



# FMBR

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## HIGH-STAKES TESTING

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(From the Introduction to

**“Failing our Kids: Why the testing Craze Won’t Fix our Kids”.**

*Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Schools, Ltd., 2000)*

The hot-button issue in education this year seems to be the testing of students in order to assess all schools for student achievement. Accountability and standards are the operative words. On the surface this sounds quite logical. In the push for implementation, however, by both federal and state governments, the following measures are accepted as self-evident:

- Standardize the tests given to all students in the U.S. for fair comparability.
- All students, regardless of ability or language, must take the same test under the exact same circumstances.
- Establish high-stakes incentives. Extra money for teachers, schools, and districts that score high on the test, and risk of failure for students, teachers, and schools, and non-survival for the districts, that score low on the test.

Carried to this extreme, it is a recipe for failure and student dropouts. Every student in America should not be forced to march in lockstep through the same curriculum, particularly one that must be adaptable to multiple-choice questions, assumed to be the only fair standardized test format. It is recognized by educators that the least important items of learning are the most easily written into multiple-choice questions. The most important comprehensive learning lends itself best to discussions, performance, and essay writing. Are we to abandon the latter?

Teachers, most of whom are being pushed into standardization nationwide, feel they have to spend more time on practicing test-taking skills, essentially drill and kill. Little or no time can be spent on reading to their students, forming discussion groups, scheduling student performances, or offering things to learn that are not likely to be on the test, such as art, music, shop, and drama. Some schools have even cancelled field trips and recess in favor of more time for test preparation.

One excellent science teacher I know said he used to take time to get to know his students as individuals and lead them into forming their own questions and experiments in search for answers. He can’t do that this year. He must drill them on items he suspects will be on the test. He is not allowed to know the items on the test since that is “secure” information, As a professional he is asked to teach, but without knowing the criteria for evaluation. It is unprofessional! Teachers should be free to teach the basics, and shape the curriculum and teaching methods to their students.

There are only four corporations in the U.S. that manufacture these high-stakes, multiple-choice, standardized tests. They stand to make a fortune since most states now require the use of their tests and test-scoring businesses. The State of California spent \$44 million administering the STAR tests last year (2000), and the governor wants to spend \$27 million more for test-preparation workbooks. All the while, school libraries in the state remain the worst stocked and staffed in the country.

Most of the push for accountability and testing comes from published reports and pundits who have persuaded the public that the public schools are not doing their job. The vast majority of parents, however, rate the schools their own children attend as being excellent or very good. Based on what they read and hear, they will report that the problems must be with “the other schools out there.” It isn’t. Most schools are educating students far beyond the schools of yesteryear.

While there are a few school in low socioeconomic areas of the country that can use more resources and help, the focus should be on creating smaller classes and schools, with attention to teacher recruitment. The focus should not be on pushing

the students out with more standardized tests that they are sure to fail without such help.

I know of no teachers who object to being accountable for their teaching, but the measure cannot be based on only one test, particularly on only one type of test. That would leave out a great deal about teaching and learning. One multiple-choice, standardized, high-stakes test will never answer the questions about what our children need to learn to be leaders and informed citizens in a multicultural, ever-changing world.

High schools  
today are  
structured  
for madness

--- Alpha B. Quincy

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