

Mastery or Progress?
The Standardized Testing Debate Comes To The Classroom
By Barbara Condliffe
TNLI MetLife Fellow, New York City, NY
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"Yo Ms. Howe let me tell you what happened." Dave yelled to his teacher across the room.

"Alright tell me, how does the book end? I'm dying to know," Ms. Howe stopped erasing her board and sat down at a desk to listened to Dave. Dave waited until his friends cleared the room and then sat down with his teacher.

"Keleeee is dead."

"No, that's so sad."

"Yeah but that kid had it comin' to him. He was getting in all kinds of trouble and wouldn't listen to no one not even his girl. I think it was sort of the point though. After a while all his decisions caught up to him...That's like the theme or whatever you call it.

You got anymore books like this?"

"Yeah this was just the first in the series. There are two more. I'll give it to you next class. OK?"

"That's cool. Don't be giving it to someone else first though." Dave started to walk away and Ms. Howe could barely contain her smile thinking of how far he had come in just a semester.

School for Medical Studies

The School for Medical Studies (SMS) was a small school in West Harlem. The school started in 2003 and by 2008 had 400 students in total. The school accepted any student who applied and expressed an interest in the medical profession. The school's demographic breakdown was 60% African American, 30% Hispanic and 10% White or

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Asian. The school received a C rating on the citywide report card. The overall graduation rates were higher than the city average, and the state tests pass rates were on par with most of the city. However, the school was struggling with African American males in terms of their attendance, academic progress, and performance.

The school's principal, Mr. Reyes, was in his second year as principal. He had been a teacher in Florida for ten years and then joined the School Leader Training program run by the city. About sixty percent of Mr. Reyes' teaching staff was in their first or second year of teaching. Mr. Reyes strongly believed in the small school model that allowed teachers to build strong relationships with students and have greater voice in school-wide decision making. Having come through an alternative teaching certification program himself, Mr. Reyes liked hiring from alternative certification programs and had gotten many of his new teachers from those programs. He liked teachers like Rachel Howe who came fresh out of college and were eager to push themselves to the limit to achieve at their jobs. "Never once has an alt-cert teacher told me they can't or they won't when I ask them to complete a task. They are so eager to please and so emotionally invested. Sometimes that investment backfires and I end up acting like a counselor or a parent to these young kids who come to teach, but most of the time they do a lot for the school. I think of Ms. Howe who, in her first year, started a drama club and became the technology coordinator at the school."

The End of First Semester Eleventh Grade Common Planning Time Meeting

It was mid January at SMS and the eleventh grade teachers were having their common planning time meeting. Ms. Shenell Breyer, Mr. Howard Neil, Ms. Rachel Howe and Ms. Mia Seung were sitting around a table in the math classroom. The room was boiling from the blasting heat coming off the radiators. The teachers assembled around the table looked uncomfortable in the chairs that were meant for middle school students but ended up in a high school classroom.

The team has been charged with assigning all 90 eleventh grade students into second semester classes based on their needs in terms of skills, standardized test pass rates, and credit accumulation. By eleventh grade students should have passed their math, global

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history and biology state tests. In June of their eleventh grade year they would take their English and American history state exams. All students had to take gym, chemistry, English, American history, and math. For the two remaining classes in their schedules, the teachers needed to figure out if the students should go to a remedial skills class, test prep classes for the state exams they had failed in the past, or enrichment/honors classes. Most of the placements went pretty quickly and then the group arrived on Dave Baker. Dave was held back in ninth grade, passed his state math test in tenth grade, but failed his state biology test and global history test that year.

"Okay," said Ms Breyer, the math teacher and grade team leader. "Dave needs biology and global. I'll put him down for those two test prep electives."

"Actually," interrupted Ms. Howe. "I would really like to continue having Dave in my remedial reading class. He improved by one whole reading level in just one semester and he is loving the series that he is reading right now. I think continuing the class would be really good for him."

"Rachel, you have done amazing things with him this semester, but Dave needs these two tests to graduate and doesn't have room for your elective class anymore. You'll still see him in your regular English class, though."

