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## Testing: An Unfortunate Roadblock In Student Learning

By [Starr Sackstein](#) on January 28, 2016 4:52 AM

Let's stop impeding the learning process with useless testing!



It's state Regent time in NY and that pretty much means we stop classes in the high schools and allow students to either make up tests they've previously failed or allow a small few to accelerate and take a test early.

These mid-year tests weren't around when I was a student in NY, but now it seems to be the time for playing catch up instead of relying only on June testing at the end of the each school year or August testing for the unfortunates who don't pass the first time and are denied the right to walk at graduation.

The idea behind them is good enough. Offer students as many opportunities as possible to pass with proficiency the exams that are required for high school graduation. Unfortunately, many of the students taking these retakes are as ill-prepared the second time as they were the first, if not less so because more time has passed since they've taken the actual class.

They are essentially set up to fail which doesn't do wonders for their self-esteem.

**Part of the problem** is that the student passed the class the test was in, but failed to meet the requirements for the Regent exam itself. These misalignments are troublesome and are cause for pause.

What is happening in the classroom where the students are finding success and how come they can't replicate that on the final exam?

Clearly there are many issues with these exams and after spending a day at a scoring facility, there are also issues with the manner in which they are scored.

First, the exams themselves are not made by the classroom teacher and therefore may have an unfortunate emphasis on material that wasn't necessarily prioritized in the class. Since there is no way of knowing exactly which content will appear and in what ratio, teachers are forced to try to cover as best they can what they feel will be on the test based on prior exams given. (Of course we shouldn't only be teaching classes to align with a test that is out of our hands, right?)

This is only partially productive because they exams change all the time. Some questions appear all of the time in one form or another, but then other emphasis shifts with little or no notice.

In addition to the content challenges, some courses have shifted and changed so much that exams have been completely revamped several times in a short few years and students have been expected to be flexible and prepared for all these changes.

And some students are. The same ones who are likely privileged and have the benefits of tutors and other aids that many low income and minority schools do not have.

In recent years, English and Math have seen the largest amount of change at the peril of many students where the **Common Core exams** were adding additional strain and testing days generating more stress and worry for both teachers and students.

Second, yet equally problematic are the way in which these exams are scored. There is a rubric provided which is suspiciously vague and doesn't particularly align with the task itself (at least this is so in English). There is a lot of room for interpretation which can be both good and bad for students even if all the teachers in a scoring room are told to give the students the benefit of the doubt. Can you tell me honestly what the difference between "insightful" and "thoughtful" is or what the difference looks like?

The secondary problem is a challenge with most testing and grading; subjectivity and human error on the scoring side. We can norm and calibrate all day long, but no group of teachers interpret what they see on the page the same way. There is too much context or not enough and we have our judgments and biases we bring to the table and that is before we factor in expectations and learning values.

This again is why we must advocate for portfolio assessment or continued **formative classroom assessments** or something, anything different from what we are currently doing. These state and standardized tests reflect so little about what students know and can do and hardly illustrate skills that are necessary in the 21st century.

When are we finally going to move on from punishing students by taking away resources and forcing them to sit still and concentrate for [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/work\\_in\\_progress/2016/01/testing\\_an\\_unfortunate\\_roadblo.html?r=1112319054&print=1](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/work_in_progress/2016/01/testing_an_unfortunate_roadblo.html?r=1112319054&print=1)

three or more hours at a clip? When are we going to stop asking them to memorize stupid facts?

If we want them to apply their knowledge to a new task that shows their ability to use the skills they've learned, why does that have to take the form of written timed tests over a two week period for every class they are taking?

How does this in any way mimic tasks they will be performing once they graduate?

The only reason that we are still doing this as a system is because it is what's easiest for those in charge to normalize or standardize the learning that is happening in school, but it's time for a better solution because this one does NOT work for many students.

*What would be your better solution? Please share.*

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