

Mississippi Association of Educators | Joyce Helmick, President



REPORT FROM THE FRONT LINES

Mississippi Educators Speak on The State Testing Issue

Prepared for the Mississippi Student Testing Task Force
June 19, 2018

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Mississippi Student Testing Task Force Members

VIA HAND DELIVERY

Dear Fellow Task Force Member,

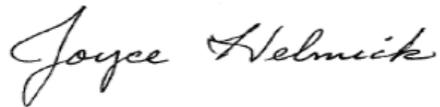
This booklet contains reports from 30 Mississippi educators who responded to my request for their experiences relative to the current state testing situation in our public schools. Classroom teachers and administrators responded.

My promise to these individuals is that I would keep their identities confidential, and you will see that many of the respondents reiterated the need to stay anonymous – due to their fears of potential repercussions for speaking out.

While this effort by no means offers a totally comprehensive look at what is occurring within our public schools, it does offer compelling, and sometimes heart-breaking, glimpses into the realities created by the state's emphasis on standardized testing as a means to determine whether or not children are learning.

I offer this to help inform your understanding of the issue from an on-the-ground perspective. This document is available on the MAE website, and our social media platforms. I welcome your comments and questions concerning what these letters have revealed. It is our job, as I understand it, to make informed decisions regarding how best to evaluate the educational achievements of our students. I look forward to working with you.

My best to you,



JOYCE HELMICK, MAE President

Report from the Front Lines

Mississippi Educators Speak on The State Testing Issue

1

Good evening. A friend of mine sent me the Facebook post about the chance for a change, and I wanted to share the Facebook post that I put out on social media in hope of getting some action -- a change actually in the state testing requirements. Please know that my wife and I have always supported the teachers and administrators but enough is enough. If the teachers and administrators are as sick and tired of the state testing as they say they are, then it's time to stand up and be heard and make a difference for our children, for their children. The following is my post on my Facebook page:

“Steps up on Soapbox P****D OFF” 🙄🙄🙄

So as the school year draws to an end, we are faced with that oh-so-dreaded week of school...the “State Testing Week” ...I’m not real sure why the teachers and administration feel that they have to push these little kids SO HARD as if they are training for a Marathon, all for a Test.

We have a 10 year-old who is crying his eyes out because he is so stressed that he’s not going to do good enough on this test tomorrow. A child who makes straight A’s has been pushed to the point that he is so stressed over this D**n Test that he literally just broke down. Really? Are these tests really worth it? Are the Teachers and Administrators really accomplishing anything that is going to make a REAL DIFFERENCE in the future? Is this really about education, or is it all for the “Love of Money” at someone else’s expense? Maybe I’m the only one who’s p****d about this, and I’m ok with that. I just hate to see kids, any kids, feel like this over some stupid test. “Stepping down off my box. Still P****D 🙄🙄🙄”

2

I haven't been teaching in public school for long, but I have noticed that testing has an effect on the way certain teachers conduct class. Students complain that some teachers in state-tested areas push worksheets and testing more than aiding in the comprehension of the importance of their subject areas. The generation currently in grade school, Gen Z, wants to know WHY things are important. This helps them make meaningful connections to their lives and society. Focusing on testing rather than teaching meaningful lessons is encouraging intellectual bulimia. Students cram information and forget it a week or two after the test.

Personally, I have pushed terms in the glossary of the Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards for English Language Arts in my English I class, especially ones I have seen in sample tests for the English II exam. It takes repetition and meaningful connections to get these students to remember. With the fast-paced news media and constant bombardment of social media, their brains are not wired to remember things that were on a worksheet or gone over once or twice. They need a more integrated curriculum that doesn't focus on upchucking everything they can recall from a series of worksheets.

“Focusing on testing rather than teaching meaningful lessons is encouraging intellectual bulimia.”

A couple of very intelligent young men were in my Learning Strategies class, and I think many students, especially these men who failed the English II test, were bored more than anything. Class doesn't have to be a circus, and teachers don't have to be entertainers, but the work needs to be meaningful. Without meaning (other than the state tests being held against their heads), these students (who are already hungry and tired) aren't going to care about learning, and teachers (who also have state tests being held at their heads) aren't going to care about much else but the scores.

3

State testing has caused many educators and myself to be held to an unrealistic truth. Many of our students have test anxiety and aren't able to pass the tests. This keeps them from getting a high school diploma. This only affects public school children, private schools, seniors aren't under the same scrutiny. We need to fight to eliminate the stress on educators and our children.

4

My story of state testing is probably similar to hundreds of thousands of teachers across the nation, but it was truly this incident that made me loathe state testing.

My first year of teaching English was in rural Louisiana. I had a class of students that weren't going to college (They were called “Basic” students, a name that diminished the students greatly). These were the students who struggled to read, write, and communicate their ideas effectively. These were the students who weren't necessarily disliked by other educators, but they were the “problem” students on campus. And all 26 of them were in one class together. Throughout the year, we practiced reading, writing, annotating, using context clues, test taking strategies, and pacing. The big day of the test came, and my students said it was hard, but they felt prepared. A week later, I called them up to read them their scores. One student, one who went from not being able to write an essay at the beginning of the year to writing a 5-paragraph essay at the end of the year, had failed the state test. He was devastated and felt that everything was for nothing and everything he did was useless. Did this student not realize how far he had come? Did this student not realize that

due to his hard work, he jumped grade levels with his reading and writing ability? The truth is, he didn't. His self-worth as a student was tied solely on that test. That day in class, me and my students had a heart-to-heart. I told them that their self-worth was not tied to test scores, but to the progress they've made to get this far. Their improvement was something that they should be proud of, regardless of what some stupid test may say. That was the day that I realized that education was broken. That the education system cared too much for x students to be at y level, not bothering to look at how the students had grown in other ways, ways these tests/test-makers could never fathom to attempt to measure.

5

May 15, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a teacher in the Webster County School District. I have taught English II for ten years. During my time preparing students for this test, it has undergone several changes. During the transitions, there has been very little help in explaining what is expected of the students on the "new test." What little help we have been given has been confusing at best. As an instructor, I pride myself on teaching the students skills and content rather than "teaching to the test" as teachers are so often accused. I would, however, appreciate a little more direction on what is to be expected on the test. This is frustrating, and I feel unfair to my students. I teach my students the skills necessary to master the competencies Mississippi has outlined for them, but I don't feel like I have enough direction in what way these competencies will be assessed on the MAAP.