"Let's be honest," said Ms. Howe, getting a little more excited, "The reason Dave can't pass these tests is because Dave reads at a fifth grade level."

"Um, I don't think so," said Mr. Neil, the social studies teacher. "The reason Dave can't do well is the kid is lazy. I know he failed his social studies state test last year because he doesn't take notes."

"Exactly; he doesn't take notes because he can't understand what he is reading in your class."

"Oh, I see, so it's my fault that Dave falls asleep in my class and doesn't show up for tutoring. It's my fault Dave can't read. Last time I checked, I taught social studies and you taught English."

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"Mr. Neil, that's not what I'm saying. I can't teach Dave how to read while preparing him and his class for a standardized test. He needs this extra class time to learn how to read or else he will fail all his state exams."

"Listen Rachel" Ms. Breyer piped up. "We all wish we have more time with the kids. I mean there are plenty of kids that I would like to see for a double period of math so that I could get more test prep in with them." Ms. Breyer understood Rachel's concerns and hoped she didn't sound too harsh. She was anxious however to get through the list because it was due to Mr. Reyes by lunch time and she didn't have time on her prep period to complete it herself.

"I don't want Dave to get extra test prep. I want Dave to learn to read."

"I understand you are frustrated Rachel, but given the amount of tests Dave has to take, we have to schedule him for test prep. If Dave doesn't start passing these tests, he won't graduate on time and then he will surely drop out....You should talk to Ms. Smith about ways to differentiate for Dave. She taught eleventh grade English for a long time and could probably help you handle him. We have to move on guys...Okay, Latisha passed all her regents, but failed health last year, do we have room in fifth period health class for her?"

"Wait, I'm not okay with this. Our responsibility is to ensure that Dave makes academic progress this year and not to have him pass these stupid tests," Ms Howe said, feeling herself getting red and her voice shaking.

Mr. Neil rolled his eyes. "I am so sick of this. The decision is made Ms. Howe, deal with it. Maybe, just maybe, we might be right on this one."

"Excuse me." Ms Howe whispered as she pushed her chair away from the table and walked out of the room to find a sink to rinse off her face. This was not the first time that she felt attacked by Mr. Neil, but usually Shenell did not so obviously side with him or dismiss her points. She knew that Mia, the special education teacher, agreed with her about Dave. Why didn't she speak up? How could she leave her out to dry like that? She suddenly felt very alone, desperate and embarrassed. Everyone at the meeting knew that

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she had gotten up because she was upset and she could not help but imagine them all snickering about her overly idealistic ways and young age.

Fourth Period English

It was the end of fourth period and Ms. Howe was handing back the timed essay tests that her juniors had taken earlier in the week.

"As you look through my comments and consult your rubric, I want everyone to write down one goal you have for the next essay that we write. What specific skill do you need to work on? Please write down your goal on a sticky note before putting the essay into your portfolio."

She had been up until two in the morning grading and commenting on essays. As she handed back the essays, her heart sank watching her students skip over her carefully worded comments and quickly flip to the grade on the last page.

"What, Ms. Howe, how I get a 75? This is bullshit."

"Watch your language, please, Denise. Consult your rubric and comments before asking me about your grade."

Ms. Howe circulated to encourage students to write their goal statements. She stopped at Dave's table and congratulated him on his progress. He had completed the essay and received a grade of 80.

"Ms. H, you playin' favorites. How did Dave and I get the same grade when he only wrote three paragraphs and I wrote five."

"Did you consult your rubric Ricardo? Don't worry about Dave, worry about your own progress."

"I looked at that and my rubric looks nothing like Dave's." Ricardo was right, Ms. Howe did have different rubrics for different students. She had created three rubrics to meet the needs of the diverse learners in her class. After a workshop on differentiation a few

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months ago, she had started using this technique with grading essays. She didn't want to keep using the state exam rubric for all her students as no matter how much her lower level students tried, they would inevitably fail with those rubrics. Her new system allowed her to really track her students' progress and to reward them for that progress. Although she had been using this system for a while now, the students had never noticed until now.

"We all have our own rubrics, Ricardo, to match our own needs."

