



Elementary school Principal Peter DeWitt writes about students' social and emotional health, and how educators can help young people find common ground. He can be found at www.petermdewitt.com.

There Is a Silver Bullet to Save Education

By Peter DeWitt on October 11, 2012 10:57 AM

Testing, although seen as a way to hold schools accountable, has done nothing more than hold schools to a 20th century model of educating students.

We have all heard the comment that there isn't a silver bullet to save education. I have said it from time to time but after thinking about it, there really is a silver bullet that can help us regain competitiveness and creativity. That silver bullet is getting rid of high stakes testing. I understand that at this point in our high stakes testing era it sounds impossible. After all, many of us have been giving state tests every spring for over a decade (Standardized Tests and its Victims by Alfie Kohn).

Those few weeks involve more than just giving tests. It's the prep before the test, the money spent on testing, the stress of testing on the part of teachers, students and parents, and it's also what gets lost in the time that could be spent engaging in better instruction. Testing, although seen as a way to hold schools accountable, has done nothing more than hold schools to a 20th century model of educating students. It forces many teachers to teach to the text and to the test. Testing has, in the words of Sir Ken Robinson, killed creativity (How Standardized Testing Damages Education by Fair Test).

If we really want to change the system, it needs to begin with testing. The millions of dollars spent on testing in each state could really be used to assist schools in acquiring better resources such as technology, books, professional development for staff and other resources needed to move forward. Schools could spend more time trying to increase bandwidth than test scores. All schools would have the opportunity to innovate rather than focus on a test that is really only written for one kind of learner.

Helping Schools AND Holding Them Accountable

State education departments know which schools are in trouble or failing, just like superintendents know which principals are lack luster, and principals know which teachers are not doing an adequate job teaching students. Those numbers are far less than the number of teachers, administrators and most of all students, who are subjected to testing.

Unfortunately, states and the federal government are making blanket rules for all schools when it's only a few that have real issues. Instead of holding them to getting higher scores on tests that they may never get higher scores on, the money saved by not buying expensive tests could be used to help these schools gain resources that they need. Instead of waking up and feeling as though every day is Groundhog's Day states could make real advances with these schools.

Schools could invest in:

Universal Pre-K Programs

High quality before and after school programs

Health and wellness education to meet the diverse needs of their students

Deeper learning than often gets interrupted at test time

It is possible to cancel state tests. A few years ago New York State ended the fifth grade state social studies exam. It was a welcomed end to yet another state test. It's interesting because most schools did well on that test and that was the one that was cancelled. However, in the years since getting rid of the fifth grade social studies exam, schools have indeed continued to teach social studies. They didn't cancel social studies because there wasn't a test. Schools will continue to teach ELA, math and science without state tests.

I would go so far as to say that schools would do a better job of teaching those subjects because they could be more creative. There wouldn't be a worry that they had to stick to the textbook that told them which lesson they had to teach on which day. Sure, many teachers are creative and don't do that type of teaching, but many new teachers may feel they have to because the stakes are too high (Effects of State Testing Programs on Elementary Schools with High Concentrations of Student Poverty-Good News or Bad News? By Carol Ann Tomlinson et al).

I Will Grant You That

One of the other issues that comes up a great deal is that of competitive grants. In the words of John Stossel....Give me a break! How can schools possibly go for grants when they don't have the people to do the work? Grants are a valuable resource for schools so states and the federal government should find a balance between the money they provide and the grants they offer. It's just not possible for schools to go after grants that they may or may not get.

We have to get away from this present day accountability on steroids because it is taking the focus off of the positive impact of education. Teachers and administrators are really trying to avoid the typical pitfalls of over-thinking accountability and testing. However, it is impossible to spend a day where the topic does not come up. Children will be looked at differently because they are a 1, 2, 3 or 4. As hard as adults will try, it will not be avoided.

In an effort to create a better educational system, policymakers and politicians who lack an understanding of education are bring our present educational model back decades and by the time they figure that out there will be a generation of students who grew up not finding their strengths, or worse, not feeling that anyone really cared about their strengths.

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