

# Let's Dump the Obsession With Standardized Testing



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Larry Ferlazzo FOLLOW

Opinion Contributor, Education Week

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

***(This is the third post in a four-part series. You can see Part One here and Part Two here.)***

The new question-of-the-week is:

***What are other ways than standardized-test scores to evaluate the effectiveness of schools?***

In Part One, Holly Spinelli, Tameka Porter, Ph.D., Mary K. Tedrow, and Meghann Seril shared their responses. Holly, Tameka, and Mary were also guests on my 10-minute BAM! Radio Show. You can also find a list of, and links to, previous shows here.

In Part Two, Joseph Rodgers, Lorie Barber, Cindy Garcia, and Mike Kaechele contributed their reflections.

Today, Denita Harris, Jennifer Mitchell, Rebecca Alber, and Amanda Kipnis offer their answers.

## **‘Formative Assessments’**

*Denita Harris serves as a district administrator in the MSD of Wayne Township in Indianapolis. Harris is currently serving in her 24th year in education as the new chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer for her school corporation:*

Standardized-test scores should not be the only indicator that defines the effectiveness of a school. Schools should be evaluated by using a holistic approach that encompasses all educators are required to do when it comes to servicing students.

The days of solely teaching academics are long gone, if they ever existed. Instead, schools are working to educate the “whole” child. A whole-child approach requires that students’ emotional, relational, intellectual, academic, and mental health are cultivated. To my knowledge, there is no standardized test that is able to measure the effectiveness of the number of schools that go beyond schooling students to educating them to thrive in a global society.

When people want to know how effective a school is in educating the whole child, student and family/caregiver voice, academic growth, and student interests/activities, which create a sense of belonging, are key. Student and family/caregiver voices are essential when evaluating the effectiveness of a school. Educators are in the service industry, and like any other industry that provides a service, we should want to know what our students and families/caregivers have to say about the educational services we provide.

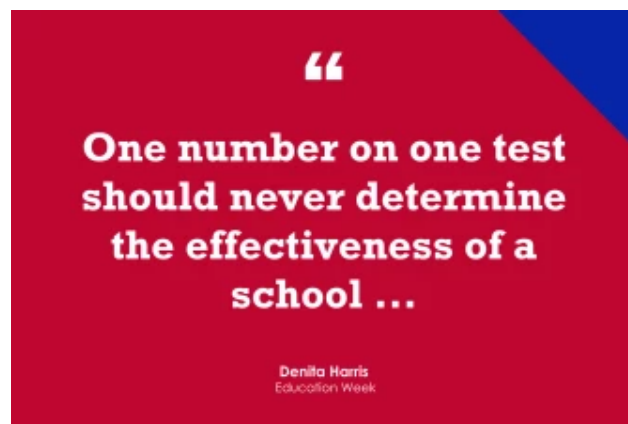
We should be asking how our students and families feel when they enter our school buildings. We should want to know if students find the curriculum engaging and challenging or are our students often bored or completely lost when we do not explain things well. Our families could provide meaningful feedback regarding communication from the school and if they truly feel like they are partners in their child’s education.

Analyzing academic growth on a frequent and consistent basis by utilizing formative assessments is a much better way to determine how effective a school is in educating students. As adults, we

understand that not all students will excel in all things; however, as educators, we have a responsibility to set the bar high, maintain high expectations, and focus on students' assets and not their deficits. When we measure individual growth and make the necessary instructional shifts, we remove the danger of competition and comparison, which can result in low student self-efficacy.

There is an innate desire in all of us to have a sense of belonging and, as a result, be valued for our contributions. Opportunities that allow students to exercise their gifts—sports, drama, speech, sewing, debate, art, etc.—allow students to shine and stand in their truth. Evaluating schools by what opportunities they allow students to get involved in and how many students participate in these opportunities are important in evaluating how diligent and attentive schools are in ensuring every student has an outlet and an opportunity to be a part of the larger school community.

One number on one test should never determine the effectiveness of a school, just like one number on one test should never determine a student's educational trajectory.



