

**SOURCE:** New York (NY) Times

**AUDIENCE:** 13,165,830 [provided by Nielsen//NetRatings]

**DATE:** 09-24-2010

**HEADLINE:** Letters – Ways to Measure Student Learning – NYTimes.com

Source Website

Letters

Ways to Measure Student Learning

Published: September 23, 2010

To the Editor:

Enlarge This Image

Shannon May

"Scientifically Tested Tests, " by Susan Engel (Op-Ed, Sept. 20), is a breath of fresh air. We have better, more humanistic and authentic ways to judge students (TM) learning rather than succumbing to "laboring once again in the shadow of standardized tests. "

Prospective teachers coming out of many teacher education programs are familiar with the range of assessments in students (TM) learning. The larger pragmatic " and moral " issue is: Even when they know what works well for student learning and assessment, what do they do in the face of the tremendous pressure to teach to the test?

Especially with our current economic woes, it is tough for me to tell them to give up their jobs and take the moral high road.

We have created a culture of fear, and we wind up schooling " standardizing " students, not truly educating them.

If we want an educated American citizenry, we need to summon our collective moral courage, if not outrage, in the face of the dubious value of standardized testing.

John Gabriel

Chicago, Sept. 20, 2010

The writer is an associate professor at the School of Education, DePaul University.

To the Editor:

Thank you, Susan Engel, for offering options to the current formats for testing and for alerting us to what we really want to know about our children. Can they think? Can they reason? Do they read? Can they apply what they know?

Janice Koch

Fulton, Md., Sept. 20, 2010

The writer is professor emerita, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Hofstra University, and past

president of the Association for Science Teacher Education.

To the Editor:

Susan Engel has it right: there are more educationally sound ways to measure what children know and can do than fill-in-the-bubble, high-stakes tests. What (TM)s more, they work.

With a test waiver granted by the Regents, a consortium of high schools across New York State uses a system of school-based, practitioner-developed and externally validated performance-based assessment.

Such a system requires students to demonstrate college-ready proficiency in extended analytic writing, critical thinking, problem solving and oral communication across subject disciplines in order to graduate. The results? Higher graduation rates, lower dropout rates and better college-level performance than their test-assessed peers.

While the system is more demanding of teachers, it is also more professionally satisfying. That (TM)s probably why so many teachers and schools want to participate.

So why the foot-dragging by school officials? Perhaps it (TM)s just easier for politicians and school officials to use public relations pundits and their manipulated numbers to mislead parents and the public.

Ann Cook

Director, New York

Performance Standards Consortium

New York, Sept. 21, 2010

To the Editor:

Susan Engel is right that we have narrowed our choices about how and what to test in our schools. Her list of alternative indicators of student knowledge, skill, interest and ability are all worth pursuing.

But I doubt that any of them would be of much help to a teacher trying to assist a child having trouble learning his phonics, a student who can (TM)t grasp long division or a group that is unmotivated and seems disconnected from learning.

Conventional standardized tests " with their attendant loss of context, meaning and personal experience " are certainly not the answer. Performance assessment through observation is.

Our research on low-income, urban, minority children enrolled in kindergarten to third grade shows that those who have been in classrooms where teachers use observational techniques far outperform a matched group in reading and math.

This is not because any kind of testing " performance-based or not " is a magic bullet. It (TM)s because performance assessment changes the way teachers teach by focusing their attention on all children across all curriculum domains over time in relation to standards. This is the alternative we need in our public schools.

Samuel J. Meisels

Chicago, Sept. 20, 2010

The writer is president of *Erikson Institute*, a graduate school in child development.

To the Editor:

To Susan Engel (TM)s examples of weaknesses in standardized testing, others would add the tests (TM) proneness to manipulation by coaching and by annual adjustments.

Since coaching concentrates on specific topics and skills tested, it limits broader learning in not only literacy and math, the two most widely tested subjects, but also many other important subjects like social studies, history and the arts.

In my state, Arkansas, test vendors change every few years. The specific psychometrics used to make different vendors (TM) test results comparable and the annual equalizations for scoring the same vendors (TM) tests from year to year are not disclosed. Thus, we lack confidence in year-to-year variations.

After all the years of testing, with their increased importance and their many shortcomings, can we move to the broader assessments suggested by Ms. Engel?

Jim Wohlleb

Little Rock, Ark., Sept. 20, 2010

The writer has worked as a statistician and evaluator for the Little Rock School District.

Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company

***Highlights: Erikson Institute***