Secondly, the test is KILLING our instruction time. I would not be exaggerating to say that these tests cost us 45 days of instruction. The school I teach at is 2A. Because of the required number of administrators and proctors, our school is forced to pull teachers out of classrooms they should be teaching. Where do their students go? Into the rooms of teachers who should be teaching. It is impossible to teach a class when you have half of someone else's students who have work they are not interested in completing because they are not in the classroom with their own teacher. Hiring subs to replace the displaced teachers would be great, but I daresay there are very few schools with the budget to support that many subs.

"I would not be exaggerating to say that these tests cost us 45 days of instruction."

Finally, and probably the most important problem I have with the state test, is the amount of stress it causes my students. The tests seem to have been designed so that students aren't taking more than one per year. The problem that comes with that is, in our district at least, only the high achieving students take algebra in 8th grade. The majority of our students take algebra in the 9th grade. Lower achieving students end up in algebra in tenth grade. Ninth grade is the year where the middle to high achieving students take biology. Students who have struggled in science take pre-biology in 9th grade, pushing biology to tenth grade. Now, if you are following my logic, you see that students who struggle in math and science end up with those two tests in tenth grade. Tenth grade is also the year that the English II test is administered. Not much stress involved in taking three state tests that must be passed before the student can receive a diploma! Regardless of

the statement by Mrs. Wright that Mississippi does not have exit exams, these tests must be passed in order to receive a diploma.

Just on a personal note, I am leaving a teaching placement that I have held for ten years. I have asked to be reassigned, not because I don't love the subject area that I am teaching, or because I don't enjoy the age group of students I have, but rather because of the state test. I have heard that our State Superintendent of Education has denied that Mississippi has exit exams. I wonder what the correct term is for a test that must be passed in order for a student to graduate. I was one of the teachers waiting on an email Friday night and then again on Saturday morning because I had a student who is a senior but was waiting on a test score to determine if he would be able to graduate with his class this year. I simply cannot take the stress and heartbreak this assignment brings. One of my colleagues is retiring simply because of the stress of state testing. Another colleague is taking another teaching assignment due to the stress of state testing. That will be three new state test teachers for one school in our state. How many other schools are experiencing the same thing?

It is my fervent hope that this letter will reach someone who cares enough about our students to investigate this testing situation and be an advocate for our students. It seems they desperately need some.

"I have heard that our State Superintendent of Education has denied that Mississippi has exit exams. I wonder what the correct term is for a test that must be passed in order for a student to graduate."

6

State testing is being forced on our children to show what they know. Numbers. Plain and simple. The scores on those tests define the student and teacher. If each class was set up apples to apples, the test might be fair. I watched two of my students click answers without reading the entire passage or question. One SPED student took his 54-question test in 14 minutes. Teachers can say nothing to the students or make any signals to work hard because we are afraid of losing our job. When my administrator looks at the test scores in June, I will be held accountable for those low students! This is unfair!

7

As an 11-year classroom teacher, I find state testing to be counter-productive. Our students are being robbed of whole learning experiences due to mandated state tests. The tests do not measure a teacher's ability to educate students. Please eliminate biased state tests.

8

I teach 12th grade English. I taught English II for seven years. Testing affects the entire school. In many cases, instruction stops. The 180 days of instruction is a farce. Testing does not just affect teachers who teach a tested subject. Everyone has to proctor. Students only work long enough to take the state test. After that, school, in their minds, is over. Watching young folks squirm, doze, stare for two hours is unfair. Adults do not like to sit quietly for two hours. Solution: if testing has to be, it should be done in a regular 45 or 90-minute timespan. This is all the time they get on a teacher-made test. Remember, [teachers] created testing. Now, that depends on which schedule the school is on. Yes, make two tests is what I am saying. Students stamina is not that long. We pay enough. We can assess students with fewer questions. We don't have to ask them multiple times to see if they understand one standard.

I read where MDE made a statement that they don't require all this testing. They are correct. But, because school accountability is tied to it, then schools have to have a way to see if students are ready. So, students have to take teacher-created tests after each unit, students have to take mid-term testing; students have to take benchmark tests or 9-weeks [tests], students have to take semester exams. Basically, they take a test for the test for the test for the *real* test. So, no MDE does not require all that testing, but because of the state tests, students have to endure all those [other] tests. Solution: if we have to have a test, let it be a grade band test. Once in elementary, once in middle, and once in high. In my day, we took the FLE in 11th grade. Many of us turned out fine. I don't remember going to class one day and a teacher saying, "Let's test prep." TEACHERS JUST TAUGHT. We have to get back to this. Back to the 180 days, aside from a month of that is testing, another three months is test prep. After Christmas, many teachers stop teaching and begin test prep. It is every day until the test. Students are now doing daily test prep, school-wide tutorial and before or after school tutorials. In some cases, by the time the test comes, [students] are brain-dead.

We are already on our way with doing away with testing. Students who do not pass the tests now have multiple options. This is the thing: if none of those work, students do not graduate. So, to say there is not an end-of-the-year test, or it does not stop graduation, is untrue. Solution: If we must give a test, let it be used for data purposes only. It should not be used to stop a student from graduating. All students aren't good test takers. Some of those who are making [students take the tests] weren't good test-takers, either. Let the test count for a portion of their grade. I won't talk about the computer issue with testing. We are asking students who have never had keyboarding to type a response. Unrealistic!!!!

While I have tried to give real life scenarios and solutions, my real ask is to cut state testing because it is a money-maker for the testing company. If our students are already required to take the ACT, and it is a part of accountability, let them take it. Use it to measure schools. Not one college asks a child for their state test results. Not one job asks students for their test score. NOT ONE!!!!!!

I think MDE staff, USDOE, chairs of ed committees, legislators, Tate, and Gunn should be made to come proctor. It is sad and will make you cry.

If I think of anything else, I will come back and post. Thank you for serving. Thank you for asking.

9

Hello,

Please do not use my name or my child's picture since I am an educator, and I don't want to risk my job.

I posted the picture at the bottom and a short description after my child got home from testing most of the day. [EDITOR'S NOTE: We chose not to print the picture of the child, who had been obviously crying, lying on the couch, huddled under a quilt. The Facebook post is reproduced in a graphic below.] He is in the third grade, and I dread the rest of his school career. The next morning, he had to take another state test and he was so nervous he couldn't eat.

This story is about a child I picked up for makeup testing at my school the week before last. When I went to get him, the teacher had sent him to the bathroom. He was throwing up due to nerves. We finally got him calmed down enough to test.

