



## Education

# Julia Steiny: Standardized testing can misrepresent a school's true quality

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, May 16, 2010



It's the end of the school day at Beacon Charter School for the Arts in Woonsocket. A thick, fluid throng of exuberant teenagers mills around the front entrance. The students are a funny mix. Because Beacon offers programs in performance, visual and culinary arts, it naturally attracts the purple-haired arty types, along with typical high-school misfits, gay kids and urban, hip-hoppy grunge kids. More surprising, however, is the sprinkling of orthodox Muslims, made obvious by the girls' headscarves.

Why would an orthodox family, of any faith, send its kids to be educated with art-school values and girls whose bodies often spill liberally from their clothes? Robert Pilkington, Beacon's principal, shrugged and said, "They trust us to be inclusive. Non-judgmental. In other schools, they're just another kind of misfit."

I weave my way through the throng to a meeting about how the juniors among this motley group achieved the second highest reading score in the state for high schools, 98 percent proficient. They were bested by Classical High, the state's only exam school, which skims applicants from Providence's private, parochial and public schools. And while fabulous eighth grade test takers can certainly become rebelliously disaffected students by 11th grade, Classical's 99 percent proficiency is good, but not a jaw-dropper.

Conversely, Beacon's triumph is happy but nerve-wracking. Can the school reproduce it next year? Pilkington has assembled a group of his data-and-testing specialists — deans, teachers, the special ed director — to explain just how fragile the triumph is. In Rhode Island, test scores alone determine school quality. So the group teaches me with charts, graphs and a PowerPoint presentation about the dangers lurking in the potential misuses of the NECAP, or the New England Common Assessment Program, on which Beacon kids did so well. They argue convincingly that the state must develop indicators that account for some of the radically different conditions under which each school labors. Give important context to the naked test scores. Because, for example:

- NECAP results more fairly represent big schools than small ones.

With a 2009 junior class of 43, each Beacon student counted for 2.3 percent of the class. Schools must improve at least by 3 percent to make adequate yearly progress (AYP), so one or two kids can make or break a small school's standing. And in the past, one or two students DID land Beacon on the state's bad-schools

watch list. According to my calculations, each Classical junior, of 246, counts as 0.4 percent of proficiency. The school has a considerable margin of error.

- Comparisons between Classical and Beacon kids are not apples-to-apples.

Beacon's kids come from 18 school districts. Including religious schools, the kids come from a total of 41 middle schools, not to mention homeschooled kids and a kid from Syria. All high schools are somewhat at the mercy of the quality of the middle schools, but Beacon's kids are literally all over the map.

Freshman year at Beacon focuses heavily on making sure the kids have foundational skills. But, simultaneously, the school has to start teaching the concepts kids will eventually encounter on the tests.

Eleventh-grade English teacher and literacy coach Carrie Appel says, "I do not focus a heck of a lot on spelling, grammar, punctuation. We use the time we have to focus on the meat and potatoes — good thesis statement, hook, transitions, supporting detail, good conclusions. My kids know what an essay looks like. But the sophistication of language, spelling, vocabulary ... I can't go back and teach apostrophes; I can't teach all of elementary and middle school."

Not that she and her colleagues didn't somehow manage to bring their kids up to speed anyway, at least in reading.

But in math, not so much.

The group emphasized that the NECAP testing strategy for math is harder. Dr. John Butler, math teacher, says that "NECAP's philosophy is to keep the answers close together. So the distractors are very close," meaning that wrong answers are very plausibly right ones, which is much harder to do in reading and writing tests. So kids guess, which is penalized, or get frustrated and give up.

To be proficient in math, a kid needs 1,140 points. The inevitable nastiness of tests is that 1,139 is not proficient, but 1,140 is. Nine Beacon juniors got 1,139. One lousy little point would have rendered those 9 kids proficient, adding a whopping 20 percent proficient to the existing 16. In math, 36 percent proficiency would have given a core-urban school rock-star status. But no, it was not to be.

Lastly, Beacon's rate of kids living in poverty went up 10 percent from last year. And as a school of choice, Beacon is often a school of last resort. Some of that motley throng of students milling around the front door had dropped out of their home school, found Beacon, and decided to give school another shot. Most startling is that about half of the student body was held back a grade, at some point, and of those, half stayed back more than once. The school regularly loses some of those students and must backfill newly emptied seats with kids who might also be giving school one last try. NECAP tests whomever is there on the days of the exam.

Pilkington says, "We're not making excuses. But we have to consider certain reasons behind the outcomes."

He's right. We need a more robust set of indicators to distinguish the challenges of the Classics from the Beacons.

Still, next week we'll find out what Beacon did to get their cool reading score.

Julia Steiny, a former member of the Providence School Board, consults for government agencies and schools; she is co-director of Information Works!, Rhode Island's school-accountability project. She can be reached at [juliasteiny@gmail.com](mailto:juliasteiny@gmail.com), or c/o EdWatch, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902.