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## The Professional Educator

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### Pushing Back Against High Stakes for Students with Disabilities

By Bianca Tanis

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I am a special education teacher in New York and a mother of two children on the autism spectrum. Sometimes it is difficult to separate these two roles. Being intimately involved in the education system has made navigating the world of special education for my children easier in some ways, but also infinitely more difficult and heartbreaking in others. Simply put, I know too much.

When my son began third grade in 2012, it dawned on me that, as required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), he would soon be mandated to take state tests in math and English language arts, aligned to the Common Core State Standards, despite the fact that he reads at a first-grade level and has numerous challenges with language. I was horrified that my child would undergo such inappropriate testing.

Unfortunately, since the passage of NCLB in 2002, the practice of compelling all students, including students like my son, to take one-size-fits-all, high-stakes tests has become policy. These tests were originally touted as a way to shine a bright light on educational inequalities based on race, class, and disability. While these tests can have negative effects for many students without special needs, they actually prevent many disabled students in particular from receiving an individualized education that meets their needs. Often, they are subjected to emotionally harmful testing. Many special education teachers like myself have questioned why the practice of administering one-size-fits-all tests to special education students persists when it flies in the face of logic and sound pedagogy. Fortunately, many are no longer willing to remain silent about the flaws in this system.

#### Testing Too Much

I never set out to be an educator or an advocate for students with disabilities. Teaching was a career change for me. After earning a bachelor's degree in anthropology, I joined AmeriCorps and volunteered in a homeless shelter. Then, for

#### ABOUT THIS COLUMN

Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

several years, I worked as a case manager in the same shelter. There, almost daily, I heard the stories of adults who, for a variety of reasons, were unable to find jobs and maintain stable living conditions and relationships. I saw the impact that repeated failure has on one's self-esteem and the paralyzing effect it can have on one's ability to chart a new course in life.

After becoming a parent, and reflecting on my experiences in the shelter, I realized that teachers would shape a large part of my children's lives, particularly their attitudes—not just about school, but about themselves. I came to understand teaching as a profession that reaches beyond the scope of grades, standards, and content instruction. I wanted to join such a profession, and eventually I pursued a dual master's degree in childhood education and special education.

For the past five years, I have taught students with disabilities from kindergarten to fifth grade in an affluent suburb of New York City. My students have a range of strengths and challenges, and although most are classified as learning disabled, they are extremely diverse in their learning needs.

As our school and state have embraced the Common Core, it has been challenging to bridge the gap between what my students know and can do and what the standards require. The implementation of the Common Core across all grades has resulted in many students receiving instruction without being taught the necessary prerequisite skills. The situation is especially problematic for students with learning challenges who are sensitive to change and depend on sufficient scaffolding of information and skills to learn. Students struggling prior to the implementation of the Common Core suddenly find themselves significantly further behind.

The problem has only been exacerbated by the advent of test-based teacher accountability required for states participating in the Race to the Top initiative.<sup>1</sup> My colleagues and I have found it increasingly difficult to differentiate instruction for our students while keeping up with the curriculum so they will be prepared to take Common Core-aligned tests. Throw in the threat of a poor evaluation and the loss of teacher job security, and you have a recipe for disaster.

In an ideal world, if my fourth-graders need to spend an extra week or two working on a math concept, I would use my professional judgment to assess their needs. But as things stand, I am forced to move on, regardless of whether they are ready. There are only so many weeks in the school year, and everything yet untaught in the standards must be packed into the remaining weeks because it will all appear on the test. Rather than a fluid process in which students' instructional needs come first, teaching has become a marathon to cram it all in. I honestly have heard my colleagues telling their students on the fourth day of school, "We have a lot to do today. We are already behind." Midyear assessments are given despite teachers not having had the chance to teach all the content that will be tested, because administrators "need the data" to

assess whether students are on track for end-of-the-year testing.

Accountability mandates and the data that they demand have destroyed teacher autonomy and created a culture of constant testing. We say that teaching is both an art and a science. Art requires free thought, while science requires experimentation. But the way things are now, those who can't keep up will be left behind, because ultimately the tests are in the driver's seat. For that reason, the testing frenzy we currently face has been particularly detrimental to students with disabilities.