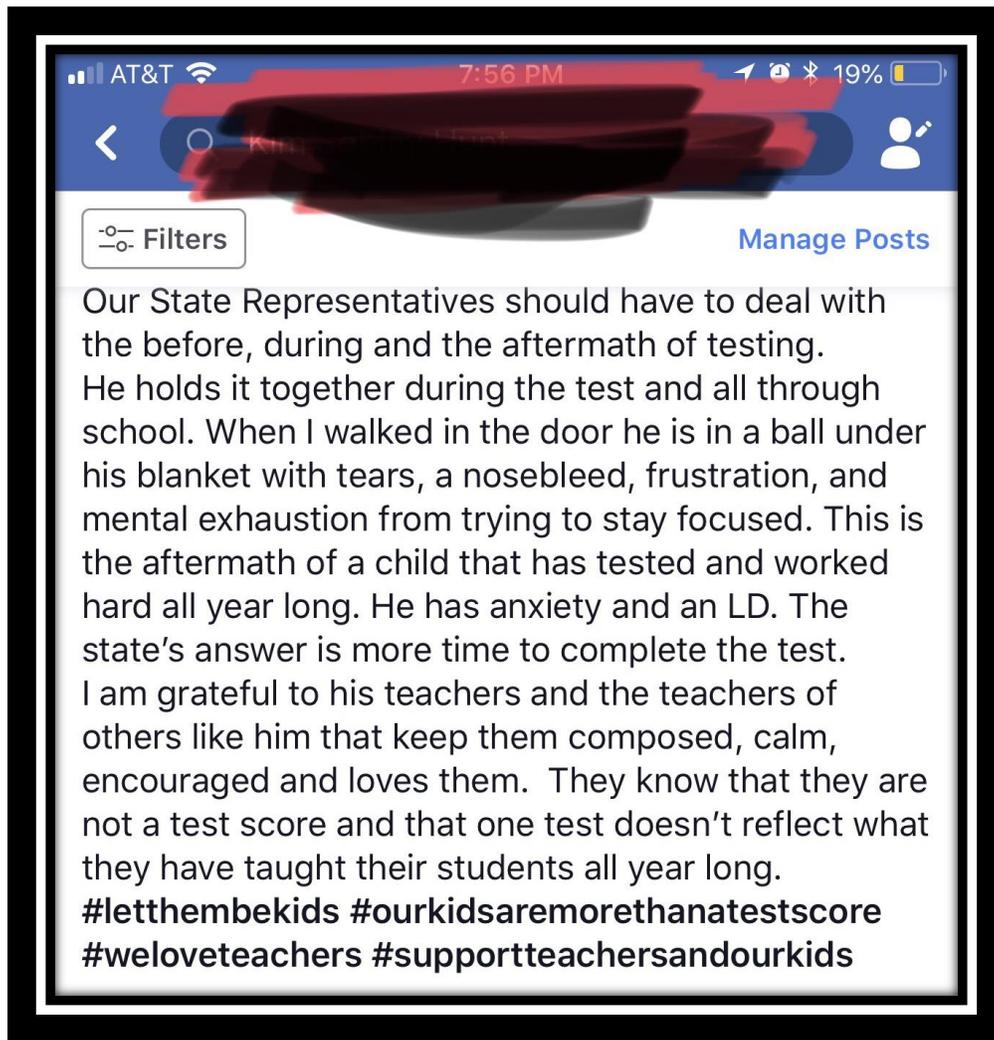
This past week a student got sick during the test (not nerves). Our STC called her mom, but told her to wait until [the student] finished the test before [the mom] came to get her. [The student] continued working on her test with a trashcan beside her and running back and forth to the bathroom to throw up. She was in a class with 20 plus students while this was happening. She was forced to finish the test because we "need" her score because our school is a low-performing school.

Due to behavioral issues in our school, we have to bribe children with cokes to keep them from throwing the computer. I watched students type 1 letter at time with their pointer finger because they had only been in our school three weeks and had not had the typing practice our students had been given.

Teachers give their everything to the students, but many of them are fighting that school is even a priority. They come in and play or sleep during the entire test regardless of what the teachers do. It is not fair for teachers and schools to be judged based on what a 9-year-old child decides to do on that day. I agree that there has to be accountability, but our current method is NOT working.

Students are required to print and then sign their names stating they will not have electronics while testing. The students can't even sign their names because they aren't being taught cursive because there isn't enough time and it isn't tested, so it doesn't matter.

Stress and pressure has caused many teachers to be put on antidepressants by their doctors.



10

One thing that really bothers me about state testing is that it is all administrators are concerned about. In kindergarten, kids need to develop large motor skills, then fine motor skills before learning to read. I feel they are pushing them too much to read and score above benchmark, so the school will look good. Let's just look over the fact that this child cannot do jumping jacks, can't pump themselves in a swing, can't hop on one foot or skip. These are all very important skills that a 5-year-old needs to master before learning to read. If this is not taught, the child will have learning disabilities later in life. Comprehension is going to be a big concern because all of these skills have to make the connection in the brain before they can comprehend. You can change the testing, change the curriculum, change the teachers, but you can never change the way a child develops through the childhood developmental stages. One has to happen before the next. When you skip important steps or milestones, trouble will be waiting down the line. We are professionals that KNOW these kids and we know what the need developmentally. However, we are told what to do, what to teach, when to teach it by people that have never taught children this age. They are not aware of the developmental stages and aren't concerned as long as they make benchmark. I do not agree with state testing and comparing teachers based on what their students know. If one teacher

has all of the teachers' children in her class and all "A" students, then another teacher has five students with special needs, the administrators still praise the one with the kids already knowing the skills. The teacher with the 100% is always praised and recognized over the teacher that made growth of 68%, but is still at 90% at the EOY. The teacher with the 100% started out above 90%! That is not right! The students should be placed in classrooms fairly, so it will be fair game for all teachers. Students with special needs do NOT need to be tested or counted toward the overall benchmark score. I feel like I am not teaching life skills, but rather testing skills. These students are moving at such a high speed, they do not learn their address for emergencies, learn to tie their shoes, or even learn what to do in an emergency situation like Stop. Drop and Roll! If it is not in a standard that is going to be tested, we aren't allowed to teach it. I was told last year that my students did not need to learn their address because they probably would not live there the whole school year anyway. However, within the next few weeks, the child's house caught on fire and burned down. If the child had known his address, he could have helped get firefighters there quicker.

"If it is not in a standard that is going to be tested, we aren't allowed to teach it."

11

Good evening,

I saw your post on Facebook looking for statements about testing. I've written one. If you choose to use it, I'd like my identity to be kept confidential. It's a little emotional, but I hope you can use it and it helps.

