

A warning to college profs from a high school teacher

By Valerie Strauss , Updated: February 9, 2013

For more than a decade now we have heard that the high-stakes testing obsession in K-12 education that began with the enactment of No Child Left Behind 11 years ago has resulted in high school graduates who don't think as analytically or as broadly as they should because so much emphasis has been placed on passing standardized tests. Here, an award-winning high school teacher who just retired, Kenneth Bernstein, warns college professors what they are up against. Bernstein, who lives near Washington, D.C. serves as a peer reviewer for educational journals and publishers, and he is nationally known as the blogger "teacherken." His e-mail address is kber@earthlink.net. This appeared in [Academe](#), the journal of the [American Association of University Professors](#).

By Kenneth Bernstein

You are a college professor.

I have just retired as a high school teacher.

I have some bad news for you. In case you do not already see what is happening, I want to warn you of what to expect from the students who will be arriving in your classroom, even if you teach in a highly selective institution.

[No Child Left Behind](#) went into effect for the 2002–03 academic year, which means that America's public schools have been operating under the pressures and constrictions imposed by that law for a decade. Since the [testing requirements](#) were imposed beginning in third grade, the students arriving in your institution have been subject to the full extent of the law's requirements. While it is true that the U.S. Department of Education is now issuing [waivers](#) on some of the provisions of the law to certain states, those states must agree to other provisions that will have as deleterious an effect on real student learning as did No Child Left Behind—we have already seen that in public schools, most notably in high schools.

Troubling Assessments

My primary course as a teacher was government, and for the last seven years that included three or four (out of six) sections of Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. Government and Politics. My students, mostly tenth graders, were quite bright, but already I was seeing the impact of federal education policy on their learning and skills.

In many cases, students would arrive in our high school without having had meaningful

social studies instruction, because even in states that tested social studies or science, the tests did not count for “adequate yearly progress” under No Child Left Behind. With test scores serving as the primary if not the sole measure of student performance and, increasingly, teacher evaluation, anything not being tested was given short shrift.

Further, most of the tests being used consist primarily or solely of multiple-choice items, which are cheaper to develop, administer, and score than are tests that include constructed responses such as essays. Even when a state has tests that include writing, the level of writing required for such tests often does not demand that higher-level thinking be demonstrated, nor does it require proper grammar, usage, syntax, and structure. Thus, students arriving in our high school lacked experience and knowledge about how to do the kinds of writing that are expected at higher levels of education.

Recognizing this, those of us in public schools do what we can to work on those higher-order skills, but we are limited. Remember, high schools also have tests—No Child Left Behind and its progeny (such as [Race to the Top](#)) require testing at least once in high school in reading and math. In Maryland, where I taught, those tests were the state’s High School Assessments in tenth-grade English and algebra (which some of our more gifted pupils had taken as early as eighth grade). High schools are also forced to focus on preparing students for tests, and that leads to a narrowing of what we can accomplish in our classrooms.

I mentioned that at least half my students were in AP classes. The explosive growth of these classes, driven in part by high school rankings like [the yearly Challenge Index](#) created by Jay Mathews of The Washington Post, is also responsible for some of the problems you will encounter with students entering your institutions. The College Board did recognize that not everything being labeled as AP met the standards of a college-level course, so it required teachers to submit syllabi for approval to ensure a minimal degree of rigor, at least on paper. But many of the courses still focus on the AP exam, and that focus can be as detrimental to learning as the kinds of tests imposed under No Child Left Behind.

Let me use as an example my own AP course, U.S. Government and Politics. I served several times as a reader for the examination that follows the course. In that capacity, I read the constructed responses that make up half of the score of a student’s examination. I saw several problems.

First (and I acknowledge that I bear some culpability here), in the AP U.S. Government exam the constructed responses are called “free response questions” and are graded by a rubric that is concerned primarily with content and, to a lesser degree, argument. If a student hits the points on the rubric, he or she gets the points for that rubric. There is no consideration of grammar or rhetoric, nor is credit given or a score reduced based on the format of the answer. A student who takes time to construct a clear topic sentence and a proper conclusion gets no credit for those words. Thus, a teacher might prepare the student to answer those questions in a format that is not good writing by any standard. If, as a teacher, you want your students to do their best, you have to have them practice what is effectively bad writing— no introduction, no conclusion, just hit the points of the rubric and provide the necessary factual support. Some critical thinking *may* be involved, at least, but the approach works against development of the kinds of writing that would be expected in a true college-level course in government and politics.

My students did well on those questions because we practiced bad writing. My teaching was not evaluated on the basis of how well my students did, but I felt I had a responsibility to prepare them for the examination in a way that could result in their obtaining college credit.

I would like to believe that I prepared them to think more critically and to present cogent arguments, but I could not simultaneously prepare them to do well on that portion of the test and teach them to write in a fashion that would properly serve them at higher levels of education.

Even during those times when I could assign work that required proper writing, I was limited in how much work I could do on their writing. I had too many students. In my final year, with four sections of Advanced Placement, I had 129 AP students (as well as an additional forty-six students in my other two classes). A teacher cannot possibly give that many students the individualized attention they need to improve their writing. Do the math. Imagine that I assign all my students a written exercise. Let's assume that 160 actually turn it in. Let's further assume that I am a fast reader, and I can read and correct papers at a rate of one every three minutes. That's eight hours—for one assignment. If it takes a more realistic five minutes per paper, the total is more than thirteen hours.

