

# Accountability

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I cannot remember a time when more demands have been placed on teachers, administrators, and students. State and federal mandates require teachers to effectively deliver an ever-expanding curriculum. Students are pushed to master more and more concepts at younger ages. Along with the traditional academic subjects, schools are now held responsible for teaching values that many believe are best taught at home. Examples include sex education and character development. I will admit this is better taught in the school than not taught at all, but in education we continue to add more to our curriculum and seldom, if ever, remove parts of the course of study.

Not only must teachers meet the academic needs of students, they must address the physical, emotional, and sometimes even medical needs of the young people in their charge. Gone is the day when teachers could concentrate only on Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic. Today’s teacher finds it more and more difficult to find classroom time during the week to plan for upcoming lessons. Implementing customized teaching strategies to reach each student and maximize learning for all students requires planning time in addition to class time.

Students today are more physically and emotionally needy than at any time I can remember. One of the negative results of this ever-expanding curriculum is the loss of time to do the fun work that students will remember. In my early days of teaching elementary school, my students and I enjoyed taking our lunches out under a tree and spending time reading, writing, and using our imaginations. Today’s schedule is so full that it is very difficult to find time for these enriching activities.

With the increasing curricular demands comes a loud call for accountability—holding schools, educators, and students responsible for student learning. Good educators fully support accountability; however, I can’t help but be concerned about the large number of high stakes tests our students now have to take. The worth of individual schools, as well as entire school districts, is often reduced to a number score or a number of gold stars just as a student’s learning is measured by grades and test scores.

The whole purpose of assessment, in my opinion, should be to drive instruction, not to be a “gotcha” at the end of a lesson or course. Testing should be one of the tools teachers use to determine which objectives are still troublesome for students. Teachers can use the information to discover how delivering instruction to the class another way may help students learn. This practice helps teachers provide several opportunities for students to master the content governed by state education standards.

Proper assessments also help us know that students who graduate from one of our high schools and enter college will not need remedial classes to prepare them for college-level work. What does concern me, however, is the number of tests educators are required to administer. When educators voice their concerns about testing, it may be perceived as a desire to avoid accountability. Good teachers do not mind being accountable. In fact, teachers must be accountable for student learning, and parents deserve to know how their children are doing in school. People in the community and local business leaders need to know their local schools are preparing the future work force.

Although I was aware we invest a lot of time in testing, this week it became very clear to me what that really means. I walked into the workroom of our Assistant Superintendent of Assessment and Accountability. Behind the filing cabinets and boxes of testing materials, the entire back wall is taken up with a magnetic calendar board covered with hundreds of magnets. Each one marks test names, testing days, and dates for mandatory teacher training that prepares them to properly administer the tests and meet state guidelines.

Keep in mind that children have been on summer vacation for barely two weeks, but state testing is such a large part of today’s education that planning is already underway to schedule next year’s rounds of state testing. It makes me wonder when teachers are supposed to teach the many objectives their students need to learn to be ready for the next test, promotion to the next grade, or other educational challenges. We need fewer, better, and fairer assessments and must continue working with legislators and departments of education to find a balance of assessment and accountability. Together, we should try to find a practical way to be accountable to parents and the community without over-testing our students.