

Test Prep – The Junk Food of Education

by Kim Marshall

Appeared in *Education Week* October 1, 2003

A fierce debate is raging on the impact of high-stakes testing on the everyday life of American classrooms. Supporters say the tests have raised curriculum expectations and focused much-needed attention on struggling students. Critics say that “teaching to the test” is ruining the quality of instruction and making schools into sweatshops. Who’s right?

As an educator and a parent, I’m convinced that when high-stakes tests are handled well (as I believe they have been in Massachusetts), they are an engine of school improvement, raising standards and bringing order out of curriculum chaos. But I’m concerned about teaching to the test. This is not always a bad thing. If teachers are using first-rate classroom methods and materials to teach to standards that are measured by the tests, that’s great. If students who have fallen behind are getting skilled tutoring that boosts their confidence and performance, excellent. If nervous students are given test-taking tips and familiarized with the test format a couple of weeks before testing time, fine. But if low-quality “test prep” materials and recycled test items are being used to drill and kill the subject matter, that’s a problem.

How much teaching-to-the-test is going on? While we don’t have exact figures, a national survey by *Quality Counts* in 2001 found that four out of five teachers were devoting “a great deal” or “somewhat” of their time to test-focused teaching. How much of this is at the bad end of the spectrum? Again, we don’t have precise data, but one thing is clear: wherever drill-and-kill is happening, it’s not good for kids. Bad test prep is like junk food: it can give students a quick burst of energy (short-term test score gains), especially if kids are malnourished (deprived of good teaching and learning), but all too quickly, students get that empty feeling (their achievement sags). Test prep is like junk food if it:

- bores students (tests, tests, tests all the time) and turns them off school;
- demoralizes teachers, making them feel like they’re working in a test prep factory;
- promotes lazy pedagogy: just assign and correct;
- uses de-contextualized passages so kids don’t read whole stories and books;
- over-uses multiple-choice questions in daily classroom teaching;
- drills lower-level skills and skimps on writing and teaching for understanding;
- focuses on memorizing facts rather than expressing ideas in an authentic voice;

Why would any self-respecting educator indulge in the junky kind of test prep? Why are some schools wasting precious time and resources that could be devoted to high-quality teaching and

materials? Why is it even necessary to have a parallel test prep curriculum to teach kids what they should cover in their regular classes?

First, most districts' curriculums contain far more material than it's humanly possible to teach. Researcher Robert Marzano calculated that it would take roughly 15,500 hours to teach the average K-12 curriculum – with only about 9,000 hours of classroom learning time available from kindergarten through high school. Teachers can only cover a portion of the total curriculum – and the tests can only assess a portion. For students to do well, the portion that's taught needs to overlap with the portion that's tested. Test prep seems like the easiest way to make this happen.

Second, some school districts have not taken the obvious step of fully aligning their curriculum with test expectations. Even in states where clear curriculum goals and previous tests are in the public domain, there are still alignment problems. Among the reasons: bureaucratic inertia, sentimental attachment to time-honored units, pedagogical disagreements with state curriculum decisions, and resistance to the whole idea of state-imposed standards (some folks don't like being told what to teach). In addition, textbooks written for a national market are not perfectly aligned with the curriculum of individual states, and marching chapter by chapter through the book (which some teachers still do) can leave big gaps. Test prep thrives on this kind of misalignment.

Third, even when school districts have aligned with the standards, some principals and teachers aren't confident that following the curriculum on a day-to-day basis will produce good test scores. They fall prey to the misconception that students will score high only if they are fed a steady diet of worksheets with cloned test questions.

Fourth, there's a lot of talk about how awful the tests are. In states that are using off-the-shelf norm-referenced tests or tests that don't include writing and higher-order thinking, this distaste is understandable. Test prep can be seen as a way to "game" the system and "beat the test."

Finally, educators' anxiety about high-stakes tests can create a kind of group panic attack: if we don't take desperate measures, our kids will fail! Gotta have some test prep – even if it displaces good teaching. Superintendents, principals, and teachers have been known to succumb to this kind of thinking and make unwise curriculum choices.

These are five reasons why junky test prep has found its way into all too many classrooms and after-school programs. Opponents of high-stakes testing pounce on this. They argue that low-level "drill-and-kill" teaching is an *inevitable* by-product of such tests. They say that when a state spells out what should be taught and holds everyone accountable with tests, it in effect dictates *how* it should be taught – poorly. Their solution? Get rid of the tests!

But dumping high-stakes tests would slow the positive momentum of education reform. Scary testing may seem like a strange way to help children, but state-level assessments with some consequences attached to them are the only way that has yet been discovered to get schools to focus their curriculum and take responsibility for teaching all students to high standards. True, teachers have less freedom in what they teach, and some have had to give up beloved (sometimes excellent) curriculum units that didn't fit the standards. But something had to be done to forge a more coherent K-12 curriculum sequence, eliminate overlap and fill some gaps, and make the high-school diploma a more meaningful document. There is a strong equity dimension to this: the students who suffer most from an individualistic, chaotic curriculum and a lack of clear standards are the least advantaged. If standards are handled well, they can be a powerful lever for closing the achievement gap.

The key point is that teachers don't have to teach badly to raise test scores. Tests dictate the *what*, not the *how to*, of teaching. The research is clear that what produces well-educated graduates and high test scores is *good teaching*. Junky test prep is a short cut that doesn't work. Students need the real thing – challenging subject matter, engaging, hands-on classroom activities, and energized teachers who know their subject and make it exciting and relevant. Having students do a lot of writing is especially important; Doug Reeves, a national expert on standards, has found that writing develops the kind of higher-order thinking and understanding that translates directly into better performance on all kinds of tests – including those with multiple-choice questions.

Anti-testers do have a point: the pressure of high-stakes testing can lead some educators to make unwise curriculum choices. But with a little prodding, they will come to their senses and do the right thing. If you are a school administrator with your pen poised to sign a requisition for test prep materials, use the checklist above to determine the level of junkiness; if it's high, *just say no!* If you are a teacher, student, parent, or community leader and you see junky test prep in your school, *speak up!* It's not good for your school – and it's not going to produce high test scores on the long run.

The path to good teaching and really solid achievement is clear. Schools need to accept the reality of high-stakes tests – and work to improve the quality of those tests where they fall short. They need to align their grade-by-grade curriculum with test expectations, reducing what's required of teachers to a teachable amount. They need to ensure that 99 percent of classroom time is devoted to high-quality, aligned instruction with no cheesy test prep. They need to put a premium on creative, involving, relevant pedagogy and teacher teamwork, trusting that excellent teaching is the best way to get and sustain high scores – even on tests that are not perfect. And they need to provide teachers with the support, training, and materials to do the job.

So let's swear off the junk food of test prep. Let's give our children the kind of education that will prepare them for any kind of test – including the real world. Let's ensure that high test scores mean that students are truly proficient, not just good test-takers. And let's give them a classroom curriculum that will nourish them for years to come. They deserve no less.

A shorter version of this article appeared in the Boston Globe on June 28, 2003.

Kim Marshall was a teacher, curriculum director, and principal in the Boston Public Schools for 32 years. This year he has worked mentoring new urban principals in Chicago, New York, and the San Francisco Bay area.