Further, the AP course required that a huge amount of content be covered, meaning that too much effort is spent on learning information and perhaps insufficient time on wrestling with the material at a deeper level. I learned to balance these seemingly contradictory requirements. For much of the content I would give students summary information, sufficient to answer multiple-choice questions and to get some of the points on rubrics for the free response questions. That allowed me more time for class discussions and for relating events in the news to what we learned in class, making the class more engaging for the students and resulting in deeper learning because the discussions were relevant to their lives.

From what I saw from the free response questions I read, too many students in AP courses were not getting depth in their learning and lacked both the content knowledge and the ability to use what content knowledge they had.

The structure of testing has led to students arriving at our school without what previously would have been considered requisite background knowledge in social studies, but the problem is not limited to this field. Students often do not get exposure to art or music or other nontested subjects. In high-need schools, resources not directly related to testing are eliminated: at the time of the teachers' strike last fall, 160 Chicago public schools had no libraries. Class sizes exceeded forty students—in elementary school.

A Teacher's Plea

As a retired public school teacher, I believe I have a responsibility to offer a caution to college professors, or perhaps to make a plea.

Please do not blame those of us in public schools for how unprepared for higher education the students arriving at your institutions are. We have very little say in what is happening to public education. Even the most distinguished and honored among us have trouble getting our voices heard in the discussion about educational policy. The National Teacher of the

Year is supposed to be the representative of America's teachers—if he or she cannot get teachers' voices included, imagine how difficult it is for the rest of us. That is why, if you have not seen it, I strongly urge you to read 2009 National Teacher of the Year Anthony Mullen's famous blog post, "Teachers Should Be Seen and Not Heard." After listening to noneducators bloviate about schools and teaching without once asking for his opinion, he was finally asked what he thought. He offered the following:

Where do I begin? I spent the last thirty minutes listening to a group of arrogant and condescending noneducators disrespect my colleagues and profession. I listened to a group of disingenuous people whose own self-interests guide their policies rather than the interests of children. I listened to a cabal of people who sit on national education committees that will have a profound impact on classroom teaching practices. And I heard nothing of value. "I'm thinking about the current health-care debate," I said. "And I am wondering if I will be asked to sit on a national committee charged with the task of creating a core curriculum of medical procedures to be used in hospital emergency rooms."

The strange little man cocks his head and, suddenly, the fly on the wall has everyone's attention.

"I realize that most people would think I am unqualified to sit on such a committee because I am not a doctor, I have never worked in an emergency room, and I have never treated a single patient. So what? Today I have listened to people who are not teachers, have never worked in a classroom, and have never taught a single student tell me how to teach."

During my years in the classroom I tried to educate other adults about the realities of schools and students and teaching. I tried to help them understand the deleterious impact of policies that were being imposed on our public schools. I blogged, I wrote letters and op-eds for newspapers, and I spent a great deal of time speaking with and lobbying those in a position to influence policy, up to and including sitting members of the US House of Representatives and Senate and relevant members of their staffs. Ultimately, it was to little avail, because the drivers of the policies that are changing our schools—and thus increasingly presenting you with students ever less prepared for postsecondary academic work—are the wealthy corporations that profit from the policies they help define and the think tanks and activist organizations that have learned how to manipulate the levers of power, often to their own financial or ideological advantage.

If you, as a higher education professional, are concerned about the quality of students arriving at your institution, you have a responsibility to step up and speak out. You need to inform those creating the policies about the damage they are doing to our young people, and how they are undermining those institutions in which you labor to make a difference in the minds and the lives of the young people you teach as well as in the fields in which you do your research.

You should have a further selfish motivation. Those who have imposed the mindless and

destructive patterns of misuse of tests to drive policy in K–12 education are already moving to impose it on higher education, at least in the case of the departments and schools of education that prepare teachers: they want to “rate” those departments by the test scores of the students taught by their graduates.

If you, as someone who teaches in the liberal arts or engineering or business, think that this development does not concern you, think again. It is not just that schools and colleges of education are major sources of revenue for colleges and universities—they are in fact often cash cows, which is why so many institutions lobby to be able initially to certify teachers and then to offer the courses (and degrees) required for continuing certification. If strictures like these can be imposed on schools and colleges of education, the time will be short before similar kinds of measure are imposed on other schools, including liberal arts, engineering, business, and conceivably even professional schools like medicine and law. If you teach either in a medical school or in programs that offer courses required as part of the pre-med curriculum, do you want the fatality rates of patients treated by the doctors whom you have taught to be used to judge your performance? If you think that won't happen because you work at a private institution, remember that it is the rare private university that does not receive some form of funding from governments, local to national. Research grants are one example; the scholarships and loans used by students to attend your institution are another.

Let me end by offering my deepest apologies, not because I may have offended some of you by what I have written, but because even those of us who understood the problems that were being created were unable to do more to stop the damage to the education of our young people. Many of us tried. We entered teaching because we wanted to make a difference in the lives of the students who passed through our classrooms. Many of us are leaving sooner than we had planned because the policies already in effect and those now being implemented mean that we are increasingly restricted in how and what we teach.

Now you are seeing the results in the students arriving at your institutions. They may be very bright. But we have not been able to prepare them for the kind of intellectual work that you have every right to expect of them. It is for this that I apologize, even as I know in my heart that there was little more I could have done. Which is one reason I am no longer in the classroom.

© The Washington Post Company