

Test Delivers Cruel Blow to Struggling Students – April, 2006

The PSSA test swept through Folk Arts Cultural Treasures (FACT) Charter School this past two weeks, leaving behind it a trail of apathy and injustices. FACT Charter School, located at 1118 Market Street in Center City, is a K-5 art school that focuses on preserving world cultures and social identities through cultural arts. It is comprised of many first generation Americans from nearly every neighborhood and ethnic pocket of the city. In my fifth grade homeroom, which is not the most ethnically diverse in the school, eight nationalities are represented.

In theory, this PSSA design holds all principals, teachers, and students accountable for performance and, in a perfect society, in which all students come to school with the intellectual and social tools to succeed, it might even be fair and work well to create an education utopia in the United States. But unlike the uniformity the PSSA prides itself on, students in this state and city are as different as Reading, Math, Social Studies, and Science – all bound together by the thread of education and while some may draw parallels with one another, they all involve different intelligences and backgrounds. As a result, the test's net result winds up being a divisive mechanism between the state's rich and poor, resourced and under-resourced.

The standardized test was conducted for approximately one hour a day for six days. Although the six hours of testing may not sound like a lot of time to someone not close to the education profession, it is a marathon for eight, nine, and ten year-old children, who are not concerned with school and national politics, but are greatly interested in getting on with the business of being a child. For two weeks, the students' routine was interrupted, the structure that binds them and the teachers together, broken down. Even now, a week and a half after the testing days were supposed to be over, students are still being pulled out of class for make-ups, and thus valuable human resources and instructional time are being wasted to complete the testing process.

Last Summer, while planning for it's inaugural school year, Principal and FACT founder Debbie Wei rostered the first fifteen minutes of each school day as a time for morning rituals. Each morning, my fifth graders do a school pledge call and response, and then recite a "Peace Builder" pledge, before greeting each other, first by looking each other in the eye and saying, "Good morning" and later by doing the same in one of their

home languages. But for those six days testing days, there was no time for my students and I to remind ourselves and each other that we would care for one another, learn from elders in our community, respect our and our classmates' cultures, collectively agree to do our part in taking care of the Earth – “Our Home” – pledge to praise each other, to give up putdowns, to seek wise people, to right wrongs, and build peace at home, at school, and in our communities each day. This was because we were too busy trying to comply with PSSA testing regulations. Angelica, a Laotian girl from South Philly didn't have time to wish Juan, a Puerto Rican boy from Germantown, a “Good Morning,” because Juan was preoccupied with scarfing down a bowl of cornflakes and chugging a few ounces of apple juice, because he was late for school and thus the test, thanks to his bus that was caught in traffic.

Inconveniences and changes of schedule, of course, are a reality in life that students need to incur to prepare themselves for adulthood. Still, each day as I distributed answer sheets and pencils, I found it all a little ironic. Those tests, which were supposed to gauge students' developing academic skills were hindering the progression of their developing social skills. I still haven't reached a conclusion as to what the proper balance is between holding students, teachers, and principals accountable for their work and “over-testing”, but I do know that developing personal and professional relationships is as valuable as any real-world skill.

My fifth graders, whose schooling has taken place throughout this President's administration and in turn have been taking these tests their entire educational lives, know this time of year as one to dread. They cringe upon hearing testing announcements and different students respond to this stress in different ways. A few become responsibly academic, others become stressfully energetic, and still others sink into deep apathy, putting forth little effort or even choosing to skip school entirely on testing days. The latter tends to be symptomatic of students with low academic skills and often unstable home lives. They seem to know how important this test is to their school and a few even seem to rejoice in putting forth their weakest efforts, knowing that they are passively fighting against a system and nation that, they believe, has been cruel to them.

During the middle of one test, I confiscated a model airplane that, a student from North Philly, snuck in behind his testing shield and was playing with, while he was

supposed to be reading short passages and answering comprehension questions. This same student later wrote down an eight word response to an essay question that asked him to describe a character's courage, citing examples from the story he had just read. '...very, very, very' made up three of those eight words and the writing prompt itself was three times as long as his response. This student then declared himself finished with the section, putting his head down and sleeping for the final forty-five minutes of the testing period.