## ‘Goal-Setting & Improvement’

*Jennifer Mitchell teaches ELs in Dublin, Ohio. Connect with her on Twitter: @readwritetech or on her blog:*

Twenty years after the passage of No Child Left Behind, many educators and students agree that with increased standardized testing and the pressures attached to it, in fact, too many students are being left farther behind. What have we gained from these years of attempting to quantify the unquantifiable (what does it really mean to score “435” on an English test that included 30+ multiple-choice questions and several essays?!) and measure unique individuals against poorly defined metrics and each other, with such high stakes that students and teachers feel their futures are on the line over a few spring mornings? Stress, confusion, frustration at the lack of agency, and a sense of hopelessness.

Instead, let's measure students, teachers, and schools by what we hope they do: foster academic and social-emotional growth over time, while affirming the unique identities of each student and staff member. At the end of each school year, are all students and staff more skilled in the areas they've practiced than they were at the beginning? Are they happier and healthier, with a better sense of who they are and how they can leverage their uniqueness to impact the world? Do they feel a greater sense of belonging and connection to their school community?

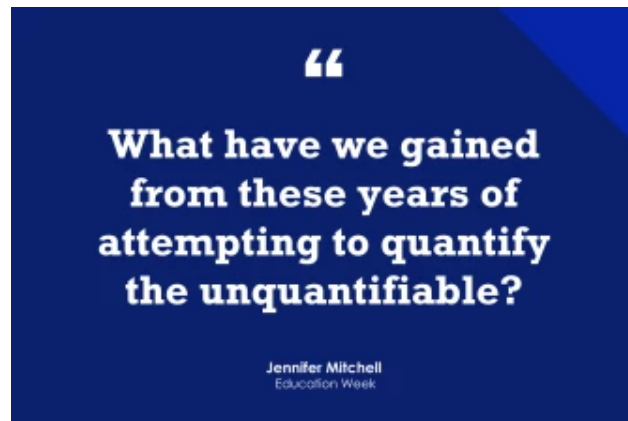
And when we measure these areas, we need to include the participants in the process. Students and staff members should actively contribute to their own assessments by reflecting on their current skills and emotions, demonstrating and analyzing their growth over time, and setting meaningful goals for continued improvement.

In my English-learner classroom, students take pride and ownership in showing their growth throughout the year with frequent goal-setting and reflection in a variety of key areas:

- Reading, writing, and academic / SEL skills forms completed three times a year (in the first month, at the semester, and year-end)
- Current skill-set reflection completed in the first month and at semester, using their form responses
- Daily overview of current learning targets and mini-reflections at the end of each class
- Weekly reading goal and thinking tracker, completed every Monday (green boxes) and Thursday (orange boxes)
- Writing reflection sheet, completed after every major writing assignment and/or unit
- Monthly personal-goal work around a chosen academic or SEL skill, with check-ins every Monday
- Weekly reflection form including sections on academic and SEL progress, as well as a chance to tell me anything else they want (which often yields incredible insights!)
- Frequent conferring with me, while I document key insights to refer to in future conferences (students do a preconference form for writing)
- Some unit-specific goal setting and reflections, such as personalized goals and reflections for our "Slice of Life" blogging unit
- Quarterly class feedback forms where students can voice their perspectives about our class activities and environment

- Year-end class anthology submissions where each student fills two pages with selections of their best and/or favorite writing to submit to a spiral-bound class anthology; copies are given to all class members, the principal, and kept in the classroom for future students to read!
- Year-end annotations of two pieces of their best writing from their anthology selections; students copy the two selections into one Google Doc and use the commenting feature to highlight and explain the writing strategies demonstrated in each piece
- A year-end creative display of their reading growth, visually grouping their book choices in some way (by genre, difficulty, how much they enjoyed them, etc.), accompanied by short reflections on the impact of each book on their growth as a reader. Students design their own visual representation; some students have created reading ladders, maps, bookshelves, or interactive digital presentations.
- Year-end reflections on their reading and writing growth, analyzing evidence from the above reflections and other classwork

When my students are directly involved in the process of analyzing their own work, reflecting on their growth, and setting informed goals for future improvement, assessment becomes an empowering, participatory, ongoing process. They know where they are with specific skills and how they have improved and they know how to use feedback to inform their next steps. Moreover, they feel supported and capable. That's much more meaningful than any number on a standardized test.



