

## High test scores are nice ... but there's more

**KRT FORUM**  
By Dorothy Rich  
(KRT)

I like high student test scores, but what I don't like is what many school districts across the country are doing to try to get them. Cuts are being made in arts and music and guidance — in any area that somehow is considered non-essential for school achievement. The problem is that they are essential.

The concept of what constitutes student success has moved to test scores, virtually alone. With the just released disappointing test scores for charter schools, a staunch advocate of testing and charter schools, Dr. Chester Finn, formerly of the U.S. Department of Education, writes: "When judging schools, one ought not settle for absolute test scores."

Right! Perhaps these charter school scores, by illustrating the narrowness of how we judge schools today, will set off the needed, wider discussion of what really matters in education and what schools should be accountable for. My answer: Test scores, yes, but well beyond.

We don't have to return to a classical education of Latin and Greek to provide for today's education. Yet, more than ever, our children live in a smaller, global world. We have to try to graduate students who know foreign languages, are aware of diverse cultures, history and the larger world. Reading and math are basic but not enough.

Putting across this message of expanded achievement beyond the usual tests is a prime assignment for educators. Yet, many today, fearful for their own jobs, are not doing this perhaps because it's believed that the public likes "data." The public does deserve the facts ... all the facts. Low test scores are an alarm signal but not the only one. Low test scores can result from a number of factors including poor tests, untrained teachers and unmotivated students.

A recent survey from Arizona on parents' opinions of the public schools reported that 34 percent believe schools teach the basics but only 6 percent believe that schools motivate students.

Even well educated professionals don't always know what to do. Mistakes, as they say, "are made." I have made my share of them. In my 50 years in education, I have held a number of wrong ideas and half truths. Many of these still govern what is done in the name of education today. Recently, I started to compile a list of wrong ideas and half truths still at large. Here are two that pertain to testing.

### **TEST SCORES ARE THE BEST MEASURES OF CHILDREN'S ACHIEVEMENT: WRONG IDEA**

Tests are helpful, yet, they are but one piece of understanding about a child's achievement. Tests measure only what tests can measure. This means that a test can measure a child's vocabulary but only for the words that the test asks about. The test measures how well a child can do certain math procedures but only the ones included on the test.

Tests are basic, usually minimal, evaluations, often called "snapshots." A test cannot measure for example, the extent of a child's imaginative and critical thinking. A test cannot measure a child's confidence and common sense. When we think of a test as one measure and we look as well to other ways of evaluating progress, including our own eyes and ears, then we put tests appropriately into perspective.

### **USE BETTER TESTS: HALF TRUTH**

Tests can always get better. When we use multiple-choice tests, students are given a limited selection of answers, and these are often based on limited knowledge. We find wrong "right" answers even on national tests.

Essay tests provide a wider range for students to show what they know and don't know. But, these are expensive to grade and are vulnerable to the grader's subjectivity. In one of my classes for teachers to train them in grading essays, the same essay distributed across the group of teachers received a spectrum of grades from C minus to A. Students to be served well by tests need a variety of tests and many different ways to show what they know.

To build test scores, we need to build students, not just for Friday's test but all the tests to come as our children become adults. Schools perform a variety of functions from the specialized work of serving the handicapped to the broad scale effort of educating all children for life in a democracy. Children need multiple ways to think and to succeed. They need to learn so much more than tests can test.

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