I am from Mississippi, have lived here all my life. I've always wanted to be a teacher, so I became one. I have been teaching in the Mississippi Delta for six years. All six years I have been in a tested area. The first year, I felt like I had no idea what I was doing. My 7th graders and I worked hard preparing for their ELA state test. When the time came, they were piled into the gym and tested en masse. It lasted nearly six hours. At lunch, they were spread out over the cafeteria, so they couldn't talk about the test. At the end of the day, at least three of them were in tears from exhaustion and anxiety. The rest of them were bouncing off the walls. When they came back on Wednesday, they went back in for 7th grade Math.

The next year, I got a job working at a high school down the road. About half of the 8th graders from my previous school became my 9th graders. This year had different challenges as I would be teaching English I, English II first-time test takers, aka 10th graders, and a class for remediation. English I was fun. We read, discussed, and built a rapport that I haven't been able to copy since. My English II classes were a struggle from the get-go. They were angry because I replaced a beloved English teacher, and they didn't understand my methods. Nevertheless, we got through the year. Testing came quickly, and, because of the setup of that particular school, it was a little easier on me. However, I was left with anxious students afterwards. I was also left with students who, after testing, didn't see the purpose of the 3-5 weeks left in the year. It was a struggle to keep them motivated and to keep attendance up.

My third year was difficult for so many reasons. Our school had applied for and received a SIG grant and the dreaded PARCC tests were to be introduced. My 9th graders from the previous year became my 10th graders. They worked hard all year. Essays upon essays, college level texts, and hours of co-teaching with my partner paid off. Compared to other schools in the county, we killed the test. Compared to the rest of the state, our kids were outperforming other students in some of the best districts and schools.

Over the past three years, I have taught English II for two of those three and 7th grade English for one. We have dealt with changes in cut scores, practice tests with bad answers, writing prompts that confuse everyone, and legislators that continue to pour money into a testing program that is not working. Our kids are tired, our teachers are frustrated, and our progress is stalled. I've seen children cry over tests. I've celebrated with Seniors who struggle with tests up until the very last second. I've done boot camps, had consultants, co-taught and co-planned for hours, all for things to change or to miss a passing score by one or two questions. I've run down test scores and had to deal with testing coordinators who forget to order the writing portion. And now, after dealing with my own anxiety and depression, I have to wonder what we're really doing here? We are not better. We are not making our students stronger. We are failing, in more than just test scores. We are failing in compassion and understanding. We are failing our students. And it's time to stop.

“We are not better. We are not making our students stronger. We are failing, in more than just test scores. We are failing in compassion and understanding. We are failing our students. And it's time to stop.”

12

Anonymous please.

I have tested for over 10 days since April. Usually, it was just for about three hours each morning, but several of those days also included afternoons. I was testing various groups of students with 504, ELL, IEP, etc. My teaching suffered because I couldn't focus on anything teaching-related. There are multiple projects and lessons that will not be finished this year because I was testing so much. I would have to miss my morning classes to test. Anyway, the way I kept up with how many days I tested was that every time I had to sign that I didn't have a phone, I would count the dates. Some teachers tested 18-20 days, that's how they kept count as well. I saw some of their sheets and can attest to that amount of days. I was hall monitor multiple days in a hallway without air conditioning. Students tested in a room without air conditioning. This was hard on the kids, I know. It was especially hard on me because I have had a bad asthma flare up this semester. It was very hard to breathe in the heat. I had to get an emergency asthma doctor appointment after one of those days.

I was hall monitor last week for a student that moved recently to the district from CA. He is very low. We suspect he needs a ruling, but we can't seem to get any documentation. Very transient background. Has lived in multiple states. Anyway, one day he asked to go to the bathroom and the

teachers later found him crying on the floor because he didn't know the answers. The day I was his hall monitor, I witnessed the child beating his head with his fists in frustration. He didn't have the fine motor skills to use the computer to click and drag. It was the most pitiful, heartbreaking thing I have ever witnessed. He isn't the only one, though. I saw students that have been at our school all three years crying, not being able to catch their breath, getting sick at their stomachs.

I am an ethical educator. The people I work with are ethical educators. We are doing everything we can within the laws and mandates to protect children, but something is very wrong with the testing. I don't feel like we are trying to put this pressure on them, but I think they can tell the teachers are under pressure and that is what upsets them. I know we aren't doing it to them intentionally as their teachers and principals. I said we are ethical, but we are being asked constantly to violate the code of ethics when we are told to test like this. I feel this testing culture particularly violates this part of the MS Educator Code of Ethics: b. Nurturing the intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and civic potential of all students c. Providing an environment that does not needlessly expose students to unnecessary embarrassment or disparagement.

“I feel this testing culture particularly violates this part of the MS Educator Code of Ethics: b. Nurturing the intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and civic potential of all students c. Providing an environment that does not needlessly expose students to unnecessary embarrassment or disparagement.”

Let me tell you what I see happening with teachers, too. Every teacher I know is trying to figure out how fast they can get out of this job. Teachers are walking out. Teachers are leaving when contracts are up. I see teachers crying off and on about the stress. Teachers hate their jobs. This impacts their own families too, which in turn has an impact on the community. I have a very hard time encouraging anyone to go into education anymore. Imagine being in a room with children who are not being taught how to behave properly and have terrible home lives...trying to get them to perform at a certain level on a test they don't care about...you can't even form proper personal relationships with them because you are told you must focus on their academics...and then you are the one held accountable when they don't meet an expectation on the day of the test. I can't imagine why anyone would want to do that. This is what classroom teachers are facing. PLUS, the class sizes are too big. So, if it even was possible to raise their test scores, and that [it would] really mean something, you'd have no chance. We ALL feel we cannot teach social skills and address

behavior, and that is the biggest place where our students are suffering. Legislators and MDE act like test scores reflect growth and that academics are all that matter. It sickens us as teachers because WE KNOW that it doesn't matter if a kid can read when they cannot even exist in a room with other human beings without fighting. Behavior in our schools has gotten so out of control. That is the thing that makes the teachers walk out...we can't teach better behavior for having to teach the tested curriculum. I work with a teacher who was kicked in the stomach and got her lip busted by a student. I'm not saying the test is the only factor in this very serious breakdown in student behavior, I'm saying that whatever is going on at home the teachers cannot do what is in their power to correct social issues in students when the only thing they can do is teach tested skills. I am afraid for what our communities will look like in ten years as far as crime and economics go when

these students who are not learning citizenship...not getting all of their needs met... not learning social skills, fine motor skills, emotional/behavioral skills, etc. are expected to function as adults.

Finally, I am having serious misgivings about my own children attending public schools because of these tests. I can just tell my oldest child is not going to handle this pressure well. I can't stand the thought of them not being in a true kindergarten room, but one that looks like a tested-subject. They should be cutting and role-playing in kindergarten, not taking computerized assessments on academic skills. I will never stop fighting for public education, but this is one reason I am leaving the classroom. I've got to be in a position to do what is best for my children when the time comes.

