

One-room school rebels against ‘teaching to the test’

“Education is not the filling of a pail but rather the lighting of a fire.”

By JOE ROBERTSON - The Kansas City Star, Jun. 14, 2011



Photo by Rich Sugg

Olivier Langlade, 10 (from left); Syke Bergerson, 7; and Roman Marshall, 7, listen intently while teacher Linda Powers provides instructions at the private Community School No. 1.

Long before she found her haven in a private, one-room schoolhouse on State Line Road, Linda Powers saw the coming of a test-mad world.

She was a new teacher in Austin, Texas, at the time. Then-Gov. George W. Bush was pushing an intense accountability system for public schools that would soon underpin the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

She was expecting a copy of the fourth-grade curriculum for her school assignment when an administrator instead handed her a copy of a state fourth-grade performance test.

She said, “That’s your curriculum.”

Powers felt she had to close her classroom door that year so no one would see her sneaking in a poetry lesson — something not tested at that grade level.

For the last eight years, she has witnessed the nation’s love-hate affair with testing from her perch as lead teacher of Community School No. 1, a single class of 22 children from kindergarten through sixth grade. The school is in a Mission Hills church.

Out there in the larger world, new research is intensifying doubt that the emphasis on accountability testing has had any significant impact on improving student performance.

A National Research Council of the National Academies report released May 26 went so far as to suggest that what little gains might have occurred were likely fueled in part by schools gaming the system rather than improved student learning.

Out there, many teachers feeling the stress to perform for tests are leaving public school systems. And child psychologists talk of anxious and depressed children whose troubles stem not just from a high-stakes test culture, but from society’s competitive atmosphere even to the point of vying for most community service hours.

“They aren’t getting the joy of learning,” child psychiatrist Kathy McConahay said. “They’re doing it to get it done.”

In here, in the one-room school, no test was looming as the children were putting finishing touches on their genealogy projects. Their round tables lay almost hidden under the pictures, drawings and manuscripts and whatever other medium their imaginations summoned to express their work.

They keep a low gate blocking the doorway so their flop-eared rabbit Misty doesn't wander off. When calling out to their teachers, they don't say "Ms. Powers" or "Mr. Puglis." They're "Linda" and "Joe."

"We're not so tense about things," 10-year-old Summer Kelly said. "We're loose. But we're serious about our work. Linda expects a *lot* of things from us."

They work in teams. Older students assume leadership roles. The teachers keep track of Missouri and Kansas' grade-level expectations for various subjects and imbed them in projects, but they're not constrained by them.

Their mission — which growing numbers of people fear is getting sidetracked in the test-driven world — is to prepare children to flourish as they would in the real world.

"We talk about work in the world," Powers said. "Who gets promotions? It's the one who is reaching beyond the obvious. We tell them to make it yours. Put your own spin on it."

A small private school has distinct advantages over a public school system. The \$725 a month in tuition brings parents generally committed to supporting their child's education. Private schools also are not burdened with having to explicitly account for how they are spending public tax dollars.

Public schools need to be held accountable to high standards. That much everyone agrees on, said Donna Gardner, chairwoman of the education department at William Jewell College.

"What is worrisome, though, is so much skill and drill," she said. "We can be making progress on the test, but not in teaching critical thinking skills."

Student teachers come in eager "to change the world," Gardner said. Then they go out into schools for student-teaching experience and too often come back saying they can't teach the critical thinking skills they've learned in college.

"I don't want to blame the schools," Gardner said. "They are reacting to the system. ... Districts *have* to make scores go up. It's not an option. They are driven to this."

National policymakers are slowly working toward the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act — dubbed the No Child Left Behind Act when it was reauthorized in 2001.

The current version, passed during the Bush administration, required states to establish rising benchmarks pushing schools and districts toward the goal of having all children performing at proficient or advanced levels by 2014.

The law dictated that schools separate records by subgroups, tracking the performance of students by racial group, those needing special education, English language learners and low-income students.

The mandate that schools monitor and report the performance of minority groups has been applauded as one of No Child Left Behind's strengths.

But pressure is mounting for the law to look to more varied measures of student growth rather than standardized tests.

The NRC report's authors noted the quandary: Schools and often teachers are being punished by sanctions or job status based on student scores that are intended to measure how much children are

learning. This setup, however, motivates educators to do whatever is necessary to get higher scores from students on specific tests, whether it actually deepens their learning.

“The NRC report in my mind ends the debate, if there ever was a debate,” said Arthur Benson, a Kansas City school board member and longtime analyst of public schools as a plaintiffs’ attorney in the district’s federal desegregation court case.

“The nation as a whole is slowly and surely rebelling,” he said.

The Kansas City School District has been part of the rebellion, he said, making learning to “deep understanding” its prevailing mission and backing its administration’s reforms to propel children on individualized learning plans.

Private schools also have been joining the cause, worrying not only about the testing culture of public schools, but also the intense demands being made of teachers and children in and out of school.

Earlier this year, St. Paul’s Episcopal Day School brought together a panel of educators to talk about the stress on teachers and children.

The concern is schools and teachers are pressed to get better scores from students, however possible. And students Googling college entrance statistics are pressing for the highest GPAs they can muster, while padding resumes with leadership experience in clubs, sports and public service.

“We’re concerned ... we’re robbing children of their childhood, while not providing the best education possible,” said Liz Barnes, head of school at St. Paul’s. “We are running good teachers out of the profession, and I want them restored.”

At the one-room school, Powers keeps in mind a quotation often attributed to W.B. Yeats, saying, “Education is not the filling of a pail but rather the lighting of a fire.”

It’s not easy getting around the hectic classroom to help so many children dallying in different projects. She likens it to a circus performer dashing about spinning plates.

They may or may not know everything they are supposed to know when they graduate on to seventh grade, but Powers is confident the children will have the intellectual tools to learn what they need to learn.

Most of all, she said, “they like coming to school.”

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