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Teaching or Teaching to The Test?

1. The Profession

Teaching is an honorable profession that many college graduates choose. In most states, teachers are required to have a four-year degree at minimum. This degree is called a Bachelor’s Degree. Elementary educators get a B.A. in Elementary Education and may have to take a test. Secondary educators must earn a Bachelor’s Degree in their content area, the subject they would like to teach, and then take several additional courses. These courses usually include Adolescent Psychology, Teaching Reading in the Content Area and Teaching Special Populations. A teacher’s starting salary can range from $31,418 annually in Montana to $51,443 in New Jersey (National Eduation Association).

Teachers are responsible for educating the nation’s youth. They design curriculum and then plan lessons to deliver to students. These lessons must be engaging and connect to the real world. After teachers deliver instruction, they must assess the students to ensure that they have mastered the skill. If students do not master the skill, the teacher must remediate instruction. While instruction is very important, classroom management is also a very important component of teaching. Teachers must make sure there the classroom is orderly and positive. Students must have a safe place to make mistakes, express themselves, and collaborate with peers. The teacher is the facilitator in the classroom which should be a world of discovery and innovation.

I chose to become a teacher because I love learning. This love for learning started out of a need to have a safe place because I had problems at home. School was a place where adults cared about me and so I hung onto their every word. As the eldest child in my household, I would try to reteach lessons to my sisters using the wall as my chalkboard at home. I would even drink hot water out of a mug, pretending it was coffee. I tried to emulate everything I saw teachers do and could not imagine doing anything else, even from a young age. Sure, I fantasized about being a pop star but since I couldn’t sing or dance, that seemed an unlikely endeavor. I spend a lot of time with my teachers, even now as a teenager, learning and growing from them.

In order to become a teacher, I must first graduate high school. I have a 3.4 GPA which is high enough to get into a competitive college but not high enough to get into their honor’s program, which would pay for tuition, room and board, food and books. Because of my GPA and my 1320 on the SAT, I plan to go to a lesser known public school where the admission requirements for the honor’s program will be lower. Morgan State University has an honor’s program with a minimum GPA requirement of 3.4 and a minimum SAT score of 1310. I plan to major in US History. When I am finished my fourth year, I will start taking my education courses either at Morgan or at a Community College, whichever is free with scholarships. After earning my Bachelor’s and Education course requirements, I plan to take either the Georgia Assessment for Certification of Educators or Praxis and apply for my teaching license in whatever state I choose to settle.

1. Common App

I want to be a teacher and a common problem in teaching is over testing. A typical student takes 112 mandated standardized tests between kindergarten classes and 12th grade (Layton). Many students have testing anxiety. Their emotions about a test may hinder their ability on the test. These tests are high-stakes which means that decisions about school funding, teacher pay, school closings and building staffing are made based on test scores. If a student is anxious and does not perform well, does not eat breakfast, has a family situation or a physical illness the day of the test, then their test scores may be affected and the school may be punished. This disproportionately affects urban schools as their students tend to score less on standardized tests than schools in affluent areas. Schools in urban areas tend to have more needs for socio-emotional programs and cutting funding based on test scores is both counterproductive and could be catastrophic.

The reason the over-testing problem matters is because schools have formed a backwards design philosophy. That means that instruction matches the ending assessment. If the test is long boring passages attached to questions and essays, daily instruction matches that. A 2015 Gallup Poll of nearly a million United States students revealed that while 75% of 5th grade students feel engaged by school, only 32 % of 11th graders feel similarly (Mehta and Fine). All of these standardized tests that drive instruction, turn classrooms into stale lectures where teachers care more about their content and test scores than engaging students in real world activities. Obviously, this wears students down, as shown by the Gallup Poll. If we do not make school more relevant and engaging, the United States will continue to fall behind its peers and students will continue to drop out of high school. The way to make school more relevant and engaging is to change assessment requirements so that instruction is less based on testing and more based on student needs. The way to make instruction less based on testing is to have less testing.

My solution to this problem is to have a national test that is given in 4th, 7th and 11th grades. The name of the test would be the United States School Test of Achievement Results, or US STAR as an acronym. 4th and 7th graders would be tested in reading and math. 11th graders would be tested in reading, writing, math, science and history. It should be federally mandated that these standardized tests are the only ones that any school district can give. All checkpoints, benchmarks, or other state tests would be illegal and school staffers can report illegal testing anonymously through a federal whistleblower hotline. The punishment for creating additional district tests would be to withhold federal funds to the district under investigation. The federal test results would be used for instructional purposes only. All rating systems that grade schools will not be allowed to use these federal test scores in their ratings. The test would be computerized with a single login provided per student in order to prevent cheating. After the test is given, the results, the test itself, and each student’s answer choices would be released to the teacher of record immediately. Every year the test would be re-written.

Whatever vendor the government chooses to write this test would have to release an enormous bank of questions and allow teacher delegations from all over the United States to vote on questions that they feel are appropriate. The teachers should come from all 50 states so that no state can say their region is unrepresented. Once test items are voted on, the vendor would randomly select from the teacher-selected bank of questions to form the test. This entire program would be headed by the US Department of Education and it would be paid for by eliminating many of the unnecessary roles and tasks that they are responsible for currently.

To accomplish this, I would contact the current leaders of education in congress to draft the legislation. I would also ask them to petition the president to change the role of the US Department of Education to focus on this nationalized testing initiative. I would also start a teacher-led grass roots campaign to support my initiative and support members of congress who are proponents of the plan. All teachers and teachers’ unions will campaign against representatives who oppose the plan.

# Works Cited

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