Even if policymakers and education leaders come to their senses, disregard the pace of instruction set by the tests, and cast aside all concern for rating teachers based on students' test scores, they must still acknowledge and try to ameliorate the negative emotional and academic consequences of high-stakes tests. In many cases, test scores alone determine program placement or eligibility for grade advancement. Attaching such high stakes to these tests is tantamount to a return to tracking, for students with and without special needs.

Test scores are also used to determine which students will be required to attend academic intervention or reteaching sessions, often by being pulled out of classes for which students are not mandated to take standardized tests, such as music, foreign language, or art. And many of my students excel in music and art. Imagine what it must be like for a dyslexic 9-year-old who loves to play the saxophone to be told that he can't take music lessons or participate in the school band because he performed poorly on the state's English language arts exam.

And then there is the experience of students taking the tests. In the days before they do so, letters go home to parents advising that children get adequate sleep and enjoy a good breakfast. Parents are asked to write notes of encouragement and send children to school with special snacks or treats. To offset the fear and anxiety that many students associate with testing, teachers attempt to create a party atmosphere in their classrooms, putting on music and letting students play games prior to the tests. Some even practice relaxation techniques with their students or encourage positive visualization strategies in which they imagine themselves in a favorite place or engaging in an activity they love.

Every year, I am struck by the lengths that we must go to in an effort to minimize the harm these tests do to our students. In the end, we are fooling no one. Once the music stops, each child is on his or her own, while the adults stand around trying to hide their frustration and despair.

For teachers, testing days involve gathering those students who need testing accommodations—as determined by a committee on special education—and bringing them to a separate location in the school building where they will ostensibly have fewer distractions. For the majority of my students, the accommodation is extra time to take the tests. Supposedly, this

will level the playing field for the student who is taking the fourth-grade English language arts exam but reads independently at a first- or second-grade level.

Once testing begins, it's apparent that the student who can't sit still for 20 minutes can't sit still for two hours or more. Because some of these students also have breaks as another testing accommodation, we stop the test periodically for silent stretching. The stretching must be silent, because if students talk, they might accidentally discuss the test. By the time we reach our first break, I have usually had to make a few phone calls to the school psychologist to counsel students who have shut down or begun crying. (I used to also rely on the school social worker for help, but that position has been excessed due to budget cuts.) Very often, the psychologist is busy with other students experiencing similar distress elsewhere in the building, and I must send my students to sit in the main office until another adult is available to comfort them.

Perhaps the worst part of administering these tests is being forced to watch the trust that I have worked so hard to develop with my students break down. Great teachers work tirelessly to build relationships based on trust. They let students know they can be counted on and will always be there to help. What message does it send to students when their teacher, who has recognized and celebrated their progress and perseverance all year long, places a test in front of them that they cannot read or compute? How does it affect children when their requests for help are met with "I can't help you" and "just do your best"? Breaking that trust for the sake of the test damages those relationships, sometimes beyond repair.

The time spent testing varies from state to state, but in New York, a fifth-grade student with a disability may sit for as long as three hours, for three days in a row, for just one test. I have sat with a student for that length of time, reading each question aloud, questions on subject matter beyond her ability, watching the anguish grow on her face as she first missed snack time and then later physical education.

Increasingly, as an educator, I have been forced to rely less on my own professional judgment and more on rules and policies dictated by bureaucrats who have never met students like mine or even worked in a classroom. I find myself creating spreadsheets and charts of student schedules in an effort to find a few minutes here and there to fit in the extra time for the instruction my students need, instead of what the test mandates. I question whether I am helping my students. And despite my passion for teaching, I find myself questioning, after only five years in the classroom, if teaching is really right for me. At the moment, what keeps me in the classroom is a love of teaching. But I often wonder how long it will take before teaching no longer feels like teaching.

Knowing what I know, it is impossible for me to subject my son to these tests. My son loves school, his teachers, and the routine and security he finds there. It wasn't always this way.

When I left him at school for the very first time, he was inconsolable. He shrieked and sobbed. Unlike other students, it took him years, not days or months, to develop trust in an environment different from his home.

