

What Can a Flawed Test Tell Us, Anyway?

Many of my students won't even try to ace our state's mandated exams this year. I can't say I blame them.

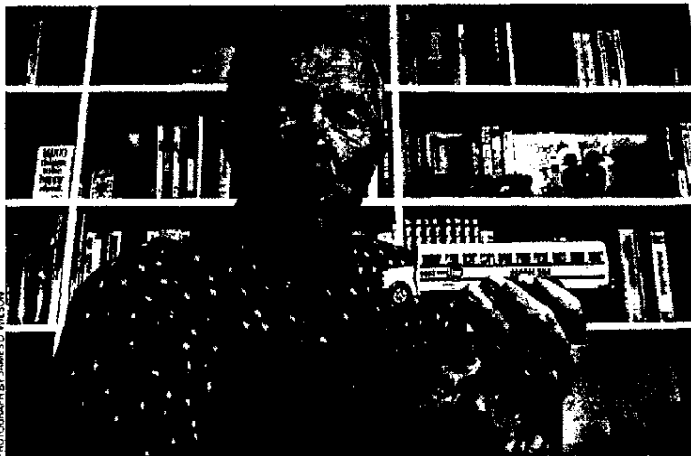
By HAL URBAN

WHILE MONITORING A test in my high-school U.S.-history class last spring, I was a bit surprised to find one of my most conscientious students doodling on his paper rather than filling in answers. I was equally surprised when another of my honor-roll students completed a one-hour test section in a matter of minutes by answering every question with the letter *c*. Why would students who consistently score 95 percent or higher on my exams deliberately tank this one? Their answer was as simple as it was logical: "This one doesn't count."

The test wasn't one of mine. It was part of the agonizing annual ritual that is mandated testing. Our school administration does an excellent job of working out the logistics of giving the six-day, multi-subject test, and our teachers monitor it in a professional manner. We do everything we can to convince our students that the test is important. "Our scores will appear in the newspapers," we tell them. "The public will judge us by what it sees," we add. And we plead with them to do the best they can. Many do, but too many don't even try.

Students want to know two things when a teacher announces an assignment: "Does it count?," and if it does, "How much is it worth?" They've grown up in a society that's founded on an incentive-reward system. They've been conditioned to ask, "What's in it for me?" In the case of state testing, at least in California, the answer is nothing. Test scores do not affect a student's grade and they have no bearing on graduation.

To make matters worse, there are significant problems with the exam itself. I read over the test while my kids were taking it, and in a discussion afterward many students confirmed my belief that it hadn't measured the important things they'd learned in my class. There were questions about matters so trivial I hadn't bothered to teach them, questions that were poorly writ-



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ten, questions that had two correct answers with instructions to choose one. Then there were the questions about facts so obscure that I couldn't have answered them.

One of my students called the test unfair. When I asked her to explain, she gave two reasons: "For one thing, we should only be tested on what we're taught. For another, there's no way to prepare for this thing." While educators in some states are forced to follow rigid teaching "scripts" that cover only tested material, I wasn't given any guidelines. A few weeks before the exam, I asked the vice principal if I could obtain a list of concepts and facts my students should be

familiar with. She said no. The reason? If I had the list I would "teach to the test."

I guess I've been doing it wrong for the past 35 years. I've always taught to the test. Let's say I'm teaching a unit on the Great Depression. I give a pretest to find out what my students already know. Then I give them a list of facts, terms, people and concepts they should be able to identify or explain at the end of the unit. In other words, I let them know what they're accountable for. No other system would be fair.

Another major flaw with the test is that it's based on the assumption that "one size fits all." Research in education theory suggests that effective teachers are those who understand their students' different needs and learning styles. In our school there are hundreds of advanced-placement students who are headed to the top colleges. There are also hundreds of students who are still learning the English language. Why should they all take the same test?

Because I'm active in the character-education movement (the push to teach students positive behavior traits as well as aca-

demics), I attend conferences and speak at schools in more than 20 states each year. It's the same everywhere. Educators under scrutiny from the public feel enormous pressure to get those test scores up. The days set aside for administering mandated tests (along with the accompanying paperwork and schedule changes) eat into valuable class time. And all this to give kids a poorly worded test that doesn't count? It's no wonder they're exasperated.

The politicians, of course, love the testing. They can say they're "holding schools accountable." That has a nice ring to it,

but it ignores a basic truth: no one test can measure what teachers do 180 days a year. Why not employ a more comprehensive method of evaluation—like sending in a panel of educators each year to rate academic programs and student progress? After all, teachers don't just help students learn facts, we help them learn to problem-solve, communicate more effectively and increase their sensitivity toward others.

I think my colleagues and I do a pretty good job in all those areas. It's too bad that a standardized test will never show it.

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