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# WHEN TESTING LOWERS STANDARDS

**By Donald H. Graves**  
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January 4, 2002

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I want to commend President George W. Bush for sustaining his educational initiative while the country is still at war. This is the largest educational initiative the federal government has undertaken since the Johnson administration's War on Poverty in the mid-1960s. And President Bush represents the party that at one time wanted to abolish the U. S. Office of Education. Following the banner, "That No Child May Be Left Behind," a massive effort is under way to assure that all children will achieve. Unfortunately, it is at the point of measuring progress that the president's effort will stumble. Instead of raising standards, they will be lowered.

When large amounts of money are expended on educational improvement, some sort of accountability is needed. But we need to take a tough look at current approaches to assessment to see if they will produce the high achievement promised for our children. Current tests that rely heavily on computer scoring will fail to measure what Americans should prize in their students in order to maintain our number-one position in the world. Such elements as student initiative, the formulation of questions, relating book sources, and good, long thinking get lost in our rush to measure quickly and cheaply.

Parents, politicians and even educators who have not recently taken an achievement test in reading need to take one. Not until I was in mid-career when I did the same tests and assignments I gave to my students did I realize how many dumb ones I'd assigned in the past.

People who assign tests ought to take them. In Colorado, it is the state law that every school has to have a Parent Accountability Council. One elementary school principal called for volunteers but stipulated that council members had to take the test. The parents were a well-educated group and were startled to learn what the one right answer might be since they could see that two or even three answers might be appropriate. Further, they were struck by the poor quality of writing in the paragraphs. They became so incensed they insisted that members of the State Board of Education take the test.

Many states have high stakes testing where monetary rewards are given to schools, districts, even teachers, whose students do well. The effect can be devastating in ways we may not understand. Students in many of these districts prepare for months taking test after practice test in order to become test wise and do well for the sake of the school and district. Enormous amounts of time that should be spent in teaching are stolen by the efforts to prepare for tests. Unfortunately, preparation for the tests means the students handle short-answer questions, read short paragraphs, and fill in bubbles for the correct answer.

Testing is not teaching. Instead of preparing children for tests, teachers need to be teaching the skills that will, in fact, make them better readers. Teachers should be using this time to give longer assignments to students that require them to read, write, handle different points of view, and solve real problems within the disciplines. Unfortunately, computers, as they are currently used for quick scoring, can't handle responses that demand written thought or discern which students can initiate and pursue a long-term project, or even read books. Most all of the assignments require an answer from multiple-choice options on timed tests.

This is the thinking equivalent of the five meter sprint. Currently, we are testing what we value, quick thinking. But what about long-thinking? Can we discern thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein and Charles Darwin, who were self-professed long, slow thinkers. Can we identify and encourage the children who can formulate a question, find the information, structure an evaluation design, and know if they have answered

their original question? The problems of a democracy are not solved through single answers but by tough-minded thinkers who sustain thought on one problem for days, months or years. In short, computers assess very well when there is only one right answer, but fall short when students formulate their own questions or write longer essays to show their thinking.

The strength of our democracy, as well as our great success in business, is in our capacity to invent, find a better way, to look at problems from several vantage points and within a free society. I know that our President prizes these aspects of our national character. There is the mistaken notion, however that a test is good just because it is a test. Current tests require one right answer and are conditioning American children to think this is what learning is all about. The massive amounts of time spent either preparing for tests or taking them have displaced writing, original, long thinking, and dulled the thinking edges of our students. Indeed current approaches to assessment are lowering standards and America is in danger of losing an entire generation of its future citizens whose problems may be even greater than our own.

*Dr. Donald Graves is professor emeritus from the University of New Hampshire and former Director of the Writing Process Laboratory. He has written over twenty books on educational subjects and most recently, The Energy to Teach (2001). He and his wife, Betty, live in Jackson, New Hampshire. He can be reached for comment at 603-383-4015.*

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