Fourteen Days SBAC Took Away

BY MOÉ YONAMINE

"Do I have to do this?"

Miguel pleaded with me. He hadn't even logged in and sat at the computer, deflated. I nodded. I couldn't get myself to feign a smile. Twenty-one 6th graders were sitting in the room — some with Spider-Man or a Ninja Turtle emblazoned on their shirt, a few who sported baseball caps with flat brims they carefully kept the original gold sticker on, girls who still wore colorful ball ponytail holders and beads in their braids and pigtails, and the girls who made sure to keep their lip gloss nearby. Twenty-one students — 11- and 12-year-olds. It was May and that meant SBAC time. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. The Test.

The neon lights in the computer lab glowed rudely on our faces. Blinds closed — too bright for this Oregonian crowd; Aaliyah immediately lowered them as we walked in, even on that beautiful spring morning. Some barely pushed the "on" button on the computer to the chorusing of that single tone humming, telling me, the teacher, that they were late in following the test's directions. Why won't they get it going?! I struggled within myself, both wanting to shut down the whole testing — maybe there will be a miraculous overload of the computer system from so many of us (upstairs and downstairs) testing at once — and at the same time, wanting them to please finish on time or even early because we just couldn't waste any more class time.

Having come from teaching in a local high school where social studies teachers were never assigned to proctor a standardized test, I felt clumsy in piecing together how we would get back to our unit on climate justice. It's just four days I told myself — two days of practice testing and two days of taking the test. Right? I started counting: well, actually, and four additional days where the other 6th-grade teacher also has to do SBAC with the same kids for math and science. OK. Eight scheduled days of kids who will no doubt be brain dead. But who's counting?

Aaliyah whistled from across the room, twiddling her hair, staring blankly at the login screen. "Shut up, Aaliyah!" said Malcolm. Aaliyah rolled her eyes and looked at me.

"My mom already opted me out. She told me she did," she said with her arms crossed.

"I don't see you on the opt-out list, but I'll call Mr. Reynolds down and maybe he has more information."

"Mm-hmmm," she said, as she rolled her eyes while looking away — that slow-motion eye rolling that lets her get away with it while still being able to claim she wasn't doing anything.

"Ms. Yonamine, didn't you opt Kaiya out?" asked Fata, sitting up straighter as if eagerly waiting for some validation. Kaiya, my daughter, was a grade older in the same school. I had opted her out of SBAC immediately. There was no way my child was going to take that test; an inaccurate and unfair test that assesses

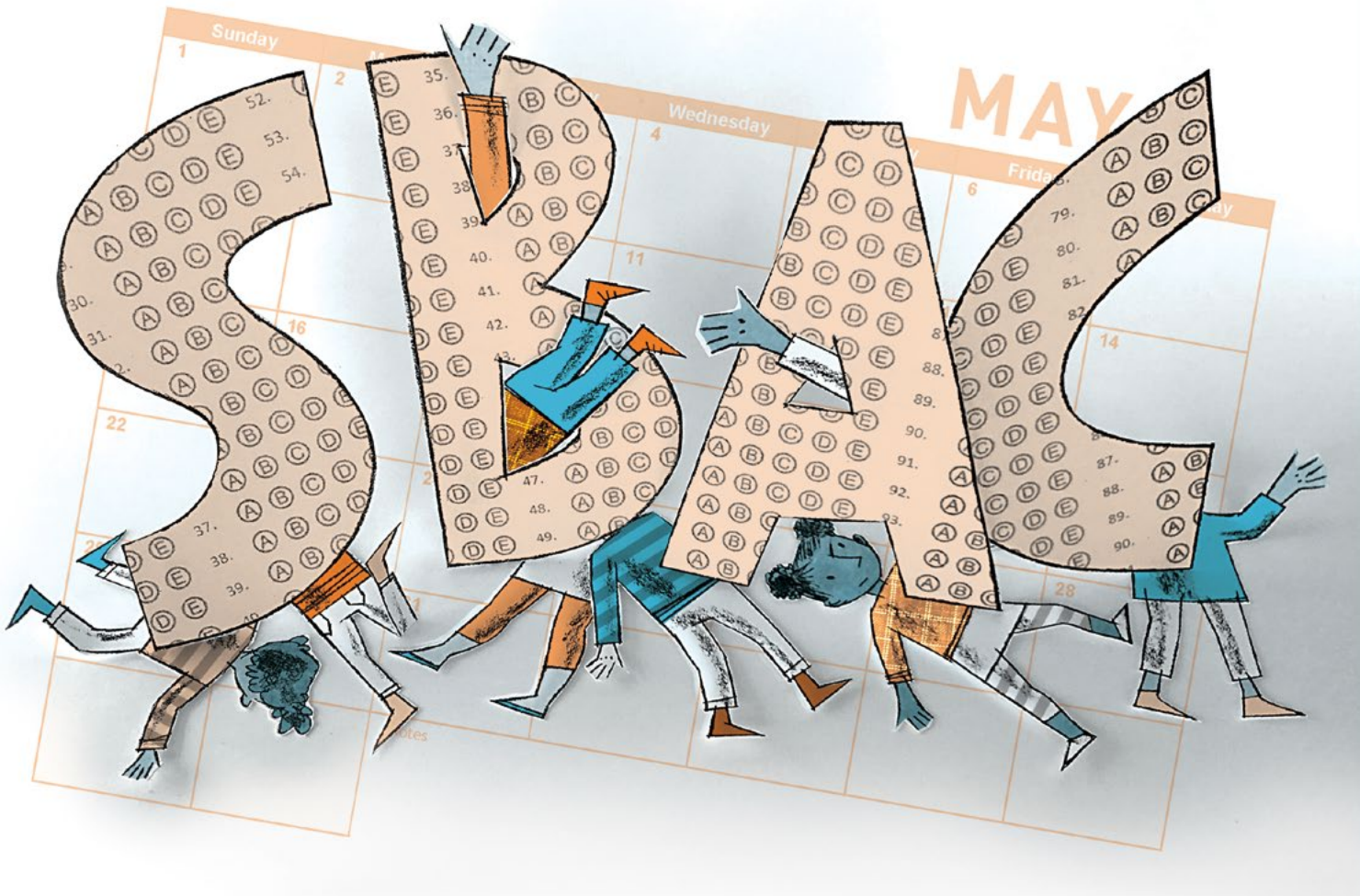
a child's intelligence by how they perform on computerized questions while ignoring inequities in background knowledge, in hardships from neighborhood poverty, and in the distribution of educational resources. Fata looked at me blankly waiting for an answer. I looked at the open door of the computer lab, back at Fata, and said nothing. "Aren't there like 20 people who got out of it?" Fata prodded.

