

Testing the Test by Dan Jacoby

Yesterday, the Board of Education followed their master's orders and instituted standardized testing for seventh grade promotion. Now, seventh grade students will have to pass a test – two tests, really, for which they get one chance – in order to become eighth graders.

Social promotion is the process where students are mindlessly moved up through the grades without having to demonstrate that they're ready to move up. This is widely regarded as a disservice to all students. Those students who are not ready to move up soon find themselves in over their head. They inevitably lose interest, and are far more likely to drop out well before graduation. It is also a disservice to those students who are ready for the next grade, as teachers are forced to spend time with the students who aren't ready, and the whole class suffers.

The problem here is that the Board of Education has chosen two standardized tests to be the sole benchmark for determining whether a student is ready for the next grade. Education is an art, not a science. It cannot be measured in numbers. Also, different students have different strengths and weaknesses. Two standardized tests cannot measure accurately the totality of a student's abilities. Nor can they measure accurately even those areas being tested, for two reasons.

First, different students have different reactions to the pressure of a test. Some do quite well, but many others, especially those who know they are close to the borderline between success and failure, score well below their abilities. Second, some students will simply have a bad day. Illness, insomnia, troubles at home, and many other factors can lead to a failed test from a student who knows the material very well.

End social promotion? Fine. But put the power to make those choices in the hands of the people who are most capable of making them – the teachers. Give them the freedom to teach, relieve them of the burden of standardized tests, allow them, and their principals, to remove quickly those students who disrupt their classes, pay them a decent salary – and yes, hold them to a higher standard of performance – and things will get better.

Unfortunately, the current Board of Education is consistently hostile toward teachers. Their actions demonstrate that they just don't trust teachers to teach.

The Board of Education failed – or refused – to take into account that standardized tests, and the one-size-fits-all mentality behind them, are a completely worthless method for measuring academic or scholastic ability. They failed – or refused – to consider that poorer schools are more likely to produce children who cannot, or for some other reason do not, pass the test. They failed – or refused – to believe that the at-risk students left behind by this method are fifty percent more likely to drop out because they were left behind.

In other words, the Board of Education gets an "F".