I lost my conference period about five times this year either proctoring or watching other classes for teachers that were proctoring. This keeps teachers from preparing and students lose class time not just from testing but because teacher wasn't in the room. One of my classes lost the equivalent of two days because half of them were testing and the other half wasn't.

Thank you for asking!

13

Hi, IT NEEDS TO STOP, BECAUSE STUDENTS CAN BE SUCCESSFUL IN PASSING COURSE WORK, BUT NOT ALL STATE TESTS. THIS NEEDS TO STOP. Please help our students graduate without the STATE TESTING.

14

My experience as a SPED teacher is that these tests are composed of far too many questions. My special needs students cannot concentrate on 75 math problems and 55 reading questions. My students do not have the ability, in 3rd grade, to focus on a test this long. I have had students trying to test with tears streaming down their faces, because they are terrified to make a mistake. This is especially true for the Gateway test to 4th grade.

15

Including the 5th grade science test, my school tested for eight days over a 2-week period. I was a proctor and/or hall monitor for six of those days. For three days (I think), I did a morning session that lasted approximately three hours and an afternoon session that was 2-3 hours. I had about 15-20 minutes in between to have lunch and SIT. Not only was this mind-numbing, but those long hours of standing/walking with no breaks was physically torturous.

The teachers didn't get a planning period while testing was going on. The students missed their special classes. Some classes were relocated because their rooms were too close to the testing area. Some classes were without their regular teacher because she was serving as a TA or proctor. The length of time to test was ridiculous. The math test was over two hours followed by another hour and 10-minute session - that is a long time to expect elementary children to focus, sit still, and stay silent. We had students who struggled to stay awake.

Another point of unfairness... one of our ELL students moved here just over a year ago and spoke no English at the time. His accommodations are that he can have the directions read aloud, but not the test items. How is he expected to be successful on these tests?

If I have to go through another year of proctoring or hall monitoring for DAYS, I'll consider retiring before I'm really ready to go.

16

I am an educator(librarian) in Vicksburg, MS. My grandson is in third grade. He had to take the reading test. At the beginning of the year, his teacher told his class about the test and that they had to pass it to pass third grade. He came home in tears telling his mama about it. He said you know I'm not good in reading...I do math better. He has a problem reading-his comprehension is great, but unless he reads it out loud he doesn't read it correctly. He has been tested and has an IEP--he is allowed to test by himself so that he can read out loud. He has gotten extra help and tutoring. We pray that he has passed the test. No child should be under that much pressure. Thanks for all you do for our children.

17

State Testing vs Learning

Students will not become the exact same as their counterparts. Students come from a variety of different backgrounds, demographics, and social economics; therefore, children will explore many different career choices and working adults. There are different learning styles that teach educators all students learn differently. So, the question is, why do we test them the same?

Some students, like myself, are not good test-takers. Do they deserve to be exposed to the same opportunities like others who are? Teaching these types of students adds stress on teachers, because they are judged by student performances on test. Hands-on projects may be the avenue for these students to broadcast their talents. High-stakes testing has a direct impact on graduation rates, because students just can't pass a test. How can an honor roll student be told they can't graduate because of one test? If we are going to test students at the end of the course for pass or fail, why can't we test them in the beginning, and, if they pass, then they don't have to take the class?

State testing causes poor teaching and loss of instructional time; many teachers are forced by administrators to teach to the test. This method only hurts students in the long run. I have noticed that once students take the Algebra I test, they don't understand concepts and make it difficult for

the Algebra II teacher. This begins a snowball effect. Once students take a state test, they think the class is over. Therefore, students tend not to perform on regular classroom assignments after state tests. This leads to greater discipline problems. There is an increase in the number of referrals in the fourth nine weeks. Teachers are burned out, and students thinking school is over leads to more and more referrals being sent to office. Therefore, four to six weeks of a school year are unproductive.

Student behavior and the lack of admin support lead to teacher burn-out, and [along with] low wages, cause great teachers to leave the profession altogether. During my 20 years, I have seen over 100 teachers leave within the first three years. Another 30-plus have left the profession within the first year. As I look at teacher education programs around the state, the numbers of future educators are dwindling. The result is the GREAT MISSISSIPPI TEACHER SHORTAGE.

What are our children going to do? How can they compete in a global market? Should we continue to test them? If so, should it be high-stakes?

18

Good Morning:

This email is in response to your request for personal stories of State Testing experiences and is one that I've wanted to share for years without an opportunity to do so. I'm a 25-year veteran educator. I've been a classroom teacher, principal, and upper administrator under this new accountability model. Because of the inequity of it, I have selected to step away.

As a teacher, I understood that we are not teaching to a test but instead the standards; so, I taught with the rigor and relevance required for my students to be successful at year's end. However, with the deficiencies possessed by the population which I was teaching, my best efforts always seemed to yield less than stellar fruit. Many of my students did in fact grow by leaps and bounds but not enough to move to another category. Others moved but not enough to be proficient or advanced. Few ever obtained the mark. Consequently, I was scorned as an unsuccessful teacher while teachers in more affluent areas of the state were heralded as successful because they did not face the same obstacles. The time of which I am speaking was prior to the new model where growth is now measured within categories but under the use of the MCT. In the subsequent years of school rating, many teachers felt as if they had no choice but to cheat. I absolutely refused to and because others did, my students showed declines under my supervision in too many cases. But, I start here because this is when the stress began and the faulty thinking came into play.

As a principal, I was determined that no teachers at my school would feel the stress of testing but instead would plan and teach with the end in mind. Unfortunately, I later learned that other school administrators did not yield to that ideology and created atmospheres conducive to cheating. As a result, my school could scarcely show improvement because the lowest students had previously scored so high. Therefore, teachers who had given their all, day in and day out, felt defeated. Students were bombarded with testing even before the test window opened causing them to be burned out during the actual testing, and administrators often focused only on the grade and not the process. Thus, education began to lose its effectiveness due to the lack of attention being given to the whole child. What we actually taught was that it's more important to get the grade than how you got it.

Thinking that moving into upper administration would provide greater opportunity to change the climate not only of a school but a district, I transitioned to a position in curriculum. Somehow, I thought that developing grade level materials that ensured both rigor and relevance, training teachers to understand and analyze data as a part of planning for individual needs, and communicating the goals and understanding of outcomes with community stakeholders would improve the testing climate and decrease fears, but I was wrong. Unfortunately, at the highest levels, the stress of showing growth and success was still present from the state level, causing it to trickle down. While the changes in the model did allow growth to weigh heavily, the qualifications of those instructing was still not taken into consideration. The playing ground was still imbalanced. To offset this, some principals were told not to test five percent of the bottom twenty-five percent. High schools manipulated courses to ensure that only those students who had proven track records would be scheduled into tested courses. In the elementary, some students were held back in the second grade and then skipped to the fourth, if the school ended at third. Too many teachers are finding more creative ways to cheat, and students are still disconnected from the end results and how they impact the district.

