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Hard-Working Teachers, Sabotaged When Student Test Scores Slip

By **MICHAEL WINERIP**

For 15 years, Anna Allanbrook has been the principal of [Public School 146](#) in Brooklyn, one of the highest-achieving elementary schools in the city. In that time, she has never had a more talented and hard-working bunch than the current team of fifth-grade teachers. The five have lunch together daily, using the time to plan. They stay until 7 p.m. on Fridays to prepare for the following week. On Thursday night, most of them helped at the science invention fair until it was past 8 p.m.

Their credentials would be impressive for college professors. Antoinette Byam, who received a grant to spend a month in Ghana in 2006, won a Fulbright scholarship in 2008 to do research in Mexico and Peru. She then wrote fifth-grade curriculums on the Mayans.

Before becoming a teacher, Nancy Salomon had her own theater company and ran a drama program in the schools that won an arts award from the Guggenheim Museum.

Cora Sangree has trained teachers at [Bank Street College of Education](#) and [Teachers College](#) at Columbia University. Laurie Matthews worked as an archaeologist in Brazil and France before she started teaching.

In 2009, 96 percent of their fifth graders were proficient in English, 89 percent in math. When the New York City [Education Department](#) released its numerical ratings recently, it seemed a sure bet that the P.S. 146 teachers would be at the very top.

Actually, they were near the very bottom.

Ms. Byam and Ms. Salomon each scored 7 out of 100 in math. Ms. Sangree got a 1 in math and an 11 in English. Ms. Matthews's scores got mixed up with the results for another fifth-grade teacher, Penina Hirshman, so nobody could say for certain what her real numbers might be.

A teacher's rating depends on how much progress her students make on state tests in a year's time, and is known as the value-added score. Ms. Allanbrook, the principal, has another name for what's going on. She calls the scores the "invalid value-added."

If city officials were trying to demoralize and humiliate the workforce, they've done a terrific job. News organizations get an assist for publishing the scores, and former Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein deserves a special nod for enthusiastically [supporting the release](#).

It's not just the low scorers who are offended. Maribeth Whitehouse, a special education teacher in the Bronx, wrote me in an e-mail: "I am a 99th percentiler. A number of us are in touch with each other, united by nothing more than our profession and professional disdain for this nonsense." She is circulating a letter of protest for others on the 99th percentile to sign.

In 2010, in the hope of winning a grant from the Obama administration's Race to the Top program, state officials and the teachers' unions agreed to let students' test scores count for 20 percent of a teacher's evaluation. Then last spring, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, John B. King Jr., the state's education commissioner, and Merryl H. Tisch, the state chancellor, decided 20 percent wasn't rigorous enough, and with little public notice pushed a measure through the Board of Regents allowing student test scores to count for up to 40 percent.

It does not take a lot of math to calculate how much damage Ms. Sangree's 1 or Ms. Byam's 7 could do.

How could this possibly have happened?

The short answer is: Numbers lie.

And not only do they lie, but they are out of date, in this case covering student test results from 2007 to 2010.

Though 89 percent of P.S. 146 fifth graders were rated proficient in math in 2009, the year before, as fourth graders, 97 percent were rated as proficient. This resulted in the worst thing that can happen to a teacher in America today: negative value was added.

The difference between 89 percent and 97 percent proficiency at P.S. 146 is the result of three children scoring a 2 out of 4 instead of a 3 out of 4.

While Ms. Allanbrook does not believe in lots of test prep, her fourth-grade teachers do more of it than the rest of the school.

In New York City, fourth-grade test results can determine where a child will go to middle school. Fifth-grade scores have never mattered much, so teachers have been free to focus on project-based learning. While that may be good for a child's intellectual development, it is hard on a teacher's value-added score.

Ms. Byam's 7 in math is as invalid a value-added score as such things can get. She regularly takes on extra duties. Several years ago, when teachers were unhappy with the standard math curriculum they formed a committee to find a better method. Ms. Byam represented P.S. 146, and spent two days a month for a year studying new approaches.

Using the new curriculum, children work in groups to solve real-life problems. On Friday, each group spent an hour developing a system to calculate who ate more — eight students sharing seven submarine sandwiches; five students sharing four; or four sharing three. Each child developed his own solution, and the group decided which way was best.

Ms. Byam made notes on how well her 29 students were working. A girl who normally did well had dashed off a muddled answer, and was resting her head on the desk.

"Why are you so sleepy?" Ms. Byam whispered.

She had been up late taking care of her older sister's baby.

After observing her class, Ms. Byam knew that Minerva Macarrulla had produced the most sophisticated solution, but the group would not select her work.

"Minerva's shy, she won't push it," said Ms. Byam, "I'll have to call on her to explain. We can't let shyness get in the way of progress, can we now?"

This week, students will advance from dividing sandwiches to comparing fractions with different denominators, to calculating least common denominators.

Across the hallway, Ms. Sangree might have scored higher than 11 in English by doing more test prep. There is a standard test-prep formula for writing an essay: Topic sentence; three sentences that give examples to support the thesis, one from literature, one from current events, and one from personal experience; concluding sentence.

Instead, her class has spent weeks working on research papers about the Mayans. Rowan Groom explained to a visitor how she was doing her paper on Mayan clothing.

"First we collected facts from books and National Geographic and Web sites and notes when we visited the Museum of Natural History," she said. "Next we sorted our facts into topics."

They were ready to write. “First you do a first draft and then you revise and edit and we talk about our thoughts with our friends, in the meeting area. Then we go into our revised draft and we edit some more, and after that we go across the hall to computer lab and type it up.”

The state test does not require students to write a research paper.

Children sense that something is going on. “My mom said teachers with lower grades were getting kicked out because they’re not good enough,” said Niko Amber, a fifth grader.

The backlash has startled city officials. Some changes have already been announced for next year. Instead of the scores’ being made public, Ms. Byam will quite likely be handed her 7 and Ms. Sangree her 1 behind closed doors. Whether that will be better or worse is hard to know.