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Taking A Stand On Testing

By *Marc Fisher*

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What if they gave a test and nobody came? What would happen if, on the day teachers hand out the No. 2 pencils, parents decide that no child of theirs will be left behind to fill in the bubbles?

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In Virginia, Maryland and across the country, the school year is now a minefield of standardized tests, interrupted only by test-prep lessons that have elbowed out the arts, field trips and creative teaching. Now, in more than 20 states, parents are fighting back by keeping their children at home on test days.

It's a simple yet powerful form of protest, and it hits the ayatollahs of the accountability

movement right in the gut, forcing them to choose between their beloved exams and their long-standing belief in parents' rights.

Boycotts have not yet hit Virginia's Standards of Learning tests or Maryland's new High School Assessments, because those exams do not yet stand between students and graduation. But in states already using tests to determine who gets a diploma, boycotts are becoming an effective weapon.

In Scarsdale, N.Y., 60 percent of eighth-graders stayed home during state tests in 2001. About 50,000 California students opted out of state testing last year; in addition, hundreds of teachers refused cash bonuses given when their students do well on the tests.

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Generally, kids who opt out of tests are among the best students, so their absence drags down the school's overall score -- and that has a direct impact on schools' budgets.

Why such antagonism to tests? Most boycotters don't mind the concept of standardized tests -- they're part of how we measure performance in this society. What they object to is the effect testing is having on America's classrooms.

"Testing is reducing the quality and quantity of the curriculum," says Mickey VanDerwerker, president of Parents Across Virginia United to Reform SOLs. "It is driving spending into test prep materials and away from high-quality resources."

More important, the testing at the cornerstone of President Bush's approach to education is proving to be little more than a scare tactic. In a recent national poll, 66 percent of teachers said they now concentrate on tested information to the detriment of other material. And 79 percent said they devote class time to test-taking skills such as filling in bubbles.

Bush's testing regimen in Texas, the vanguard of the movement, appears to be leaving poor and minority students even further behind, according to Linda McNeil of Rice University and Angela Valenzuela of the University of Texas at Austin. They found that schools in poor communities have cut time devoted to higher-order thinking skills and problem-solving to make room for test-taking drills. Money once spent on books and lab supplies is used instead to buy test-prep booklets and software.

Teachers told the researchers that although practice tests help raise scores on reading tests, "many of their students are unable to use those same skills for actual reading."

What to do? The same politicians who saw high-stakes testing as a panacea (so much easier than actually improving schools) will change their tune when they see armies of protesting parents.

Virginia's SOLs will become a barrier to graduation next year. Thus far, resistance to the tests has been "quiet, with some parents keeping their children home on test days," VanDerwerker says. But "as students and schools move closer to state-mandated consequences, it is likely that resistance will become more direct and more focused."

In Maryland, Sue Allison, coordinator of Marylanders Against High Stakes Testing, opposes asking parents to keep children at home on test days but plans to urge school boards to issue diplomas without regard to test scores. That would free students to boycott tests without fear of losing their sheepskins.

Last month, the District scrapped Stanford 9 tests for first- and second-graders, though the system will keep the test in third through 11th grades.

"We're working to roll back the emphasis on testing that was foisted on us by the control board," said Steve Seleznow, then chief of staff of the D.C. schools. "Tests were the only educational tool they knew."

But schools alone cannot push the pendulum back toward balanced teaching.

That fight belongs to parents who have the courage to say no.

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