

TAKS fact: Test just measures size of parents' bank account By PAULA L. WHITELEY

TAKS has to go, and here's why. TAKS is not measuring student performance. It measures how much money your students' parents have in their bank accounts. Year after year, test performance predictably peaks in affluent areas across the state. The Suburban enclaves post great test scores. Then the Urban schools - with children whose vocabularies and experiences cannot begin to compete with children whose parents have advanced degrees and six-figure salaries - then play catch up There will be a vast difference in test scores between children with educated parents with expansive vocabularies, and students whose parents are struggling to put food on the table and hold down menial jobs.

So, after years of unfair competition and high-stakes testing, the inner-city schools, in a word, cheat. Of course, they don't all do it, and but for the ones that do, I don't blame them a whole lot. Last year, there was a list of some about 800 possible instances of cheating in Texas. It was just the tip of the iceberg. The reason I say that is because I have had personal experiences where students have asked, "Ms.Whiteley, are you going to hold up one finger for "A," 2 two fingers for "B," etc., as we take the test, like the last teacher did?" That was many years ago. Today, there are multiple versions of the test within the same classroom.

But, don't kid yourself, with high-stakes testing costing administrative jobs in affluent and urban schools, you're readers would be naive if you don't they didn't believe there will be cheating. From the subtle approach of a teacher whispering, "Check that answer once more," to full-fledged erasures at the campus level in a private office, cheating happens, and will continue to occur as long as TAKS remains an educational martinet.

TAKS is driving our classrooms in Texas. It is what we teach, often to the detriment of social studies and science, which are not part of the TAKS test until fifth grade. Just ask an elementary teacher in third or fourth grade how much time is actually spent on science or social studies. Those two disciplines go by the wayside in order to have more reinforcement of math and reading, to shore up those vocabularies that haven't been nurtured at home. Minutes earmarked for social studies are actually used to drill math skills that were neglected for one reason or another.

Let's use a nautical analogy: Imagine that there are twenty 20 students, and they are either safely on the deck of the TAKS ship, with no danger of failing, or they are flailing in the water, reading in the third grade on a kindergarten level. (Don't gasp - every teacher in Texas has Children Left Behind that don't read on grade level. They're not widgets, they're kids, and despite all of Berkeley's some research, they develop at different rates.)

There are a finite amount of minutes in the classroom. Five students are very bright and need challenging and extensions. Six students, however, do not read anywhere near grade level and will definitely not pass TAKS without daily intervention. A lack of attention to the flailers in the water might cost the school's principal a job. Those are our choices in Texas. Now, which do you think a teacher would choose?

There are established tests that measure a child's yearly progress to hold teachers accountable. For instance, student growth from a first-grade to a third-grade performance level can easily be measured.

TAKS won't measure that growth, however; all the teachers and districts know is that the student, who made two years gain in one, failed third-grade TAKS.

We are jumping through flaming hoops in Texas, losing good teachers.

Most now leave teaching after less than five years. Texas teachers are sick to death of this test being crammed down our throats. There's a better way than the TAKS Nazis we have morphed into. It's time to draw a line in the educational sand and take our state back.

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