"What? Well I *need* to only write three paragraphs next time." Ricardo had gotten loud and now the whole class was listening and comparing their rubrics.

"Fair is not giving everyone the same thing, Ricardo, but giving everyone what they need. Some of us are making progress by writing five paragraphs and for some of us, it is different."

"What do you mean, different?" Dave piped up with a scowl on his face. Dave was terrified that people would start considering him a part of special education if they thought he was treated differently.

"I mean..."

"Wait," Joyce stood up in the back. Joyce was a senior taking this class for a second time because she failed the test during her junior year. "Why Natalie's rubric say some stuff about official New York State exam and mine don't?" Ms. Howe had given the on-level students the actual rubric used for grading the exam and the other students, like Joyce, had received the lower-level versions she had created.

"You keep gassing us up about this test, but some of us don't get the real rubric? You think we special ed or something? You think I'm in here for my health? I need to pass this shit for real. I ain't missing my graduation and coming to no summer school."

Shouts of "this is some bullshit," "I hate this class," and "I'm gonna fail" rose up from the back and rang in Ms. Howe's ear.

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Before she could formulate a response, the bell rang and the class scurried away, leaving Ms. Howe with a sea of blank sticky notes scattered all over the floor. Among the yellow, pink, and blue notes, Ms. Howe saw Dave's essay on the floor. She ran after him and found him in the hallway, "Dave you forgot this."

"Oh," Dave looked the paper for a second and stuffed it in the black abyss of his bag.

"Hey, can we talk? I'll write you a pass for your next class." Ms. Howe hoped her voice did not sound too pleading. Dave followed her back to her classroom and sat down.

"What did you make of the whole rubric thing in class? I hope you realize that you deserved the 80 that you got. You have worked really hard this semester."

"I know. Don't worry Miss. Ricardo is always whining about something. Besides, I know I'm not as smart as him."

"It's not about smarts Dave, it's about progress. We all come into class in different places and I grade based on how much progress you make. Like, for me, imagine that I come onto the basketball court and have never played ball before. You wouldn't judge me the same way that you do a person who has been playing ball all their life. You are smart Dave; you just haven't had as much experience with books and essay writing."

Dave gave her a half hearted smile and Ms. Howe realized she had lost his attention. She looked at him and said, "Can I ask you something? Have you been enjoying our 2nd period reading class?"

Dave smiled slightly, "It's cool. It sure is better than the regular 4th period English. You be killing us with all those essays."

"Hm...Well the problem is that you have all these regents to pass and people want to take you out of my class and put you in a regents prep class next semester."

"I don't care too much just as long as the teacher ain't Mr. Neil. I can't stand him."

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"Right." Ms. Howe realized she needed to end this conversation as she didn't want to get stuck talking to Dave about another teacher and then have that teacher find out. She already had enough problems with Mr. Neil.

Seventh Period in Ms. Smith's Room

Ms. Julia Smith was one of the few veteran teachers at SMS. She had come to the school in 2006 after leaving the large school that she had worked at for fifteen years prior. Her former school was taken over by the city and broken into small high schools. Rather than be placed at one of these new schools under new leadership, she chose to apply for a position teaching twelfth grade at SMS. SMS was close to her home, she already knew many of the kids in the community and she figured that if she liked the school she might send her children there one day. Mr. Reyes was happy to have her. Although she had taught eleventh grade for many years and achieved excellent pass rates at her old school, Mr. Reyes gave Ms. Smith a smaller teaching load and asked her to serve as a mentor to many of his new teachers. Ms. Smith liked Ms. Howe and enjoyed being her mentor most of the time. She appreciated her interest in growing as a teacher and her dedication to the students.

Ms. Howe knocked on Ms. Smith's door during her seventh period prep period in hopes that she could talk with her about the situation with Dave. She knew that Ms. Smith was close to Dave and his family, and thought that if Ms. Smith talked to Mr. Reyes about the situation, things might work out the way she wanted. "This is a surprise," said Ms. Smith as she greeted Ms. Howe at the door with a smile.

"What can I do for you?"