This effort was certainly not indicative of the boy's intelligence. He is a gifted speaker and thinker and, in the right circumstances a decent reader and writer. But, he also suffers from severe Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which requires heavy doses of medicine to allow him to focus throughout a test. In the weeks and months leading up to the test, his mother was so neglectful about giving him the medicine that he had to take it minutes after arriving at school under the supervision of the school nurse. The medicine took much longer to take effect than the test took to complete.

He still might have performed well, however, had he gone to school ten or fifteen miles west of 1118 Market Street, because there's a good chance that if he did, he would have been at a school that would have been able to provide an available room for him to work alone, with a counselor to monitor him. When he became stressed, he might've been able to stretch, talk to the counselor about whatever was on his mind, and maybe even jump or run around a little. But then he'd also be going to a school that receives twenty-one thousand more dollars per pupil per year. Instead, his under-funded school's support team was busy neglecting their specialty jobs to administer the test for the entire student body.

While the boy lamented his confiscated airplane and later slept, a Vietnamese girl just a few feet away, worked diligently throughout the allotted time, carefully reading the same writing prompt and several times reviewing her requested two-paragraph response, which was littered with mis-conjugated verbs. In the eyes of those grading these tests, it doesn't matter that she's lived in the U.S. for less than two years and rarely hears English spoken outside her home. She'll still be held to the same standards of a student who's family has been in this country for centuries and has been read to in English all their life,

and it won't really matter that that girl is unbelievably creative, has an IQ that is off the charts, and that her reading and writing skills are rapidly improving thanks to her and her teachers' dedication. She'll just be a number that will be logged into a computer, which will spit out data that will help determine her individual, class, and school rankings.

The rest of my students' efforts fell somewhere in the middle. One Indonesian girl didn't touch her pencil to her piece of scrap paper for an entire Math problem-solving section, but as soon as her test and answer booklets were closed, used that same pencil and paper to sketch a cartoon figure, which to my nascent artistic eye, appeared professionally done. Initially, I felt irritated that she put forth such a meager effort, but the more I looked at the drawing, the more I understood why she would look at a thick testing booklet and a piece of scrap paper and find that little white rectangle a whole lot more intriguing. Within that slip of paper, she saw a super hero waiting to surface. In that testing booklet, all she could see was school and government politics and insurmountable work she couldn't possibly process effectively.

The last person to finish each testing section was always the same American-born, Cambodian boy sitting one table behind the cartoonist. The closing of his book and folding up of his testing shield did not signify the end of the deafening hour to hour-and-a-half silence, because each class had to be finished with testing before anyone was allowed to make noise. Otherwise, they might distract students testing in adjoining rooms. While the majority of students seemed to resent this marathon of sitting in silence, this boy reveled in it. Each day, he wrote a mini-skit, derived from a recent Social Studies lesson, for the class to act out.

Once every student has completed all six testing sections, the booklets will be packaged and sent to Harrisburg. There, the aforementioned students' test scores will be averaged together with the rest of their classmates. The class and school will be tagged with a number and thus a skill level and ranking. With this information, the state government will decide whether or not we've met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and thus if we're fit to be a school or would be better off shut down. The boy with ADHD, the English Language Learner, cartoonist, and playwright will all be lumped together and receive the same amount of money. To the casual observer, this might not seem like a great injustice. After all, the English Language Learner and play writer will probably

make much more out of their educations than the other two. Life and education is more what the individual makes of it, not what they are given.

However, those students deserve just as good of teachers and resources as any child in the state and as long as the state government continues to allocate money on a wealth and ranking system, the gap between rich and poor, resourced and under-resourced will continue to increase. In turn, great minds and great workers, which underfunded, low-performing schools feature a lot of, will not be nurtured and will fall far short of reaching their maximum potential.