"She can't tell you," said Kalani, who was sitting next to him and looked up from behind his glasses.

I wanted to tell them that this test is not about who's smart and who's not. This test is not about if you will be successful in college. I wanted to say to them, "Don't take it, honey. This test is not a measure of who you are or how smart you are. You are brilliant," as I had told Kaiya for weeks leading up to this moment. Although I considered the test wrong, as a third-year teacher, I felt trapped between my disgust for the test and the expectations to adhere to the school's protocols. As we repeatedly analyzed data comparing the growth of our students' test scores (or lack thereof) at our "high-poverty" school, I felt the weight on my shoulders to show that my students can rise from their low test scores. Meanwhile, many of my teacher colleagues at affluent schools on the other side of the city expressed excitement in closing out their year with meaningful projects full of joy and social justice.

I read the first set of instructions to walk everyone through the login process and to proceed with their first series of vocabulary and reading comprehension questions. Malcolm sat by squatting on top of the chair. We made eye contact and he said, "What? This is comfortable."

"OK," I said, putting my finger to my lips to remind him to be quiet and pointing to the computer, pushing him to get started.



CHRISTIANE GRAUERT

Jimena sat there crossing her arms. She was actually from the other 6th-grade cohort but she had been absent during her class's SBAC time in the computer lab. She was on the screen with the first question. "I hate this," she said.

"Try your best, Jimena. Get started," I said in a low voice standing behind her. She turned back to the computer, chose an answer too quick to have read the question. Knowing I was still standing there, she proceeded to pick up speed, clicking through random answers.

The rest of the students were trying hard to read. Every time she finished a question, Leigha drew a smiley face on her white, copy paper that had been handed out for scratch — a way to encourage herself to keep going. Ashley took notes on the content of every question asked, reading the passage again and again before selecting the answer. Malcolm was now facing me, straddling his chair backwards and smiling.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"This is so boring. I don't even know what it's saying."

"Do you want to take a break?"

"Yeah. I wanna take a break from the whole thing," he said, loudly directing his voice to the center of the room to the laughter of his friends.

Even though the main office was literally two feet from the doorway and we faced the window to the secretary, I was not allowed to step out. I called Matt, the secretary, who was standing at his raised computer. I watched him pick up the phone without taking his eyes off of the computer screen through the window. "Can you ask Mr. Reynolds to come down please?" I said softly, trying not to stir students' anxious curiosity.

Matt immediately sighed, "OK. But it'll be a while. Everyone needs him," he said in a flat voice and hung up, cutting our conversation short.

