

## Motivated to Succeed? Or Motivated to Fail?

Rose McDonough

Since starting my education classes, I've heard so much about high-stakes testing and how they are being used and misused, how they're influencing our teaching, and how they're influencing our students. When I started teaching, the idea of high-stakes testing was somewhat pushed back in my brain. I taught primary age children- kindergarten and first grade. We didn't have MEAs, we didn't have NECAPs, we didn't take NWEAS. Everyone said we were preparing kids for these tests, laying the foundation for these students. But the testing of these kids was so distant to me, the idea was put on the back burner. That all changed last year.

After three years working primarily with primary age students, I accepted a job teaching fifth grade. I was very nervous. Everything was going to be new to me. One of my internships had been in a fifth grade class, so I had a vague idea what to expect. I knew the behaviors would be different. I knew the academics would be more demanding. What I wasn't prepared for was the testing.

In the beginning of the year, we were given the schedule for September's NWEA tests for reading and math. I saw it as a baseline or starting point to measure student growth on. I figured we would take them again in the spring to compare. I later found out we would not only be taking them at the end of the year, but we'd also be taking them in January. And as if that wasn't enough testing, we'd be taking the New England Common Assessment (NECAP) as well.

From the first workshop day prior to school starting, the emphasis on testing was clear. We were implementing a new intervention block, and since we didn't know the students yet, the previous year's NWEA scores were used to place the kids for the first round. Administration admitted it was not a perfect picture of the student, but it was a place to start for the first round. Resources were made available for us to use while teaching our topics during the intervention block. The binders we were given had the NWEA Descartes learning goals. The intention was clear that I was teaching them to do better on the test by teaching them the information that was going to be on it.

This same intensity was in place when we were preparing for the NECAP tests. We were given practice tests a month before and were expected to spend time in class taking practice tests, constructing written answers together, teaching them skills that we hadn't covered yet but were found in the practice tests. Our guidance counselor even came in to do a lesson on test-taking tips. How could the students not feel pressure when they were hearing so much about these tests?

Just before our first test, and prior to every test thereafter, we were to remind students how important it was they did their best on them and took their time answering their questions. It was clear to me that these kids had heard this every year since third grade. It was also clear that in the past they had been told about the magic number that told teachers that the students were where they were supposed to be. I heard other teachers talking about how they had told their kids what the benchmark number was, and many of my kids were angry that I wouldn't tell them that number. To me, telling them

that would only lead to disappointment for some of them, and competition for others. I'm all for competition in the classroom and I know it motivates some kids, but in a case like this, I really didn't see the motivational usefulness. And in a high poverty, title one school, I felt there would be more disappointment than anything.

Although I tried to keep the testing experience positive for my students and focus on the aspect of personal best, it didn't seem to be the culture that surrounded our classroom. The kids had heard the target score from students in other classes. The first thing I heard after the test when we got back to the classroom was students asking other students what they got. As much as I tried to remind students that their test score was only their business, I knew I was fighting a losing battle. It was a battle created by an educational setting that stressed test scores instead of learning. And although several of us teachers had conversations on how it was not the way it should be, we were powerless when it came to the top-down pressure against us.

It's easy to say there was pressure on us as educators, but even more so there was pressure on the kids. Some of the kids in my class thrived on this pressure. However, I really started questioning what this pressure was doing to my academically low students, those students who were not going to meet that target score and they knew it. For some of them, they were so disappointed you could see it written all over their faces. I noticed this reaction mostly from those students who were only slightly under the target score.

One student in particular had me very concerned. It's important to know some background about this student to understand his reaction to the test-taking, the NWEA in particular. My first encounter with this student, Paul, was on the first day of school as he and his family did not attend the open house we had before school started. When he walked in and I introduced myself, the smell of cigarette smoke and body odor was so strong on him it caught me off guard. His clothes were old and worn and his hair was very greasy. It was immediately evident from the first day of school that he did not fit in with the rest of the class, as much as he seemed like he wanted to. While the boys in my class were talking about first person shooter video games and sports, he was talking about Minecraft (a lego-like computer game) and random historical or scientific facts.

Paul struggled academically. He had been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but his parents had decided to take him off his medication two years prior so focus was a huge challenge for him. He had also moved around several times since starting school. As a fifth grader, Paul was reading at a first grade level (which made me glad for my primary experience). He was quick to tell me he couldn't read and every time I'd try to push him or challenge him, he would give up immediately. He didn't get frustrated about it, he just wouldn't try. If he read something wrong and I tried to point it out as a teaching point, he would adamantly argue with me that he was right. His special education teacher told me he did the same thing with her as well. He was reserved to what he saw as the "fact" he couldn't read, but yet wouldn't accept that he had made a mistake in his reading. Although Paul was strong in math, he had the same "always right" attitude towards it, and would not put effort into new skills. He very rarely completed his homework and it was a challenge to get papers and phone calls returned.