“Instead of accountability increasing educational success, it is causing less efficacy. The focus is no longer on the well-being of students but on the final grade.”

Instead of accountability increasing educational success, it is causing less efficacy. The focus is no longer on the well-being of students but on the final grade. The process of teaching has been lost. Every year, the districts most in need are losing teachers due to the stress. They either leave the profession or are going to more affluent districts. As a result, the students in need are being failed.

Should accountability continue is not my debate. What type is of concern. Until we begin to look at the entire picture, the puzzle will never be complete.

19

My child has test anxiety. The week of the state test, he is unable to sleep. The teacher is stressing that he must pass. This is a lot of pressure for young students. In addition, it is not fair to judge a teacher's year of hard-work based on one thing (test). PLEASE KEEP CONFIDENTIAL

20

I received this email from a parent after our last day of testing last week. The student is a 7th grader. The parent emailed all of the girl's teachers because she was missing school on Friday. Here is what she said:

Dear wonderful teachers,

My sweet ----- called me around 2:20 yesterday crying and nauseous with a migraine. Anyway I took her to the Doctor at Trustcare. Basically her vision has been strained from state tests this week (I'm making a doctor's appt) and lack of sleep (she has bad insomnia) and stress has all contributed to the migraines. She came home last Night and went straight to bed so I let her stay home today.

As for myself, after proctoring four out of five days for the last two weeks, I was also exhausted. That same Thursday I received this email, I went home and laid down at 6:30, not meaning to fall asleep for the night. I slept all the way to the next morning. Each individual day I proctored from 8:00 to 10:30 or 11:30 depending on the test. Then, of course, I'm expected to have my own classes the rest of the day. After standing around for 2.5-3 hours every day, my feet and legs hurt worse than if I had walked five miles. On two occasions I had students so nervous about the tests that they left the room to throw up. We had numerous technical problems with the Questar platform. Kids were frequently knocked out of the test and had to reboot their computers and walk through the lengthy log in procedures to get back into the tests, losing precious minutes on a timed test. All of this for a set of scores that tell us little to nothing about what kind of school we have, or what students actually learn. There has to be a better way to do this.

As you stated in your Facebook post, please keep all of this anonymous.

21

Where to begin? Let me start with a personal observation for when I taught gen.ed. English. The entire focus of the curriculum is the English II test objectives therefore, even in 9th grade that is the base from which we taught. We were told to assume that by high school, our students were accomplished grammarians despite the evidence in the writing samples to the contrary, thus we were not to teach grammar but simply the formulation of essay writing. I ask, what is the point of being able to formulate an essay if it is so poorly written that it cannot be understood? For that matter, most of our students today are so apathetic towards their education that they barely participate in class, or their assignments and refuse to actually use what they are taught. They cannot only not compose a decent written sentence, they cannot use one orally, nor do they care to! Their philosophy is usually, "I know how to talk right, I just choose not to. This is how I have always talked, and I ain't gonna change."

All of our teacher-composed tests had to be written to follow the state test format, and we were given Case 21 practice tests twice a semester along with workbooks geared to the state tests as well. The workbooks are gone, but the Case 21 testing still remains, despite the fact that we have moved on to a completely different testing format, thrice, since we started using Case 21.

Furthermore, what have we prepared students for outside of these four walls and those four tests? Absolutely nothing. I attempted to teach formal documents in my English III classes. It seemed logical since they would encounter the species multiple times throughout their lives, job applications; financial aid for college, mortgages, auto loans, and other various items; housing applications, college applications, homestead applications, voter registration, selective service,

military service, utility connection, income taxes, health, home, and auto insurance applications or claims, medical information forms, etc. My students thought I was nuts, and I was told it was not important, so I shouldn't bother teaching it. Not important! I got the same responses when I introduced formal and informal letter writing and resume composition! How are these not important tools in the real world?

Now as a special education teacher, I have experienced a completely different side. In effort to disturb the gen. ed. teaching process as little as possible (after all, they are teaching the test), SPED teachers are used for testing more often than any other teacher which leaves the SPED students receiving minimal services for the month that testing requires in a school with over 1900 students.

Do I understand that students need to be assessed in order to prove they have learned the required curriculum? Of course! But I also feel there has to be a better way. The pencil/paper tests took less time and interrupted the learning process minimally, when compared to the computerized testing. The curriculum/tests themselves are too rigid and not realistic when it comes to the material addressed vs. what students will need to know for college, the working world, the real world.

22

I am a testing coordinator and a teacher at my school. I have seen testing mishaps, stress, and just plain out sickness because of the "test." I will walk you through the day the 3rd grade shut down at our school. Everyone was in his place, teachers, students, principal, testing coordinator, proctors, and hall monitors. The school was eerie quiet because we are on prison lockdown. No one in no one out, no talking in the classrooms, no going to the bathroom, no going to lunch until testing is over, no moving unless it is the teachers in the room or hall monitors. Testing begins, two students threw up as soon as they logged into their tests because they were afraid of failing. One student has diarrhea, another gets a nose bleed and the test just began. The teachers are walking around the rooms in silence (we have 10 rooms testing at this point). The red flags start turning around on the doors and teachers are saying the computers are having problems. Oh boy, here we go! I call for the computer tech to come to the school to investigate. He tells us it is a Questar problem and will have to deal with it. The students continue to test, two more students throw up because they are afraid of doing bad. Questar is continuing to mess up. One of our rooms is through testing, the students submit, and their answers disappear. The whole class of 25 students lose their answers. This causes a chain reaction of tears from the students and ugly words from the teachers. Again, the computer tech comes in and tries to figure out the problem. In the meantime, class number two is finished and submitting the test, again the material is erased. More tears flow and more words from teacher. We call Questar and they have to investigate the problem. Well, there is a major glitch in the system, and the students have to retake the test. The students cry, throw up, and the parents protest because of the amount of stress the kids are under. Re-test date is scheduled, and lo-and-behold, it happened again on re-test day. Third grade shut down, and the students are angry because they might have to take the test again. This time Questar figured out a solution after the district testing coordinator speaks to them. I have to ask, "Why are we paying \$10 million dollars to a company that has so many problems with the testing?" \$10 million dollars could pay for teacher pay raises.

