansas criterion-referenced test items are combined with items from the norm-referenced Stanford Achievement Test, 10th Edition (SAT-10) into one "augmented" set of annual exams. Moreover, high school students in Arkansas take end-of-course exams in algebra, geometry, literacy, and biology, which are also closely aligned with Arkansas' Curriculum Frameworks.

To gather the views of these educators, we conducted focus groups with teachers and principals in five schools in three medium-sized Arkansas school districts. The focus groups lasted for about an hour at each school, with about 8-10 teachers (and occasionally principals) present for each interview. During these sessions, we guided the discussions around central questions, such as whether teachers found the Arkansas benchmark tests helpful, whether they thought testing prevented them from teaching creatively, whether classroom hours became focused on test prep rather than learning, and what they thought of the concept of "teaching to the test." *Broadly stated, we simply wanted to know how the existence of the Arkansas state exams influenced teaching and learning in teachers' classrooms.*

WHAT DID TEACHERS SAY?

Because our focus groups were conducted just days after the end of the spring exam period, we wouldn't have been surprised if the sessions became venting

sessions for exhausted teachers with nothing good to say about testing. At first, the teachers didn't disappoint; most sessions opened with a list of criticisms of the state's standardized testing regime. Some teachers voiced the usual complaints that testing is too focused on bubbling in answers, that testing isn't conducive to the strengths of more "active" learners, and that the tests are too "knowledge-based" and "multiple-choice." Other teachers said the testing period could be shortened so as not to exhaust the students. Still others maintained that testing should measure academic growth rather than absolute levels of attainment. Of course, these results are predictable and not all that interesting.

What happened next was the interesting part. After the surprisingly short introductory period in which teachers voiced complaints, teachers began talking about good aspects of the Arkansas exams. One teacher followed the other, with no prompting from the researchers leading the focus groups. In the end, teachers said many good things about various aspects of the testing process and, overall, gave a very positive impression of the effects of the annual assessments on classroom teaching. After we sifted through all of the comments from all of the teachers at all of the school sites, five positive themes emerged. The consensus of teachers with whom we spoke was that the tests provide useful data, that the testing regime helps create a road map for the year's instruction, that the standards and tests don't sap creativity or hinder collaboration, and, perhaps most surprising, that the accountability imposed by the testing regime is useful.

Theme #1: Tests provide useful data. Almost all teachers agreed that tests provide useful data showing whether students have grasped certain concepts. As one teacher put it, "I do think it has been very helpful in our building for when they walk in on day one to know this kid really doesn't know this, this

Teachers said the tests provide useful data, the testing regime helps create a road map for instruction, standards and tests don't sap creativity or hinder collaboration, and the accountability imposed by the testing regime is useful.

Did the existence of the Arkansas state exams influence teaching and learning in teachers' classrooms?

kid didn't understand . . . and that data has certainly helped us to know our kids much better." Another teacher said, "as soon as we get our class lists, we'll have those results too. . . I actually sat down with my kids and said, 'OK, this is where we were messing up.'" Indeed, these comments exemplify a belief shared by many proponents and opponents of testing — more data is one clearly positive outcome of the recent emphasis on student testing.

Theme #2: Testing and standards help create a road map for the year's instruction. Many teachers noted that before testing, it was easy to teach idiosyncratically — perhaps spending

"six weeks on the dinosaur unit and just totally ignor[ing]" other topics. With increased focus on testing, however, teachers have focused on matching their instruction to a coherent set of standards. Thus, one math teacher said that while she had initially "hated" the Arkansas benchmark tests, she has since changed her mind: "I'm OK with it now, to be honest; I see where knowing the standards and knowing what's going to be tested can help me plan the whole year and make sure I've

covered everything." One additional benefit of standardization — a "lifesaver," as one teacher put it — is that districts can collaborate in setting a consistent schedule for teaching the state standards, which means that "if a child moves from [neighboring town] to our school. . . they should be right where we are."

This point assumes that a state's tests are aligned with the state's curricular standards; without such alignment, schools would face conflicting signals and would therefore have a difficult time creating a consistent road map. Most teachers agreed that the Arkansas tests do a fairly good job of matching the Arkansas standards. This finding is also in line with an argument made by many advocates for testing and standards — that standards foster clarity about what should be taught each year.

Theme #3: Test-prep does not necessarily sap creativity, for teachers or students. Several teachers disagreed with the notion that testing forces teachers to replace creative lessons with dreary test-prep. One math teacher said, "I used to think and really had a strong opinion that it caused me not to be a creative teacher, but I've changed now." Another teacher — one who was often critical of testing — said that "true creative people" will "find a way to be creative regardless of what the framework is." When

asked if tests discourage creativity, one teacher claimed that "I think it's done just the opposite. . . I think adding open response where you used to have tests that were just strictly multiple-choice has forced teachers to be more creative." From another school, a teacher said, "In science and math, we're expected to use manipulatives as much as possible and do hands-on as much as possible . . . I do so much more now, so much more."

