

Tests don't work after the year kids have had

Your Turn Martha Patterson Guest columnist

The Biden Administration, with the support of U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, recently announced that schools will be required to have standardized testing this school year, one year into the COVID 19-pandemic, when schools in Kitsap County have only recently opened to a limited number of students in class.

I am a middle school, special education/math intervention teacher, and I am stunned with the decision to move forward with standardized testing this spring. All I can say is... Why? Even with the test not being used for accountability measures, and with schools being allowed flexibility as to the where, when and how ... there's just that one question: Why?

On a typical day, if half of my students show up to a Google Meet video conference call I consider that a win. If half of the kids who show up actually complete the assignment, even better. I can tell you of the 50 or so kids I serve, I've yet to see 8 of them since school started in September. Another 5 of them have shown up just a handful of times. This is despite numerous phone calls, e-mails, home visits, and home delivery of a working Chromebooks. Approximately one third of my students have completed little or no work, or participated in instruction this school year....and the government wants to test them to determine the impact of COVID on learning.

A test is not needed to determine how the pandemic has impacted student learning. A test does not measure attendance, participation, engagement or home circumstances. Educators knew that before COVID; the pandemic has shined a far brighter light on these inequities.

Within my group of students, I have several students whose attendance has been decent, but have completed little or no work. One student has had two family members hospitalized due to depression; a few have had family members hospitalized for COVID, several juggle their time between various family members homes while parents are working, or the students themselves are helping with childcare. COVID and the building closures have created a generation of students who are suffering from the lack of social engagement, the structure in person school provides, a lack of mental, emotional and physical activity and stimulus...and they will be subjected to standardized testing in the near future ... to determine how the pandemic has impacted learning.

Educators are lucky if they get half the students of any given class to take an online classroom-based assessment. Many students have not taken any classroom-based or progress monitoring assessment in nearly a year. Many of those that have completed tests at home do so unsupervised, clicking on random answers, with the goal completing the test as soon as possible. How will a standardized test provide an accurate measure of a student's progress, when they have not taken any sort of assessment since pre COVID days, despite educators providing multiple opportunities to do so?

As a special education teacher, I have always been horrified by the cruelty of subjecting students who are not working at the 'standard' and are nonetheless expected to take standardized tests. Now, in a year like no other, when learning has been disrupted, politicians with minimal classroom experience are asserting a test is needed to measure student growth. Why not ask practicing educators what students need?

Would we expect the assessments of students impacted by 9/11, by Hurricane Katrina, by the death of a parent to show us something we don't already know? Trauma is real. Why would we subject a child living during a pandemic to a meaningless test?

Standardized tests eat up weeks of instruction time. When students fully return to school buildings, they are not going to need a test to measure the impact COVID had on their learning. They will need social and emotional support, in person instruction — not test preparation. The testing industry makes millions, if not billions in profits annually. Would it not make sense for departments of education to invest the resources spent on testing to provide our schools with smaller class sizes, more counselors, school psychologists, nurses, social workers, mental health supports for students and families, that we needed pre-pandemic?

Standardized testing? Again, I ask: why?

Martha Patterson teaches special education/math intervention at Fairview Middle School in the Central Kitsap School District, and serves on the National Education Association Board of Directors. Now, in a year like no other, when learning has been disrupted, politicians with minimal classroom experience are asserting a test is needed to measure student growth. Why not ask practicing educators what students need?

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