Knowledge Quest
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Column: Real Questions, Good Answers
Title: Can School Media Programs Help Raise Standardized Test Scores?
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Real Questions, Good Answers provides answers to those absolutely right-on questions we repeatedly get from outside our profession. The editor, Doug Johnson, Director of Media and Technology in the Mankato Public Schools invites readers to submit actual questions and write those articulate answers needed for Board members, principals, teachers and others who question the role of the school library and media specialists. Direct submissions to: Doug Johnson johnsd9@mail.mankato.msus.edu

Like it or not, standardized testing has become the 600 pound gorilla of education. Project-based learning, curricular innovation, and practice with new forms of authentic assessment have taken a backseat to increased emphasis on traditionally taught basic skills instruction.

Calls for higher levels of accountability by business leaders, politicians and the media have led nearly every state to adopt requirements that students must pass proficiency tests in order to graduate. The percentage of students passing these tests is then used to measure and compare districts, individual schools, and teachers and praise or punish the same. (I am not sure why they are not used to measure the effectiveness of departments of education, state governments or communities. Now that might make some sense.)

While the backlash against standardized tests seems to be growing[1], they are for most of us a reality into the foreseeable future. They may be crude and biased, but they are what most of our society believes they understand and has faith in. U.S. students will remain the most tested in the world.

From my experience here in Minnesota, I can't truthfully say that high-stakes basic skills testing has been all bad. In fact, I've liked what has happened in our district since kids who can't demonstrate they can read, compute or write at a minimal level aren't being allowed to graduate. Suddenly these invisible children whom we've quietly passed on from grade to grade until passing them out of the system have become glaringly visible. And as a result, our district has magically found some resources to provide remedial instruction, summer school and early reading intervention programs. It really appears more kids in our district are becoming functionally literate because of the pressures resulting from these tests.

Our goal of course is not to have *anyone* fail these competency tests the *first* time. By the 8th grade, we'd like everyone to be performing at the 8th grade level. So like most schools, we have strategized about how we can bring all kids up to snuff.

Most schools' standardized test improvement plans seem to be divided into two tracks: short term fixes and long-term changes.

Short-term fixes usually include things like:

- Teaching kids test-taking skills and giving practice tests
- Making sure everyone is well-fed and rested on test day
- Strategically scheduling testing at optimal times in optimal places
- Cheerleading, bribing, and propagandizing about the importance of the tests
- Figuring out how to keep the really poor performing students from being included in the count

Hey, these things work. Of course, they really don't make kids much smarter or better able to function in the non-academic world, but everyone gets happy when for the first year or two test scores rise.

The long term change efforts that actually result in improved student abilities as measured by tests is of course is where schools should be concentrating. Long after the quick fixes have played out, there are some real ways your school's library media program can help achieve long term improvements. Some of these include:

1. Aligning, defining, and teaching the curriculum. (AKA –teaching to the test).
Basically this means is what is being tested actually being taught. If fractions tested on the 3rd grade standardized test, but taught in your district's 4th grade math curriculum, it's easy to see why a child might not do well. A couple areas here where your media specialist should get involved:

- Check to see if research and reference skills are being tested, and ask your media specialist to determine if the test your school is using reflects the tools actually in your media center. Do your students use an electronic catalog but see card catalog drawers on the test? Do your students use an online magazine index but get tested on *The Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*? I don't have a clue how to deal with a problem like this, but you as a school administrator and your board need to understand the problem.
- Check to see what type of reading children are tested on. Most school's reading instruction is heavy on fiction and narrative non-fiction. Most tests see if kids can read factual exposition. Your media center should have a wealth of good materials that have interesting expository writing: newspapers, magazines, and non-fiction books. Ask your media specialist how she is getting them into the hands of kids so they can do meaningful practice reading.

2. Building extra time to practice skills and encourage reading practice by ALL students.
It's unarguable that kids who like to read, who read willing and joyfully also tend to read better[2]. Good media programs bolster the efforts of the classroom teacher and reading teacher whose responsibility it is to teach kids how to read by helping kids want to read. Again, kids who like to read, read better because of the practice. This is a truth that cannot be heard too often by parents and teachers.

Work with your media specialist to determine if your school media program:

- Provides accessible reading materials for a wide range of interests on a wide range of topics.
- Promotes reading across the curriculum by providing teachers with bibliographies and classroom collections of exciting content area specific reading materials.
- Promotes reading through specially designed activities and programs. One electronic reading promotion, *Accelerated Reader*, has been shown specifically to increase student performance on standardized test scores.[3]

3. Using project-based learning to reinforce basic skills through application of those skills.

Quick, what's the formula for measuring the volume of a cylinder[4]? I'll bet you memorized it for a test at one time, so why don't you remember it now? Constructivists and project-based learning activists have long purported that actually applying skills leads to deep understandings that result in well-remembered learning.[5] Professor Royal Van Horn articulates what most of us have seen for ourselves:

> "At first I was surprised to learn that the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills is precise enough to pick up marked differences in teaching styles, but I can always pick out the drill-and-practice teachers and those who use a more balanced approach that includes a lot of student writing and emphasizes children's literature. Guess what, the students who write a lot and read a lot do much better on the tests than those who do lots of dittos

I am not sure "teaching to the test" is nearly as bad an idea as "learning for the test." The harshest criticism of standardized testing is how little is actually measured by such tests. No one wants students to be content with reading for comprehension, knowing basic number facts, or being able to write a few complete sentences (dumbing down the curriculum). We want to produce critical readers, real-world math users, and passionate, effective writers. These tests should truly only be a stopgap measure to help catch the very neediest of students – not a very low bar to which to hold all our students. Project-based learning that is planned, co-taught and assessed by your school's media specialist will always ask children to go beyond the minimum, and in doing so, have no difficulty in passing tests that measure just the minimum.

4. Designing assessment and reporting methods that go beyond standardized testing to measure school efficacy.

Perhaps the best thing your school media specialist can do is to continuously advocate for and to actively help create assessments for both individuals and schools that give parents and communities far more meaningful measures of abilities and efficacies. I worry that standardized tests:

- Ignore intelligences like creativity, compassion and humor.
- Devastate the confidence of children with learning difficulties or test anxiety.
- Ignore artistic and physical talents.
- Tell us far too little about individual areas of academic weaknesses.
- Tell us only where children are at, not how much they have grown.
- Ignore the special populations that districts might be serving that may not score well on normed tests (non-English speakers, highly transient populations, etc.)

Media programs need to lead the development of ways of measuring and reporting out mastery of many different kinds of learning experiences. As a parent, yes I want to know my son's

standardized test scores. But I also want to see projects that require higher-level thinking skills, view a critiqued portfolio of his work that shows growth, read reports of his ability to work collaboratively, review evidence of his ability to self-assess his work, and watch him use his skills to make a thoughtful difference in society.

Soft, fuzzy-headed, feel-good claptrap? I don't really think so. Businesses have been asking schools to produce graduates not just with basic skills, but more importantly with the ability to solve problems, to communicate, to collaborate, to be organized, and to be creative. Problem is we've only had the crude tools of standardized tests to show what students know. Donald Norman reminds us that "The danger is that things that cannot be measured play no role in scientific work and are judged to be of little importance."[7] The development of new kinds of tools to measure student learning and to aggregate individual data from those measurements that will show school effectiveness is probably the most important thing we as educators can be doing right now. Your media specialist should be using her expertise in project-based learning and authentic assessment to help make those developments happen.

Conclusion

A variety of credible studies[8] tell us that schools with good library media programs tend to have children who do well academically as measured by standardized test scores. So does common sense. As administrators, we should not be asking ourselves if we should be devoting resources to improving test scores or to improving media programs. Improved media programs *do* equal improved test scores – and more.

Sources:

1.Critics include:

- Popham, W. James "Using Standards and Assessment: Why Standardized Tests Don't Measure Educational Quality." *Educational Leadership*, Volume 56 Number 6 March 1999
- FairTest: The National Center for Fair & Open Testing <http://www.fairtest.org/>
- Rethinking Schools OnlineVolume 13, No. 3 - Spring 1998-99 <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/Archives/13_03/13_03.htm>
- Kohn, Alfie, "Only For My Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform." Phi Delta Kappan, Apr98, Vol. 79 Issue 8, p568,
- Neill, D. "Transforming Student Assessment" *Phi Delta Kappan* September 1997 (among other articles)

2. These writers emphasize the importance of practice reading:

- Krashen, Stephen D, *Every Person a Reader: An Alternative to the California Task Force Report on Reading.* Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates, 1996.
- Trelease, Jim *The Read-Aloud Handbook, 4th Edition*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.

3. Paul, Terrance and others: *Impact of the Accelerated Reader Technology-Based Literacy Program on Overall Academic Achievement and School Attendance.* Madison, WI: Institute for Academic Excellence, Inc., 1996.

4. If L is the length of a cylinder, and r is the radius of one of the bases of a cylinder, then the volume of the cylinder is $L \times pi \times r^2$ (or so claims my 8th grade son). Now how many of you remember what pi is?

5. The Buck Institute for Education's Project Based Learning site at <http://www.bie.org/pbl/index.html> provides a good overview.

6. Van Horn, Royal. "Improving Standardized Test Scores," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Mar97, Vol. 78 Issue 7, p584

7. Norman, Donald. *Things That Make Us Smart.* Reading, MA:Addison-Wesley, 1993.

8. A few of these studies can be found in:

- Didler, Elaine, "Research on the Impact of School Library Programs on Student Achievement: Implications for School Library Media Professionals," *School Library Media Annual*, Libraries Unlimited, 1984, p. 352.
- "Kissing the Big City Goodbye," *Changing Times*, August, 1990,. p30.
- Loertscher, David V. 'Treasure Mountain IV. The Power of Reading: The Effect of Libraries and Reading Promotion on Reading Competence." School Library Media Annual 12 (1994): 198-99.
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