As such, many teachers praised the Arkansas tests for encouraging more creative and critical thinking by students. Due to the many open-response questions in math and English, students "have to understand it [the material] to get the points on that [test]; they can't just make a guess and maybe get it right." One teacher remarked that "as an older teacher," the introduction of benchmarks and tests "totally changed the way we taught because [formerly] we

Example Open-Ended Math Item from the 8th-Grade Math Exam, 2009

Freda has a bag of 3 tennis balls that are the same size and shape. Each tennis ball is a different color: orange, yellow, or green. Freda will randomly pick 1 tennis ball to play tennis and will not put it back in the bag. She will do this 3 times.

1. List all the possible outcomes for the order in which Freda could choose the tennis balls. You can use an organized list, tree diagram, or logic grid to show all the possibilities.
2. What is the probability that Freda will pick the yellow tennis ball first? Show your work or explain how you got your answer.
3. What is the probability that Freda will pick the green tennis ball before the orange tennis ball? Show your work or explain how you got your answer.

BE SURE TO LABEL YOUR RESPONSES 1, 2, AND 3.



Jlunlimited/Polka Dot Images

were just answering questions; we didn't have them think about, 'why is this the answer?'" In this way, the Arkansas tests encourage both teachers and students to be creative and to think more deeply about questions and answers.

We were certainly surprised to find that teachers voicing the "testing prevents creativity" criticism were distinctly in the minority. One teacher in particular summed up the opinions of many other teachers: "I think that [if] there's somebody who says, 'Oh all you do is teach to the test and you're not being very creative,' I think they haven't been in the classroom in a long time — either that or they've been in a classroom or a school where their principal is not doing their job." In other words, whether testing saps creativity depends on the teachers and principals. They could respond to the perceived pressure by resorting to dull lessons premised on rote memorization, but they could also seek creative strategies for ensuring student learning. For many teachers in our Arkansas sample, the testing regime fostered greater creativity.

Theme #4: Testing can lead to collaboration. Many teachers claimed that the Arkansas exams encouraged teacher collaboration to ensure that students are well-prepared. As one teacher said, testing "does give us a common goal, and we can work together." From a different school, a teacher asserted that "I feel like we have a lot more open policy teacher-to-teacher now because everybody's reaching for the best way. . . . It's just so worth it to collaborate with your other teachers on better ideas and seeing what they do that you can do better.

Teachers at one school had adopted a professional learning community (PLC) model (DuFour 2004). Several teachers in that school said that they used to hate testing, but that they now thought testing had introduced a greater sense of collaboration in ensuring that each child learned everything that he or she was supposed to know. Teachers at the PLC school reported that they regularly gathered to decide on the "eight to 10 essential standards and try to focus on just those." Most teachers rose to the challenge that the testing provided by teaming together to enhance student achievement.

Theme #5: Accountability is useful. This final theme was the most surprising because many criticisms of testing are related to the accountability that comes with the exams. That is, while many educators welcome the data and information that standardized assessments provide, few will claim an affinity for the consequences that are sometimes attached to student performance on these tests. Nevertheless, teachers in our focus groups even made positive comments that the testing programs encourage teachers to feel an even greater responsibility

Example Open-Ended Writing Prompt from 8th-Grade English Exam, 2009

Some people never want to grow up and become adults, and some people can hardly wait. Choose one of the following statements and tell why you agree with it.

It is more fun to be a child than an adult.

It is more fun to be an adult than a child.

Before you begin to write, think about what it is like to be a child and what it would be like to be an adult. Which do you think is more fun? Why do you think the way you do?

Now write an essay to express your opinion. Is it more fun to be a child, or is it more fun to be an adult? Give enough detail so that your readers will understand.

ity that students learn the material.

One teacher noted that tests "hold accountable" those teachers who "are just there to get summers off and an 8-to-3 job." From another school, a teacher said: "We all need accountability. . . . [It] helps us be better teachers and not just take a day off because we don't feel like it and let [the students] watch a movie." At a third school, a teacher said, "I absolutely believe in accountability and having [the students] know those benchmarks before they go on to another grade." And from a fourth school, a teacher pointed out that "the only way someone might say [that testing makes teaching] less desirable is because they're [other teachers] going to work harder."

As a specific example of how testing encourages teachers to be accountable for ensuring that each student makes progress, one teacher noted that "I've totally changed my philosophy of teaching. I used to stand up there and teach the best of my knowledge, and if they didn't get it, 'Sorry, we've got to move on.' But now it's, 'OK, these kids didn't learn it; what's the plan?'" These teachers used to hold themselves accountable for delivering good lessons; now, thanks to the testing regime, the teachers can go one step further by assessing whether the lessons translated into improved student learning.