"I came to talk to you about Dave."

"Uh oh. What did he do this time?"

"Oh, nothing. He is such a pleasure in class. He was tough with me at first, but I think he really has opened up to me in the last few months." Ms. Smith looked at Ms. Howe inquisitively.

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"Just don't let that boy push you around. He tries to play all the young female teachers here. Make sure he's doing his work, because if he isn't, I can set him straight."

Ms. Howe laughed nervously. "No, that's not it. I'm actually really concerned about his reading. You see I have him in my English class and currently he is taking that extra remedial reading elective that I started earlier this semester. He is progressing really well, but now the team wants to pull him out of the reading class and put him in a test-prep course for the tests he failed in tenth grade."

"Well does he need to pass other state tests?"

"Yes, but he also needs to improve his reading. He reads at about a sixth grade reading level according to the DRA I did with him the other day. He is really responding well to the guided reading in our remedial reading classes. How can we let him graduate without teaching him to read?"

"Well Rachel, I don't know about guided reading and the D.R. whatever, they must be after my time, but I do know that if he doesn't pass the tests he won't graduate." Ms. Smith was trying not to sound annoyed, but she couldn't help but be irritated by all these young teachers who came into school thinking that their knowledge of education jargon meant they were good teachers.

"Okay but he won't pass the English state test if he does not improve his reading comprehension." Ms Howe thought she could win Ms. Smith over by appealing to the test, which she knew Ms. Smith cared about.

"Rachel, have you looked at the curriculum materials I gave you in September. I have worked with plenty of kids like Dave and have gotten them to pass the test without having to offer them an extra reading class."

"You mean the essay writing worksheets."

"Yes, that is part of it. Somewhere in there is an outline for all of the essays they have to write on the test. It gives them sentence starters for each paragraph. My students really responded to it."

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"I will look again, but I just hate giving them formulas for writing. There is all this research that shows that when students learn to write through memorization of formats, they do not retain the skills. I also don't know how to spend time on all these essays *and* improve their reading levels."

"Rachel, as an eleventh grade teacher, your job is to get these kids to pass the test. I know it can feel overwhelming and that's why I offered you those materials. I don't mean to sound harsh, but I would spend less time worrying about what your college professors tell you about how to teach writing and more time focusing on the tried and true ways that have worked in the past."

"I'm sorry Julia, I didn't mean to say I didn't appreciate your curriculum materials. I actually have used a lot of your reading strategies lessons. I just am so worried about Dave. Do you think I should call his parents and talk to them about his reading?"

Ms Smith scowled, and said, "No, I don't. Dave's parents did not graduate from high school and his brother just dropped out of Millington Community. Look, Dave is not college-bound. He just needs a high school diploma. His parents just want him to graduate and that's what Dave wants too. Have you asked him what class he would like take next semester? Do you know how good Dave felt when he passed his math exam? How is he going to feel when he gets to twelfth grade and has still not passed the tenth grade tests?" Ms. Howe sensed that the conversation was not going in the way that she wanted. She didn't want to push it with Ms. Smith, knowing how much Ms. Smith's opinion mattered in the school.

"I see what you are saying, Ms. Smith. Thanks for the advice."

"My door is always open, Ms. Howe. Any time."

Ms. Howe left feeling truly perplexed. Ms. Smith was respected school-wide for her knowledge about instruction and was known city-wide for her high state pass rates. How could her advice be so different from all the advice she got from her college professors on literacy? She also knew that Ms. Smith really cared about Dave and knew him better than

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she did. What should she do? Should she stick to her principles and go talk to Mr. Reyes about Dave? What if she was wrong?

Discussion Questions

- 1) Who should decide which class is best for Dave?
- 2) Which elective class should the teachers place Dave in?
- 3) What is Ms. Howe's primary responsibility as an English teacher whose students need to take a state exam?
- 4) Should teachers use essay writing formulas and outlines to teach writing to low-level students?
- 5) What role do state exams play in student learning?
- 6) Is Ms. Howe's grading method fair for all her students?
- 7) How can teachers differentiate instruction when faced with a standardized state exam?