



Opinion Editorial

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Go Ahead: Teach to the Test

By: Gary Ritter and Stuart Buck

Each spring, thousands of Arkansas students sit for a few hours of standardized assessments so that educators, parents and policymakers can gauge the progress of our schools and students. At about the same time, critics of standardized testing complain that teachers are so busy "teaching to the test" that there is no time for genuine teaching or real learning. Of course, what well-meaning, thoughtful educator would want to reduce all of the important objectives of education to a test?

But despite criticisms of standardized testing, there has been little rigorous analysis of the concept of "teaching to the test." Toward that end, we have decided to put the concept of teaching to the test, well, to the test. So, is "teaching to the test" really that big of a problem?

Most broadly, teaching to the test occurs when teachers modify their instructional practices-or content-to ensure that students are ready for the tests. It is certainly true that educators might choose to "teach to the test" in harmful or inappropriate ways. During testing season, we hear stories of teachers who put their students to sleep with repetitious drilling of one test item after another; we hear of schools in which students might be encouraged to "stay home" on test day; and we even hear of outright cheating on the state assessments so that school results can appear better than they might have been.

There is little debate that these practices represent bad pedagogy and are most certainly unhelpful for our students and even unethical. Nevertheless, the gamesmanship and cheating reported each year are isolated examples-we have no evidence that these problems are widespread. In any event, these events do not illustrate the flaws of standardized testing; rather, they demonstrate that a small minority of professionals have chosen to behave in an unprofessional way.

Others are concerned that standardized testing encourages teachers to focus too heavily on tested skills within tested subjects. This criticism is based on the very plausible theory of "what is tested is what is taught." Well, then, the teaching will only be too narrow if the test content is too narrow. Fortunately, we find no evidence that the Arkansas Benchmark tests are too narrow, or



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that they fail to test a wide scope of material. To the contrary, the Arkansas tests seem to measure a broad sweep of skills and materials that children are supposed to learn.

Finally, with the advent of wider testing, there have been claims of teachers leaving the field because standardized testing requirements have robbed them of their creativity. The art of teaching, this argument goes, is reduced to checking off a list of items that will likely be tested later in the year. However, it is not at all clear why this should be the case.

committees of educators, leaders and community members, simply indicate what students should know and be able to do. Neither the tests nor the curricular frameworks force teachers to adopt any particular teaching style.

Teachers are still free to be as imaginative as they can be—as long as, at the end of the day, the children have been taught the necessary concepts and skills. Indeed, inventive instruction focused on the frameworks is what good teachers do each day.

Students in Arkansas are fortunate to live in a state with thoughtful curricular standards and comprehensive assessment instruments that are aligned to the standards. Thus, if the testing critics are correct and thousands of professional, hard-working teachers throughout Arkansas are "teaching to the test," then that is okay.

It may be true that some teachers sometimes engage in poor pedagogical practices in an effort to beat the tests, but they are missing the point—the best way to beat the tests is to ensure that our students have the skills and content-knowledge they need to score well on them.

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