

Every lesson taught should be regarded as an assessment—not just of what a student already knows and need not be taught again, but of the assessment itself and of what is being taught. Besides my work in high school classrooms, I taught students how to pass the verbal sections of the SAT, GRE, GED, and GMAT. Students took my course because they realized that they could know enough to pass a course but not know what determined which answer was best on a test. Often, the smarter they were, the more likely they were to get the wrong answer. That's because they could see justification for their answer that others couldn't see. When I used questions from my test preparation course to train teachers on what were the standards for determining the best answer, I found teachers were worse than those struggling to get into graduate school. It's not about knowing the subject. It is about knowing which answers are not acceptable, which are not relevant, and which are not grounded in the text. It requires knowing grammar, rhetoric, and logic—all of which could be easily taught as "how words relate to each other," "how words relate to ideas," and "how ideas relate to each other." But, I am sure you know that this is not the curriculum teachers have been assigned to teach.

But, it seems the only way to convince some politicians what a waste of time and money standardized testing has turned out to be is to assess the test. In California, I had the good fortune of administering and, later, defending the California Learning Assessment System, developed by teachers to be given to 4th, 8th, and 10th grade students, where the test for literacy included discussing text in small groups, drawing pictures to represent ideas in the text, and then writing, individually, about how that text related to their own experience, experience of others they have observed, or experiences they have read about. Here is what most people giving the test did not know. The purpose of this exam was to encourage teachers of have their students think about how what they were learning related to their own lives, the lives of others they knew, and others they had learned about in the course of their lives. It was a test designed to teach critical literacy. Ultimately, it was opposed by politicians who thought relating literature to students' own lives was an invasion of privacy—or so they said. So, what the state settled for was teaching to a lower standard of literacy, where students would be asked to mark the "right" answer. Frankly, if you know the right answer, you are probably asking the wrong question. It's like naming musical notes without learning how to sing, identifying parts of speech without know how to write with purpose and creativity.

So, yes, assess those tests. Discover how learning in this country has been subverted by the commodification of education! Then, empower teachers to engage in collegial professional development, sharing what they have learned through working with their students. That will elevate the profession and offer rewards far beyond anything we see today. Put our system to the test! Pass SB 606 to see whether standardized tests deserve a passing grade!