CONCLUSION

Before we walked into the schools, we anticipated a chorus of complaints confirming that testing, in and of itself, is a negative force, as is argued in some 90% of the literature we examined. What we found was surprising: While some teachers criticize testing

for inhibiting creativity, most maintained that testing and standards spurred their creativity. Further, while one teacher claimed that she had to race through all of the Arkansas standards to be sure that everything was covered by the test date and that she had to abandon her former attitude of “stick with it until they got it,” more teachers said that testing had forced them to make sure that every child understood the lessons.

While some teachers criticize testing for inhibiting creativity, most maintained that testing and standards spurred their creativity.

One important limitation was that teachers in our focus groups were not serving in extraordinarily low-achieving schools. While these educators were well aware of AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) and were concerned about their schools being on or near alert status, they did not work in schools that were under constant accountability pressure from day one. Thus, teachers in such low-achieving schools could feel different pressure from the testing system and view the influence of testing quite differently than do the teachers in our sample.

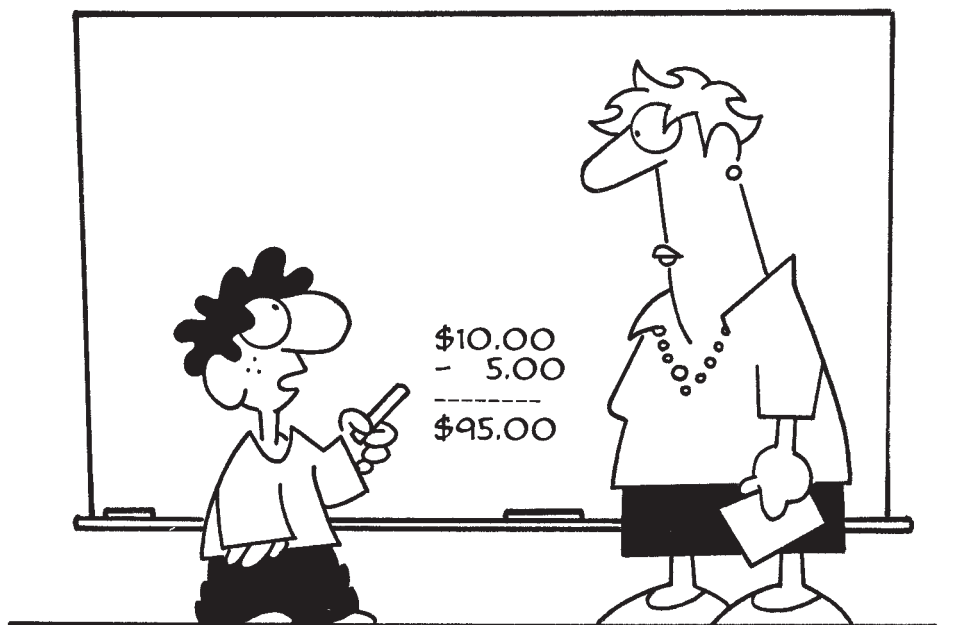
Nonetheless, these teachers work each day in typical American schools, with good but not great student performance. Their opinions are not generalizable to all teachers across the country, but we also suspect that we didn't manage to stumble upon the only teachers in the country who see benefits of student testing.

In the end, if some teachers and principals believe

testing has changed their pedagogical approaches for the worse, they might be able to gain some insight from other teachers who are still able to present creative and interesting lessons and to concentrate on student learning, as we found in our focus groups (Au 2007; Starnes 2007). The existence of teachers who report that these tests actually *add* to the learning process suggests that standardized tests might not be the hindrance they're made out to be. Indeed, most teachers support the general concept of student assessment — they reveal this in their actions each day when they ask students to prepare for tests and quizzes and submit homework assignments. And the teachers in our sample demonstrated that, if they want to, they can use state standards and state exams to become even better educators through more data, coherence, creativity, collaboration, and even accountability. **■**

REFERENCES

- Arkansas Department of Education. “Testing: Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment, and Accountability Program.” <http://arkansased.org/testing/assessment.html>.
- Au, Wayne. “High-Stakes Testing and Curricular Control: A Qualitative Metasynthesis.” *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 5 (2007): 258-267.
- DuFour, Richard. “What Is a Professional Learning Community?” *Educational Leadership* 61, no. 8 (May 2004): 6-11.
- Starnes, Bobby Ann. “Twisted NCLB or Twisting NCLB?” *Phi Delta Kappan* 89, no. 4 (December 2007): 314-315.



“I’m getting cash back with my debit card.”

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k1003buc.pdf

**Stuart Buck, Gary W. Ritter, Nathan C. Jensen, and Caleb P. Rose,
Teachers Say the Most Interesting Things – An Alternative View of
Testing, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 6, March 2010, pp. 50-54.**

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. **Copies of this article, in print and electronic formats, may not be made, distributed, or posted online without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.**

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
Bloomington, Indiana 47405-3800
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at
<http://www.pdkintl.org/utilities/archives.htm>.