Paul also struggled socially. He did not have the social skills to communicate effectively with the other kids and had a lot anger management issues. He didn't have any friends, as it seemed most kids really didn't understand him. He was very immature for his age, and often resorted to threatening when presented with a problem with a peer.

Whenever caught doing things he shouldn't be, he would adamantly lie. It often seemed like he really believed his lies, as if reality was somehow distorted for him.

It was this student in particular that worried me when it came to the tests we were making the kids take. He had spent his educational life being below benchmark. The gap had grown so much that he was four years behind where he should be in his reading ability, but still forced to take the same tests as everyone else. He heard the same lectures the other kids did about doing your best. He was exposed to the same pressure to meet that magic number, but the difference was that with this student he had no chance of meeting that target. No matter how much effort he put it when he took that test, it just wasn't possible for him to bridge that gap.

Because he was identified as special ed, he did have some modifications for the NECAP tests. He took it in a small setting with his special ed teacher. For NWEA though, because it is designed to adjust itself to meet the abilities of the student, there were no modifications for Paul for that test. He took the test in the computer lab with our regular class. As if taking it wasn't enough pressure, he was forced to take the test with people around him who clearly had harder questions.

His attitude toward testing was what worried me the most. I had given a quick pep talk before the first test about how they had a whole hour and they should take their time and read the questions carefully. We went to the computer lab, and the test administrator gave the same reminder about time that I had given. I circulated the room while the students tested. I knew right away that he was not taking his time. He was clicking on answers so fast, it was as if he wasn't even reading the questions. After a couple of minutes, I reminded him to slow down. He finished the hour long test in ten minutes. He scored so low that the program could not even give him a lexile reading score, but instead informed that he was a beginning reader. He seemed fine with this, not even looking for a score whereas the other kids studied what the screen had said.

At first glance, it seemed like he knew the reading would be too hard so he didn't even try. It was not surprising to see a struggling student give up. It happens all the time when students don't get the support they need at home and at school. It wasn't until our January test that I became very concerned. Remembering the quickness of his September test-taking, I talked to him while other students were stopping to take a bathroom break before the test. I just reminded him to take his time and that I was looking for his personal best. I told him how hard he had been working and that I bet his score would go up. He looked at me with a big, defiant grin and said, "What if I make it go down instead?" I was heartbroken to hear this student so focused on failure that he couldn't accept the encouragement that I was trying to give. How was it possible that in our push to motivate kids to succeed, we instead have pushed this student to be motivated to fail?

This experience really made me question the test-taking practices I was forced to follow. The one-size-fits-all mentality of testing does not recognize the harm it is causing to these students who just can't keep up. I wondered if this student had become so used to failing everyone else's standard of where he should be, that he finally stopped trying to meet those standards. Was it his way of putting that power back in his hands? Did Paul feel like if he didn't try, he didn't really fail because it wasn't really measuring his true ability?

I wish I could say I saw improvement in this student's attitude towards testing by the end of the year, but it didn't happen. He continued to not put effort into his work and

to give up very easily. And why would it change when the culture he was going to school in hadn't changed? The tests were still stressed as extremely important. He still had no chance of passing. So what was left to help this student and was it possible to really get him what he needed going forward? Was there anyway to build his confidence back up? I couldn't change the test, but could I take steps to make sure that going forward in school he could get the extra help he needed to feel successful and thereby possibly changing his attitude towards the testing?

Unfortunately, this was a student that left me thinking he would never get the help he needed and deserved. When we had his year end I.E.P. meeting to set up his plan for middle school, his special ed teacher, the behavior specialist, his parents, and I all agreed that he really needed more support than the hour a day he was getting. When we left his meeting, the middle school special ed teacher and the facilitator from central office had instead cut his time down to thirty minutes with support. I was angry, frustrated, and depressed knowing that this student was going to have another year of feeling unsuccessful.

Budget cuts and limited resources had taken the place of doing what was best for our students, which is meeting them at their individual level instead of having a one-size-fits-all approach like tests these students are made to take. I wish I could say that I have hope for the future of education, but it seems there's always another test coming down the conveyer belt. It might be a different test, but I'm afraid it'll have the same disastrous results for our students who need individualized instruction to feel successful.

\*Student's name has been changed.