In light of my experiences administering tests that are years above children's academic proficiency levels, the idea that I should allow my son (who did not yet understand the concept of "test") to experience such a potentially upsetting situation was unthinkable. However, my son did not qualify for an alternate assessment, which, as per NCLB, is permitted only for the most severely disabled students.<sup>2</sup> It was well documented that his independent decoding level for reading and his math abilities were two years behind grade level, and that his difficulty with language affected his reading comprehension significantly. Yet he was mandated to take a test that every adult knew would result in frustration and, ultimately, label him a failure.

In New York, the use of high-stakes testing to gauge the progress and success of students, educators, and schools has created a toxic environment in which teachers feel unable to meet students' individual needs. It has also created anxiety-ridden students who are viewed more as test scores than as learners. Across the state, only about 5 percent of students with disabilities in grades 3–8 scored proficient in English language arts in 2014.<sup>3</sup> These scores indicate that no matter their progress, 95 percent of our students with disabilities are considered failing. As a parent and educator, I reject this narrative of failure for my son, and I also reject it for my students.

Anyone who teaches knows that while pretesting is standard practice as a diagnostic tool, posttests, or summative assessments, are administered on material that students have been taught. The notion that one would give a summative assessment to students on material they have never been exposed to is absurd and would be bad practice by any set of standards. And yet, children with disabilities who receive individualized instruction must submit to homogenous assessment at their grade level, no matter their instructional level. Thus, the current system of high-stakes testing is not a valid form of assessment for students with disabilities.

Take, for example, a student I'll call Mark, a fourth-grader in my class who reads at a first-grade level. Neither one of Mark's parents speaks English, although Mark himself speaks English, French, and Spanish. Despite his trilingual abilities, Mark has a very poor grasp of basic concepts and needs all academic content explained in the simplest of terms. In the middle of the New York state Grade 4 Common Core English Language Arts Test, Mark broke down crying, asking the proctor, "Why don't they give me something I can do?" Because of his status as an English language learner (ELL), state law mandated that he be tested yet again the following week using the ELL version of the Common Core-aligned English language arts test. In New York, ELL students must take both tests yearly until they are

deemed proficient on one of them. For many students with disabilities who are also English language learners, this type of double testing goes on for years.<sup>4</sup>

As the parent of a child who requires a modified curriculum, I expect that his teachers will stretch him beyond his current abilities. Sometimes, in the context of a safe and nurturing environment, that stretching may frustrate him. The frustration that comes with academic challenges tailored to the individual strengths and weaknesses of a student greatly differs from the frustration that the one-size-fits-all, high-stakes tests create. Good teachers see the difference between the two, and recognize that the former creates an important learning opportunity while the latter is far from constructive.

My son's teachers, for example, understand that it is equally important for him to practice engaging in a reciprocal conversation as it is for him to compute double-digit addition problems. They understand that any frustration he feels when trying to engage in that reciprocal conversation is very different from the frustration he feels when confronted with a test he cannot access or understand.

### **A Better Path Forward**

Who are "students with disabilities"? This category is a catchall that encompasses a wide range of learners, including learning-disabled students with higher-than-average cognitive abilities, students with developmental delays and mild cognitive impairments, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and students with severe mental retardation. So while all students should have access to a challenging curriculum, what constitutes challenging must be fluid. I would argue that assessments for students with disabilities must be as individualized as their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and that it is perhaps more appropriate to measure progress than benchmark attainment.

Although NCLB does allow some testing accommodations, most states do not allow any accommodations that interfere with the construct of the test, even if these accommodations are part of a child's IEP.<sup>5</sup> For example, having a passage read aloud on an English language arts assessment may negate the test as a measure of a child's ability to decode, but it also may allow us to obtain a more realistic measure of a dyslexic student's reading comprehension level, or the reading level of a visually impaired child who does not read Braille. These types of accommodations allow for assessments that provide evidence of what a child can do, rather than just providing further confirmation of a disability.

Special education teachers frequently administer standardized academic tests as part of evaluations to determine if a student is eligible for special education services. These tests include assessments such as the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement and the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test. These assessments, which include questions sequenced from

easiest to hardest, identify a jumping-off point based on a student's age or grade. Students answer questions until a ceiling is identified: the point at which the student incorrectly answers a number of questions in a row. In this way, the time spent on testing is minimized and the negative impact of enduring difficult test questions is mitigated. Perhaps these kinds of assessments can serve as a model for high-quality assessments that allow educators to measure progress while maintaining the dignity and emotional well-being of students who already face significant challenges.