## ‘Digital Portfolio’

*Rebecca Alber is an instructor at UCLA’s Graduate School of Education. A teacher educator and literacy specialist, she believes education’s true purpose is for liberation and transformation:*

Standardized tests are typically one sitting and on one day. Along with the pressure of limited time and conditions (fluorescent-lit, cramped classroom, multiple choice only), can this really produce

reliable and valid results? It cannot. In fact, no single measure properly captures what a learner knows and can do and who they are. Simply put, a standardized, multiple-choice test is just a single “snapshot” from one day.

What we need is a “photo album” for each learner. Curriculum experts Carol Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTighe describe this photo album as containing various “photos” (assessments) given in different contexts to reveal a more accurate “portrait” of a child’s knowledge and skills. This means presenting students with assessments on different days using varied modalities. But as we know, this takes time, resources, and commitment from a school/district/state. And the single measure, standardized, multiple-choice test is the least expensive (computers do the scoring) and also supports the meritocratic educational system currently and firmly in place in this country—one built around ranking schools and children.

Students with neurodiversity, English-learners, and poor test-takers particularly get a raw deal when a school overrelies on the single measure and modality standardized test to determine its success. (It’s important to note that when a school does do this, what is revealed is *not* actually the limitations of the test-taker but rather the limitations and deficits *of the school.*)

So, let’s circle back to the photo album approach to assessment: What might this look like?

Think digital portfolio. In that portfolio, a student may have artwork, written pieces that are brief and poetic, and longer pieces that are more detailed and explanatory. There may be audio recordings of the student narrating thoughts on new content learned or explaining a new concept or idea and reflecting on the benefits of this new learning. The portfolio could include slide presentations; quiz and test results; problem-solving charts, graphs and reports; multimedia projects; and also self-assessments, along with peer reviews and teacher reviews of the student’s work.

Teachers should then be provided with pupil-free days so that they can periodically look through these portfolios together, discuss, evaluate, and determine individual and collective student growth. This data can then be shared and discussed with the school leadership team.

Additionally, when a school is determining how effective it is, the school should survey students, families, and faculty so they can provide feedback to the leadership team on such things as the learning environments and school culture and community.

If our education system moved away from this obsession with the single measure of standardized testing and moved toward a more holistic and humanizing approach to evaluating student learning, think of all the ways this could transform our schools and positively impact children.



## School Culture

*Amanda Kipnis is a passionate educator who teaches a 3rd-5th grade special day class for students with moderate to severe disabilities in Lemon Grove, Calif. Amanda was named to the 2020 class of Curriculum Associates Extraordinary Educators:*

I, along with thousands of other educators, have appreciated the limited pandemic shift away from standardized testing. I know it's only a matter of time before we go back to the "old ways;" however, this pandemic has forced us to think outside the box and find new ways of assessing student growth and analyzing the effectiveness of a school. One topic I find promising is the focus on school culture and its correlation to student success.

Kent D. Peterson from the University of Wisconsin-Madison defines school culture as "the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school." School culture is more than just the *feeling* of a school. It is the *soul* of a school and includes everything school-related.

School culture and its connection to academic achievement was not truly researched until the 1970s. Since then, we've learned that a positive school climate is correlated with increased student

achievement while a negative school culture is associated with decreased student success. Therefore, assessing school culture can give you a glimpse into how students are performing academically.

Fortunately, assessing school culture can be very simple with an anonymous survey. A very simple survey exists that evaluates the three main aspects of school culture: collaboration, collegiality,

and teacher efficacy. The School Culture Triage Survey consists of 17 questions and a rating scale from 1-5 (ranging from Never to Always/Almost Always). There are five questions about professional collaboration, six questions about collegial relationships, and six questions about teacher efficacy/self-determination. Questions about collaboration look at how and why staff collaborate and includes determining if teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues. Questions about collegial relationships look at staff behavior in and out of the school environment and includes asking if teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values. The section on teacher efficacy looks at how staff members influence each other and how they respond to adversity. It includes questions asking if members of the school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what they have always done.

Knowing this correlation exists, many educators find it's frustrating how few staff meetings and professional developments have been devoted to school culture. The good news is that districts focusing on staff and student well-being may influence more than just what SEL curricula they decide to use. The questions in the School Culture Triage Survey also provide concrete ideas leaders can immediately implement to improve their school's culture. With a healthy school culture and high expectations for students, one can only assume a school is maximizing student learning and fostering student success!