Minutes went by and now Malcolm sat on the floor, this time with the chair on top of his head. I tried to keep my laughter from exploding and fought to keep my strict teacher look. "Put it down please, Malcolm." His smile turned into a straight face with a pouty lip as he pulled the chair down to the ground slowly again, all to his friends' laughter.

I noticed Miguel reading his book, with the first question still on the screen.

"What's going on?"

"I can't do it," he said, not even looking up from the book.

"Why?"

"Because I'm stupid. I told you I can't do this," this time looking at me with pain in his eyes. My nose tingled from the sadness that flooded over me: Miguel had been fighting all year to overcome his own internalized idea that he was not smart enough because he was one of the few pulled out over and over until he passed the English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) test. In class, he struggled to write just one paragraph and he constantly kept his eyes on his peers to compare himself to their pace of writing. "You are smart, you are smart, you are smart," I whispered firmly. But the weight of this test was winning over anything I said.

Mr. Reynolds quietly stepped in with a walkie-talkie in hand, already looking worried.

"Malcolm needs a break and Aaliyah says her mom opted her out." He beckoned for Malcolm to come with him as Malcolm skipped diagonally across the room to leave. Mr. Reynolds looked at Aaliyah. "I'll go check," he said, seeming too busy to even take a breath.

Aaliyah mumbled, "I am not doing this," still resisting eye contact with me and looking out the window.

"Then read your book, Aaliyah," I tried to calm her. She grabbed the book next to her and slapped it open loudly to a random page, signaling to everyone that she was not happy.

Fifteen minutes in and the silence began to break into sighs and chairs creaking as more kids swayed their bodies with comforting rhythm. I looked at the Fred Meyer bag of gum and granola bars provided by the administration to help students weather the test. But the kids needed them already. I walked around and quietly put orange Trident next to each student's keyboard. Gasps of excitement could be heard, and smiles of "thank you" politely captured at the beat of the gum coming down. "Is there food?" whispered Fata. I nodded. "Is it chocolates?" he asked. I quietly held up the chocolate chip granola bar I pulled out from the bag. He put up two fingers — two granola bars he wanted. I shook my head. He pouted. By the time I finished distributing the snacks, some of the kids had only a wrapper left.

Kalani, though, had opened nothing — unusual for the sweet, funny, and loving boy that he was — full of affection in his body language even if he was a kid of few words. He was on the third question. I walked over to stand behind him. We were discouraged from having any conversations as teachers but I stood there to tell him I was right there. Something was wrong. He didn't turn around and smile like he always did. Nothing. He wiped a tear from under his glasses as he still faced the computer. "Hey, what's up," I whispered. He wiped the other eye, and then again. "Do you want to not do this right now?" I asked. He nodded, keeping his hand under one eye to stop the tears from falling. "OK. It's OK. You don't have to," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. Kalani had been through so much outside of his school, and this was not what he needed. This was never what he needed. Nor anyone. I hated that I was forced to do something that brought so much harm, something that I would not allow for my own child.

Fourteen days this testing went on. Four from my complete two hours that

---

Moé Yonamine teaches at Roosevelt High School in Portland, Oregon. She is a Rethinking Schools *editor.*

Illustrator Christiane Grauert's work can be found at christiane-grauert.com.

these 6th graders had with me in our double-blocked humanities, and then four from the other 6th-grade teacher's, who did her complete two hours for math and science with SBAC — leaving me to receive brain-dead kids who were quiet and wanted to do nothing except to run around and scream outside. Many of our kids didn't finish within the scheduled time. Eight were pulled out for three more days, and then five more were pulled for three days even after that. Fourteen days I couldn't carry out my teaching because we couldn't leave out the remaining kids. Fourteen days I lost during those May weeks.

On the second SBAC day, I told Miguel to try again — his mom had not turned in an opt-out form. Minutes in, he began repeatedly banging his head with the inside of his wrist. "I can't do this," he said. He didn't get back on the computer that day and had to spend it in the other 6th-grade classroom while we carried on the test. He would be pulled out of our class later for three more days until he finished.

Jimena eventually blew out, her comments of outrage were no longer just in the quick clicking of her hands. "This is bullshit," she shouted from across the room as the testing coordinator walked in to check on our progress. She beckoned Jimena out to the hallway. Jimena angrily shoved another chair out of her way as she got up. She had to take a time-out and start again the next week. She was absent for the week that followed.

Fourteen days SBAC took away. We ended our year without returning to building community for our climate justice unit. We ended the year with a rushed celebration of each other. We could have been so much more. Fourteen days SBAC took away. Fourteen days I enforced SBAC testing to be the priority of our classroom learning — or rather, our classroom "unlearning." Fourteen days SBAC took away. ■

CHRISTIANE GRAUERT