Were it the norm, this type of individualized assessment would stop the flow of comparative data currently used to rank and sort students and to judge teachers. But to create an education system that truly caters to the learning and growth of each student (and one that simultaneously encourages students' strengths and supports their weaknesses), we must challenge the notion that learning can be represented by a test score. Only when the needs of children, not the need to assess institutions or educators, become the priority will we be able to consistently administer assessments that yield useful information about our students.

Of course, it's easier to point out the flaws in our education system than to offer solutions. First and foremost, we must face the uncomfortable truth that cognitive differences and differences in learning needs exist. But if that is difficult to admit, we can take comfort in the fact that many students who face significant challenges more than likely demonstrate strengths that surpass their weaknesses. Our job as educators is to do our best to ensure our students will have satisfying career choices and the strength of character, and the knowledge, to work toward their goals, overcome obstacles, handle disappointments, and become civic-minded members of their communities. Despite the fact that these skills and outcomes cannot be measured by a test score, they should be the goal of education. To reach it, we must find alternatives to high-stakes tests that hinder our ability to meet some students' instructional needs.

### **The Importance of Educator Advocacy and Teacher Voice**

Increasingly, educators recognize we can no longer make do with a broken system that labels our students with disabilities as failures. Our role as educators requires that we do more than just attempt to reduce the negative effects of high-stakes testing. We must speak out and teach our students that success in life comes in many forms. When we measure all children by the same yardstick, by the same version of success, we risk limiting the possibilities that our children see for themselves, and we narrow the lens with which we view them. As teachers, that is not in our nature.

At some point in late 2013, something in me changed. My protective instincts as a mother and my experience as a special

education teacher coalesced in such a way that I lost my fear of any kind of reprisal for speaking out against harmful testing practices. Ultimately, my husband and I refused to allow our son to take the New York Common Core assessments, despite the insistence of state officials that his participation was legally required. Along with several other parents committed to ending the use of high-stakes testing (many of whom are also educators), I cofounded a parent advocacy group called New York State Allies for Public Education. We represent a coalition of more than 50 parent and educator groups in New York, and our combined voices have raised awareness throughout the state. In the spring of 2014, between 55,000 and 60,000 students in New York refused to participate in high-stakes testing.<sup>6</sup> And in light of pressure from educators and parents, New York state applied for a waiver from the federal government that would allow students with significant disabilities to be tested up to two years below grade level. Although such a waiver would merely act as a Band-Aid, it is a start.

As educators, we should raise our voices and be heard by policymakers who have little to no teaching experience and would relegate classroom teachers to mere foot soldiers marching to the beat of misguided reforms. We must change the culture that exists in schools by encouraging each other to voice our concerns, because in the end, only educators can breathe life into the theoretical discussions that take place regarding testing students with disabilities. Only educators can speak up for students and ensure that their well-being is considered.

In New York, educators are bound by a gag order that prohibits us from speaking about end-of-the-year state-mandated tests in even the vaguest of terms.<sup>7</sup> Concerned about the quality and content of these tests, Brooklyn teachers took to the street in protest, many with duct tape on their mouths.<sup>8</sup> That teachers have been prevented from speaking out is unacceptable.

Success never will look the same for all. NCLB's goal of 100 percent proficiency as judged by high-stakes testing is antithetical to learning. When we deny diversity in student strengths, weaknesses, and abilities, we risk robbing children of the chance to experience success that begets confidence and perseverance. We risk sending the message that to be different is to be less than. We all know the child who scores off the charts on a standardized test but can't pack his bag at the end of the day or tie her shoes. We also know the child who struggles to read and retain math concepts but is a prodigy on the saxophone. High-stakes testing does not reveal the full picture of who children are. As educators, we must demand better for our students.

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cofounder and member of the New York State Allies for Public Education, a frequent blogger on education topics, and a contributor to the forthcoming book *Resisting Reform: Reclaiming Public Education through Grassroots Activism*, to be published by Information Age Publishing.

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