As a testing coordinator, I have seen students throw up, poop on themselves and skip school because of the pressure of taking a test. The teachers teach to the test and other material is thrown out because it is not tested. A lot of our history is not being taught because it is not tested, a lot of our social skills are not being taught because it is not tested, our kids are suffering and so is society because of "the test."

23

State Mandated Testing is one of the biggest detriments to the education system ever. If the students are not 3rd graders trying to reach the 4th grade or high school students trying to graduate they serve no purpose other than stopping the educational process. The only skill kids are now possessing are moderate test taking skills.

In my district we spend every moment possible reconstructing the testing environment, no matter how small the test, spending hours at a time creating a test taking culture while losing valuable classroom time that can be used to further teach our students. Students are not taught how to formulate thoughts, process information or use thinking skills unless it is in testing format. So much time is spent focusing on how the data can be used to get a point here or a point there that the overall curriculum is almost forgotten about. Our students "test" so much that when it is time for the test during the spring, they are tired of the entire scenario. Teachers are tired of it also because if it's not a standard that will possibly be seen on the test, it's not taught.

Finally, what are the incentives for the students? Teachers' jobs are based on the performance of 9-16 year-olds who can go through the test and mark anything. Funding for schools is also based upon these same students who can go through and mark anything just to get the test over with. So, I asked what really is the purpose of the state-mandated tests? Yes, school districts and schools can get low ratings or grades and lose funding, but is that really helping our students to succeed when they can't get the materials needed to compete? How can these tests be made to mean something to the children and parents? is the biggest question I have.

I am not in favor of state testing basically because we have lost so much instructional time focusing on being a corporation and not an educational subsidiary that is needed to produce productive citizens.

I will stay confidential for right now.

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24

The writing prompts were based on one passage each. The standards led me to believe that the writing prompt would require the students to synthesize information from TWO passages, or at least from two different authors.

25

I am writing about the state testing fiasco that occurred at our school over the past two weeks. I do not want to throw blame at our assistant principal upon whom the ENTIRE TESTING for the state and district fell this year. She was told she had to take on all testing and, in addition to her other duties as administrator, she went sleepless many nights to prepare rosters and displacement.

All teachers are required to proctor and administer the tests even if the teachers have classes not testing. This situation requires the students to be moved to another teacher's room where instruction is not going to occur since the other teacher could be watching several testing teacher's students at once. Teachers who have planning in the first two blocks that are involved in testing lose planning periods every day. Last week, I was assigned to administer the English II test the day before my AP kids were to take their AP exam, so I lost a day of review. The English II test had been rescheduled due to not enough teachers available to administer from the week before because of senior exams. I gave the English II test which is online (don't even get me started on the tech problems) and I missed the first two blocks those days. Three classes of English students didn't have printed tickets, so they sat in the auditorium for two days doing nothing until they got those tickets and tested two days later than the rest.

Then, I was assigned to give the AP World History test that was started late since the fiasco above was happening and there was neither roster nor materials prepared to start that test. Again, I had a class that was not involved in testing have to go to another teacher's room.

This is just the story of three days last week. These stories are just mine.... every teacher had some kind of complete upheaval over the last two weeks due to testing. I am sure that even where there is a testing coordinator whose only job is to plan for this horrible school time, the upheaval and redirection and disruption is just as damaging.

26

State-mandated testing has caused so many students anxiety during their senior year, especially if they have not passed. I believe their senior year should be enjoyable, but instead, it is devastating, embarrassing, and stressful for them. I have witnessed many disappointments and tears. I do not understand how one cannot graduate due to missing one or two points from passing. However, I can understand using the scores to determine what areas we need to improve in, but to change someone's life forever is a bitter pill to swallow. My daughter will be in 9th grade this upcoming school year, and she is already feeling anxiety about state testing. When she was in 5th grade; her teacher noticed she did better in a quiet setting with very little movement. Her weekly test grades increased tremendously thereafter. One may not realize it, but constantly walking around the classroom is a big distraction for some students which may result in non-passing test scores. It is not like they do not understand; they just freeze up. Recently, a parent spoke to me about

“Recently, a parent spoke to me about her son not being able to graduate this year. She shared how proud she was of him for doing so well in his classes, but how the test has drained him emotionally, physically, and spiritually.”

her son not being able to graduate this year. She shared how proud she was of him for doing so well in his classes, but how the test has drained him emotionally, physically, and spiritually. This is her statement, "It's just not fair my child, and other parents' children have to go through this. That test isn't going to help them on how to live as a citizen. If you can, please stop this from hurting so many kids, then you'll see an improvement on our dropout rate. Children need administrators, teachers, and others in their corners. School is supposed to be fun--not harmful. This test is harming our children's life and future. Think about your child or grandchild not being able to graduate because of a test."

27

I've seen all throughout many years that State Testing causes problems for many students because of the stress it causes them. I've never believed that State Testing tells the student's true abilities and education level. I think testing on the subject that the student is studying is more than sufficient to know their strengths and weaknesses. We never know a student's family life and stresses they deal with on a daily basis to add to their stress level and even impede their testing.

Good Morning,

I am a first-year teacher in Mississippi after living and teaching in Alaska for 20 years. My experience in Alaska was teaching 20 years of kindergarten. This year, I am teaching kindergarten as well in a whole different world! I have administered the MAPS test and DIBELS in Alaska for over 10 years.

The organization and minimal time spent on test taking in Alaska was a breath of fresh air compared to here. In Mississippi I have spent countless hours sitting in my classroom trying to keep my students quiet while testing is being completed. The last MONTH of school, we have been in testing mode. What is testing mode? Testing mode means that we have an adjusted activity schedule where the music, p.e. and librarian are not available to give us a break during the day, classrooms go UNCLENED because the custodians are sitting in chairs in the hallways as monitors, travel in the hallways has to be SILENT (hard for five-year-olds) and flexibility is a MUST.

In addition to the above issues, I was asked to administer a test (MAPS) that had five-year-olds crying. When I am administering a test that asks five-year-old students to compute perimeter and area, multiply, divide, tell time to five-minute increments, solve for "s" in an equation, subtract three-digit numbers and choose two statements that are true about a shape, I know that developmental appropriateness has been lost. The tests that I am being asked to give my students are in no way appropriate or self-esteem boosting for students. Students are leaving their testing computer in a sad state thinking that they are failures because they are being asked questions that are far above what they can understand. We should not push a child but allow them to develop skills using a natural progression on the developmental continuum.

I have taught harder than ever this school year. This group of students that I have are smart! Testing does not measure a fraction of what I have worked so hard to instill in their minds. Please contact me if you have any further questions or want more comments.

