

Testing, Testing, Testing

It is 1970. Constance Bennett sat at her desk long after her students had left. She wept, head in arms. At last, looking up, wiping her tears, she stared at the pile of tests on her desk knowing what she would find when she graded them. She thought, it's time to retire. I can't do this any more. She picked up the papers, stood, looked over her fourth grade class, desks tidy as always, three Apple computers in the back, drawings by her children proudly displayed up on the cork boards circling the room, sat again and began to grade the venerable Iowa Test of Basic Skills. She thought back to this afternoon.

She always watched her children carefully during tests. Not because she didn't trust them, and of course some would try to cheat, but to see signs of trouble, learning disabilities, attention disorders. Some of them, especially the ones in front, were working furiously, heads bent over the papers on their desk. Some looked perplexed, especially the ones near the back of the classroom. One girl raised her hand. Mrs. Bennett walked over to her desk and bent down to hear, not wishing to disturb the other students.

"Mrs. Bennett," the girl whispered. "May I go to the bathroom?" The teacher looked at her, then at the test paper, nearly blank, on her desk.

"I'm sorry, Rachael," she whispered back. "This is the testing period as you know, and you will have to wait. It will only be a few minutes." Mrs. Bennett walked to the back of the room. Poor child, she thought. She won't have a chance with this test. She can barely read. But they'll pass her anyway.

She finally stopped. The tests were all corrected, evaluated, final scores tabulated. It was time to go home. Mrs. Bennett looked at the profiles. Median score 6.6 out of 10. Five students with perfect scores, three with no answer correct. We are failing these babies, she thought, though she knew the failure was with the country's indifference, not her effort.

Mr. Minke, the principal, a fine teacher in his own right, briefed the faculty several days later. "No surprises here," he said, looking in Mrs. Bennett's direction. "We are doing what we can, the grades aren't improving. The math test scores, especially are going down. Where is Jaime Escalante when we need him?" he joked, referring to the famous math teacher portrayed in the movie "Stand and Deliver." They all admired the teacher in the barrio of Los Angeles, yet something was wrong. You should not have to be a genius to teach children to read, write and do math. Perhaps it was the parents, too busy

to help their children after school. Perhaps it was the government with such emphases on testing. The meeting ended with a stirring pep talk from Mr. Minke.

“Don’t forget, my friends: Knute Rockne, the famous coach of Notre Dame. When asked by a reporter whether the prayer the team said before each game helped them win, replied, ‘I have discovered that prayer works best when you have good players.’”

“I have the best players in the county. Thank you, thank you everyday for your skills, your dedication, and most of all, thank you for your friendship.”

It is 2004. Mr. Taylor was peering over his novel as his class took the standardized test.

He was the curriculum coordinator. Top of the line in computer technology. Computer labs everywhere, one for mathematics, one for English, one for science. Every kid in this school had a laptop computer. He saw to it that the money allocated to technology was well spent. He had installed a wireless network in the school so any student could log on anywhere within two blocks of the campus. Several times a week, teachers would lead their students to the labs, park them for forty-five minutes, go for a smoke or a nap. So what, he thought? Every computer has the Iowa Test of Basic Skills tests for the last ten years. Just wait until they see the scores, he thought, smiling.

He looked over to the class taking the tests. Most of the kids were looking at their computer screens to make sure their answers were correct.

He smiled again. “Smart kids,” he muttered.

The next day, there was a faculty meeting. Constance Bennett, the principal, looked over the group. “The median scores are 7.8 out of 10. An amazing increase over the last few years. Mr. Taylor...you are a math teacher, how do you explain it?”

“Better teachers, Constance, better students. And of course the “No Child Left Behind” program our president inaugurated. I’m just glad we are getting the recognition we deserve. This year we will be getting the maximum amount of federal funding. Don’t you think this is a great achievement?”

“Yes, I do,” she said softly. “But what of students like Rachael Rodriguez who we passed for years? Don’t we share some blame for her failures?”

“Please, Constance. Blame her parents, blame her mental incapacities, blame society, but we did the best we could. She just couldn’t learn how to pass tests.”

“Thank you all,” Mrs. Bennett said, gazing intently at them one by one. She fixed her eyes on the math teacher. “It is an amazing achievement, especially in your class Mr. Taylor. I was astonished at the improvement in test scores. I am taking this opportunity to announce my retirement. After 30 years of teaching and administrative experience, many thanks for all your help. Children deserve our best efforts, our dedication, our lives. Please keep up our traditions.”

Much later, walking to her house through the village, she saw the young woman, short skirt, much too much makeup, leaning into a car window, engine running, the man handing her something. She walked up to the car.

“Mrs. Bennett,” the girl gasped. “I’m so sorry.” The teacher put her arm around her, leaned into the open car window. “I’m sorry, sir, but you will have to go elsewhere.” Turning to the girl, she said, “Let’s go have a cup of coffee, Rachael. It is so good to see you.” They walked down the street, heads together. Hugging.

It is 2008. John Taylor, education superintendent of the Las Palmas school district, began to speak.

“Respected colleagues, and parents, thank you for coming. We are in the midst of an amazing event, something the world is watching, I assure you. I would like to show you how we are center stage in education.” He pointed to the screen with his PowerPoint projection. We are the fortunate ones. President Bush inaugurated the No Child Left Behind program and we are the beneficiaries. The numbers speak for themselves. Virtually every school in America has amazing test scores in all phases of scholarship: math, language arts, history, reading. It is just short of a miracle, attributable to us, the teaching community, and to the astonishing increase in IQ of our youth. Let me show you the numbers.”

An elderly woman stood up near the front and began to shout. “This is nonsense, Taylor. Every school in America has the answers to tests. No school will get any funding whatsoever from federal money. The world is watching alright...we are the laughing stock of the world. Anyone can get good test scores if they know the answers.”

The speaker stood at the podium, emotionless. “Guards,” he yelled. A guard came down to take the woman out just as a dozen fourth grade children burst through the doors. Mrs. Bennett was at the forefront. The audience looked back as the students, dressed in suits, walked down the center aisle up to the stage.

Mrs. Bennett took the microphone from the principal. There was a hushed silence from the adult audience.

“So this is what it has come to?” she questioned the audience. “What has become of our profession? We used to educate children. Now we test them to death and give them the right answers, either outright or by practicing day after day.” She looked directly at Mr Taylor. “No wonder the dropout rate has increased. These children are bored and illiterate. We should be ashamed. We were the best once....and if we protest this we can be the best again.

“Starting next semester I am opening up my own school. You are all invited to send your students. There will be no tuition fees, but I promise you the children will come home with homework every night. Six of my former colleagues have joined me, all master teachers. We may be older, but we damn well know how to teach children. I have been successful in getting several sizeable grants and the shopping center everyone thinks is being built...well, it is our new school.

“And among our benefactors are two United States senators. We will protest the outrageous lying and illicit procedures in our public schools which our federal government has foisted on us. We must turn this around. Educating our children is the future of our country.

“Oh, by the way, Mr. Taylor. I just talked to Senator McDonald. You are fired.”

The auditorium erupted in shouts and claps as Mrs. Bennett led the children down the steps, up the aisle, past the guards and through the door, fist in the air.