



## Education

# Julia Steiny: Test results don't accurately write a school's story

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Last fall, on the days of the NECAP testing, Beacon Charter School for the Arts cordoned off the fourth floor of its Woonsocket building for the exclusive use of juniors, the all-important test-takers.

The New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) is the set of tests on which the state relies — too heavily, to my mind — to “classify” or grade schools. The previous fall, Beacon suffered what the staff still calls the “11-percent shock,” a drop in writing scores. As soon as their heart rates settled back to normal, they rolled up their sleeves to design and carry out a full-court press to boost test scores, especially in writing.

In the latest release of scores, Beacon got a well-earned 28-point boost in writing. But to everyone's surprise, it also reaped a bonanza in the reading score — 98 percent proficient, second-highest reading score in the state. I'll get to the reason for that in a moment.

On those testing days, Beacon fed its juniors a hearty and encouraging breakfast. To cope with the nerve-racking half-hour before the test, kids had three choices: They could take a walk outside with a teacher. They could get physical and aggressive with Wii games set up for the purpose. Or they could listen to an iPod and chill. Whatever worked for them.

When they took their seats that first day, at each of their desks they found a mechanical pencil — a little luxury most urban kids don't have — a rubber eraser and a little pile of mints. The mints were like the chocolate on your pillow in hotels that say: “We really appreciate your business.” The school was clear with the kids that it would appreciate their best effort.

Which they gave. John Butler, math teacher, said, “In all my years of proctoring tests, I've never before been in one where not one student stopped or gave up.”

Which is no small potatoes, given that many of Beacon's kids have been unsuccessful in their previous schools. Coming from 43 different middle schools and transferring in from an unknown number of high schools, half of its students have been held back in grade at some point in their schooling. Of those, half have been held back more than once. Some kids passionately want Beacon's art programs, but others merely pray it will be a tolerable experience, since they've hated school before. Beacon's is not an easy, academically oriented group.

So the story of Beacon's reading triumph is twofold. On the one hand, it's about how the staff treats the kids generally, as illustrated by the TLC they doled out on the test days. Lots of schools resent the statewide testing program and communicate that resentment to the kids. Beacon nurtures its kids.

Secondly, the triumph reflects what a whole-school collaboration can accomplish in a year when every adult is on task.

For starters, every teacher had to become a writing teacher, and a good one at that. Every class, no matter how non-verbal, now requires at least one paper, preferably more.

It's a huge culture shift to convince every acting and cooking teacher that they will henceforth assign and grade writing tasks. They will develop school-wide writing rubrics that help every teacher identify and support good writing. They will read and score each other's student papers with those rubrics, until the best English Language Arts instruction is radiating from the school's every pore.

The beauty of charter schools, which can choose and manage their own staff, is that the teachers are generally the sorts who are willing and ready to take up such challenges.

And 79 percent of the juniors showed up for summer school to work on their writing, just before school opened.

So the staff was cautiously optimistic that their efforts with writing would pay off in the way it did.

Interesting, the Carnegie Foundation recently published a report called "Writing to Read — evidence for how writing can improve reading." In essence, it shows that writing teaches reading from the inside out. It forces students to pay more attention to the mechanics — the spelling, vocabulary, grammar and details — that make writing readable to another person. Reading comprehension improves because writing makes kids record their own connections and analyses, and sort out their thinking by getting it down on paper. And just by spending more time wrestling with the mechanics of being comprehensible, they become more thoughtful and engaged with reading. Who knew?

So Beacon's writing innovation paid off in spades in the writing test, but even more so in reading.

Now Beacon's teachers are all about to become math teachers, hoping for a similar effect. Their recent math scores were statistically flat, as were the state math scores as a whole.

Will that work? Who knows? But you can't innovate or experiment if you're afraid to fail.

The problem with leaning too exclusively on test scores is that it stifles. Beacon's writing initiative was a hope, not a sure path to success. Yes, it led to an unexpected happy ending. But had the kids not performed as well, the school still should have gotten high marks for its humongous whole-school curriculum effort. It deserves yet another "Proficient with Distinction" for how it treats the kids. Its waiting list of students trying to get into the school goes on for days.

Tests are totally useful, but not by themselves. We can't see the schools clearly until we have more ways to measure them.

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