



# Opinion Editorial

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## Time for Testing By: Gary Ritter and Marc Holley

As students are beginning to exchange their winter coats for short-sleeve shirts, they are starting final preparations for the perennial statewide standardized testing regime. Busily working sample problems and touching up their testing-taking techniques, students are gearing up for the tests that will signal whether schools are meeting expectations across the state.

Just as this testing frenzy has become a rite of spring, so has the blossoming of the accompanying complaint: Why are schools spending so much time on testing?

We are struck that there is a key assumption in this protest; namely, that schools are actually spending an inordinate amount of time on testing. Rather than blindly entering in this refrain, we decided to investigate the amount of time devoted to this form of assessment. Our findings may be surprising.

This year, Arkansas students in grades 3-8 will spend one week taking something called the Augmented Benchmark Exam. This test includes items geared specifically to measure progress on Arkansas curricular standards and questions that permit comparisons with students across the country. Our youngest students, those enrolled in K-2, will take a nationally standardized exam, and students in our high schools will continue to take end-of-course exams in algebra, geometry and literacy.

To be sure, that sounds like a lot of testing, but is it really?

Let's first consider students in the fifth and seventh grades, the most heavily tested grades in the state. These students will spend a grand total of 12 hours—spread over five days—on our state standardized exams this year. This testing time represents less than 3 percent of the total school days, or about 1 percent of the total instructional hours. And this is in our most heavily tested grades!

As a point of comparison, Arkansas state law mandates that fifth-graders spend 36 hours each year in physical education classes. Thus, for every hour that pupils are demonstrating how much they have progressed in language, math, science and social studies, they spend at least three hours in gym class.

Some have argued, however, that it is not fair or accurate to count only the actual test-taking time when measuring the burden imposed by standardized tests. We are reminded that the equation must include the countless hours that students spend preparing for the test or that the teachers spend "teaching to the test." Of course, the term "teaching to the test" connotes dreary images of teachers relentlessly drilling students on rote memorization and basic facts and filling in bubble sheets.



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If our teachers are doing this, we agree that this represents poor pedagogy and is not in keeping with the standards of the profession. On the other hand, "teaching to test" done properly might actually be helping students to master the skills and material that count.

Consider teaching to a test of reading comprehension, which requires the application of critical thinking skills. Teachers may prepare their students by working on sample problems, and they may spend time instructing students on how to identify a passage's main idea. Teachers may also show students how to use context clues to figure out unknown words. Further, teachers may help students to identify supporting evidence or conclusion sentences. These analytical reading skills are precisely what teachers should be teaching anyway, so using this instructional time for test prep might not be such a bad thing after all.

Focusing instruction on skills that matter is just one of the values of this testing regimen. The second benefit is that the test data on student progress are valuable for diagnosing student learning difficulties. Standardized tests enhance educators' abilities to pinpoint learning needs. The value of standardized assessments is that the measuring stick is external, and therefore more objective. Third, standardized tests help the public to determine if schools are meeting their charge of educating students on learning standards that have been developed by diverse, carefully chosen committees of parents and educators.

So the next time you hear the person in the parking lot or grocery store lamenting the coming of testing time, you might offer an alternative thought: Perhaps we aren't testing enough.

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