“When I am administering a test that asks 5 year-old students to compute perimeter and area, multiply, divide, tell time to five-minute increments, solve for “s” in an equation, subtract three-digit numbers and choose two statements that are true about a shape, I know that developmental appropriateness has been lost.”

Thank you for this opportunity. I'm so glad to have this chance to tell someone "how it is." Please keep my identity and my school's identity confidential.

We have a small school district perpetually on the border of being a failing school system. Here are some of the (extreme) measures we go through to pass the test:

1. All of our state testing teachers must TEACH THE TEST. No background information is allowed, no historical build up to an idea, no introduction of concepts the students will be seeing in future courses and no labs or projects.
 - a. You know as educators that ideas are introduced in early grades, to be addressed again and again over the years cycling through concepts until they are mastered. In the current climate - If something does not have specific questions on the state test it is not to be mentioned. I teach upper level high school science and my 10th, 11th and 12th graders have not been exposed to some basics. My students come to me not knowing how to measure – basic things like reading a ruler, much less other lab measuring devices. They don't know the parts of an insect – I can't "hook" terms like *thoracic* in anatomy anymore because they have never been taught the parts of an insect – THORAX. They can't tell the difference between a mammal, bird, or reptile, and they certainly can't tell you the historical scientists like Galileo, Newton, and Einstein and the stories behind scientific concepts.
2. All of our emphasis is on math and reading in early elementary. No science is taught until 4th grade because it is not tested. Then our teachers must cram five years of knowledge into two years. Social studies is not addressed until later.
3. No science labs are allowed. There isn't time. Our 5th grade science teacher is great, and she does hands-on mini labs with her students to illustrate concepts. Our "award winning" teacher for 8th grade science and biology does NO hands-on. Everything is teach and practice the test using canned lectures.
4. 7th grade science and Introduction to Biology does not follow published curriculum – we mimic the 8th grade and biology curriculum to teach the test.
5. Every teacher, including teachers of non-tested subjects, is required to have the students drill for state tests on a test practice program called Study Island one day a week.
 - a. 20% of our class time must be used for practice time, off-subject. It is difficult to get through an intensive curriculum like high school science and lose 20% of your time.
 - b. We have few computers which are concentrated in computer labs. Teachers are assigned access to the Computer lab one day a week. Can you see the problem – we cannot have the students do required research, computer-assisted learning or presentations because we must use that one day for Study Island.... To teach the test.
6. At least six WEEKS of the school year, students are removed from non-tested subjects in order to concentrate on THE TEST.
 - a. Every quarter instead of two or three days for 9-weeks testing for the whole school... ALL non-tested subject tests are given during the regular one-hour periods the Friday before testing week. (Seniors take up to seven exams) The entire Testing week is set up to mimic State Testing conditions (see # 7). All teachers and

classrooms are displaced for the state test practice. This removes three weeks from class time – 1st, 2nd, 3rd quarter.

- b. In late April, early May, the entire school goes into “Boot Camp” mode. For two weeks prior to State Testing, the entire schedule is changed to two-hour blocks concentrating on the state tested subjects in order to cram the State test. All non-tested subjects are either not included in this rotation and don’t meet at all or assigned study hall duties while students are pulled in and out of those classes for extra help.
 - c. Our school covers grades 6 – 12. We lose another two weeks as we lock down for the two weeks of actual State Tests. (One of the above weeks overlaps between middle school and high school boot camp/testing schedules.)
 - d. The kids are so sick of the test, they actually go to sleep during the State Test itself.
 - e. Our seniors – who have already passed the state tests are encouraged not to come. This means they do not come to school for these six weeks.
7. School configuration: We have a small school with limited facilities. We have two computer labs, two computer classrooms, and computers in the library. During state testing mode, all of these facilities AND all the rooms on the same three halls are removed from service. At least eight classes cannot meet in their classrooms. These students are often displaced to the gym to sit all day, and their teachers sent to the gym to monitor the chaos.
8. Each test room requires two teachers in attendance and 1-2 monitors for each hall. Even a small school requires 3-4 rooms per test. These teachers are pulled from their classrooms, and their students are sent to the gym for babysitting.
9. High school exams are unfair to lower-level students who do not test well. Ideally, high-functioning students take the Algebra I test in 8th grade, Biology in 9th grade, and English II in 10th grade. The good test-takers can take one test per year. Low functioning, poor test-takers take introductory courses their freshman year, and then must take all three major State tests back-to-back in one week. Does this make sense to you?
- a. Small schools do not offer Algebra in the 8th grade, so even high-level students must take two exams the same year.
10. This year the 6th and 8th grade math tests took six HOURS to take. This is excessive. What adult can sit for a six-hour test?
11. Ask your legislators to go through the actual Mississippi History and US History tests (not the practice tests for public consumption.) They don’t have to know the answers, just tally the positive and negative slants to the questions and answer choices. When you finish reading through the test, are you proud to be a citizen or are have you been inundated with all of the possible errors that someone has made in the last 300 years? I’m not even going to go to the liberal vs conservative slant of the tests.
12. The students have no personal investment in the test. They know the test scores affect the school district – so what? They have multiple chances to take the test if they don’t pass. They don’t study on their own, and some actually go to sleep during the test. They are so

“Our seniors – who have already passed the state tests are encouraged not to come. This means they do not come to school for these six weeks.”

sick of the State Test mantra being shoved at them that going into the test they just want to get it over with.

30

Thank you for requesting information from teachers about the effects of the annual testing process in our public schools. As a retired teacher who worked in the Rankin County School District for many years, I would like to offer my perspective.

I taught in a fifth-grade gifted program on a third-fifth grade campus; law required me to serve my students five hours a week. When testing time arrived, teachers of the gifted were required to assist with administration and/or monitoring whether our students were involved or not. In addition, we missed even more time with our students because we were required to conduct make-up tests.

It often seemed that the gifted classes might as well have concluded for the year once spring testing began. Of course, there were other times during the year when the administration of other grade-level tests also disrupted serving students of the gifted program. From hearing teachers in the regular classroom talk, I was well aware that they, too, resented the excessive time that preparation and actual testing took away from teaching.

From time to time, I had occasion to see some of the test questions while monitoring students. We were told not to discuss the tests with other teachers, but it disturbed and frustrated that sometimes I would see questions that appeared confusing and might easily be “overthought” by students.

I am all for accountability with students and teachers, but THERE MUST BE A BETTER WAY to access student progress.

P. S. – And the cost!

Note: The items published here have been proofed and edited for style and clarity. The Mississippi Association of Educators maintains the originals on file. The letter from President Helmick soliciting input can be found on the MAE website and social media sites.



775 North State Street
Jackson, MS 39201

(601) 354-4463
www.maetoday.org