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In Testing, a Principal Leans on Her Experience

By MICHAEL WINERIP

Since 2000, Anna Allanbrook has been the principal of Public School 146 in the Carroll Gardens section of Brooklyn, one of the highest achieving elementary schools in the city. It is so popular that each year she holds an admissions lottery — last spring, 1,538 children applied for 175 slots.

As principal, it is her job to make sure children learn (94.9 percent of the fourth graders were proficient on the 2012 state math test); hire talented teachers (Antoinette Byam, for one, has been awarded grants to study in Ghana, Peru and Mexico and used the research to develop a fifth-grade curriculum on Mayan culture); create an environment where good teachers thrive (the turnover rate is 4 percent); and encourage families to be involved (she holds weekly breakfasts with parents.)

She also believes it is her job to shield students, teachers and parents from the state's ever-expanding standardized testing system and to question its reliability publicly. "At my age, I've seen so many education fads come and go," she says. "It gives me the confidence to trust what we're doing here."

In a letter to parents in April she criticized the newly developed tests as too hard, too confusing and too long. She predicted scores would plummet, which, as city and state officials announced last week, is what happened.

In New York City, 30 percent of third to eighth graders passed the math test, compared with 60 percent on the old, 2012 version of the test.

"As a senior principal I feel a duty to speak honestly about what's going on," she said in an interview. "By my age, my position is relatively safe; I feel like I've learned a lot and should express what younger principals and teachers are too scared to say."

At 58, she is part of a generation that remembers when standardized testing did not dominate. She says from the time she started teaching in the 1980s, there has always been a place for testing to help assess student performance. But she worries that over the last decade, tests have superseded a

teacher's judgment.

The P.S. 146 fourth-grade classes where 94.9 percent were proficient in math last year? This year, as fifth graders, only 25.6 percent of those same students passed. How did such gifted fourth graders become such challenged fifth graders? The problem isn't the fifth-grade teachers, she says. Last year, with the same teachers, 83 per cent of fifth graders passed.

"Neither the 94 percent or the 25 percent reflects reality," Ms. Allanbrook says. In the 1990s, when students took the tests, she says, results weren't distorted by test prep. "You got a clearer sense of a child's strengths and weaknesses," she says. "What could parents possibly learn about their child's abilities from such crazy results?"

Here's one way to think about it: Suppose your worth was measured by how much money you earned for a company, but the fellow who kept track of everyone's earnings periodically forgot how to count.

During the last decade, she has watched as state officials have repeatedly thrown out test results or rejiggered them.

In 2003 the state superintendents' association urged colleges to disregard New York's physics test scores because they were so unreliable. That same year, the state rejected the results of the math test required for graduation after 70 percent of students failed.

In 2004, Ms. Allanbrook was one of many principals who spoke out about how hard the fourth-grade English test was. So in 2005, officials made it easy and scores jumped 10 percentage points statewide.

During the following four years, results soared and by 2009, 82 percent of city students scored proficient in math and 68.8 percent in English.

But in 2010 state officials acknowledged those numbers were embarrassingly inflated and toughened the scoring scale, resulting in only 42 percent passing English and 54 percent math — about the same passage rate as when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg was first elected a decade earlier.

As for this year's precipitous drop, city and state officials attribute it to a new set of tougher learning standards known as the [Common Core](#) that are aimed at encouraging higher-level thinking. While those standards have been adopted in most states, New York pushed to be one of

the first to use new tests, which officials called more rigorous.

City and state officials now say the results aren't reliable enough to use for assessment purposes. They say that the problems are the inevitable glitches that go with introducing any new program and that in the long run, public education will become more rigorous.

Ms. Allanbrook sees good in the Common Core, and says long before it existed, her teachers used many of its principles, like emphasizing nonfiction reading and requiring that students do research papers.

The problem, she says, is the Common Core provides a framework and there are many ways schools can use it, meaning that the content taught at a particular school may not align with questions on the state test.

In her April letter to parents, Ms. Allanbrook wrote that the test was unrealistically hard. ("What 10-year-old understands the difference between loneliness and being alone, especially in poetic form?") She said it was too long for 9- and 10-year-olds (70 minutes a day over six days versus two days of testing in the 1990s) and had questions with more than one answer.

"After the second hour of the third day, (and following two and a half days of pretty impressively sustained effort)," she wrote, "one student had enough. He only had two questions left, but he couldn't keep going. He banged his head on the desk so hard everyone in the room jumped."

Through the letter home and breakfasts, she sought to calm parents, which she hoped would help their children. To calm her faculty, Ms. Allanbrook called on veteran teachers like Ms. Byam, who is 58 and has 25 years of classroom experience. "Her belief system is so strong that it makes it easier for younger colleagues who are nervous," the principal said.

Ms. Byam told her fellow teachers: "You know more about what those children have learned than anyone in the world. You know their research papers on the Mayans and the study of the Holocaust. These tests are designed by people who don't know anything about you and your students."

Ms. Byam has not looked at the test results.

The best way to improve a school, Ms. Allanbrook says, is hiring talented teachers. "As I've got older, I've become much better," she says. "It's almost instinctual. It's not about what university someone attended, it's about passion and love for children. I've developed a set of questions over

time and pick it up pretty quickly from how they talk about children.”

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