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Test-takers, not students

Test madness and centralized curriculum control squeeze creativity out of the classroom.

It is popular to blame the federal No Child Left Behind Act for California's educational woes, but our misery is largely homegrown and predates the 2001 law.

A friend who teaches at a prestigious suburban school recently told me that she was on leave and didn't think she was going back. "I can't stand giving kindergartners timed standards tests and watching tears trickle down their cheeks," she said. "It's just not right."

I know how she feels. This fall, we were at first forbidden to teach novels — any novels — in the college preparatory English classes at our high school. We must teach from the textbook because "the Holt textbook is aligned to the California content standards," the principal said. No "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." No "To Kill a Mockingbird."

The good news is the administration at my award-winning urban district relented and is allowing us to teach one novel, now that we are done with 18 hours of California Standards Tests.

The bad news is the district tells us we can do so only if we use the novel to "reinforce content standards" and not "teach it cover to cover," and the novel must "not supplant Holt's minimum course of study."

The district allows me seven hours to teach "To Kill a Mockingbird" to my students, a third of whom are English learners and two-thirds of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

The even worse news: The administrators are eliminating "sustained silent reading." That's the 15 minutes a day when all students stop everything and read. By eliminating it, we gain "over two minutes of instructional time aligned to the standards in each period each day" so we can "improve student achievement," the principal tells us.

"Improve student achievement" means "get better scores" on high-stakes standardized tests. "Aligned to the California content standards" means teaching to the tests — in my case, a food chain of tests to prepare students for other tests, almost all multiple choice. Easily 10% of my students' classroom time is spent taking these tests.

In a crescendo of circular logic, "high-achieving schools" have become those whose students are successful test-takers, without asking if they are prepared for work, for college, for citizenship or for a meaningful life.

The National Center on Education and the Economy reports that we lack workers who are "creative and innovative, self-disciplined and well-organized." Colleges complain that freshmen cannot think critically or write lucidly. As the center points out, "What gets measured is what gets taught."

In the 1990s, the core content standards were adopted and the state Public School Accountability Act was passed. That law mandates the tests that rate the schools; it also threatens sanctions against schools in which students "under-perform."

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act requires states to choose tests to demonstrate their educational progress. Thirty-five states chose tests that include writing and open-ended questions, which do more to encourage literacy and critical thinking than filling in bubbles on a Scantron form. California chose to use its existing tests.

Hardest hit by California's rules are schools that teach students who are poor or transient or who are learning English. These schools, fearing state and federal sanctions, concentrate on language arts and math. "Under-performing" students at my school may have two periods each of English and math, with no time for band, athletics, auto shop, languages or any other subject not tested each spring.

Educational standards and accountability are important, but most educators agree California's standards are not perfect. But neither your local school board nor the Legislature can change them. The Academics Standards Commission no longer exists. The state Department of Education has no plans for revision. The standards are out of reach of any democratic process.

They got one thing right though — the name: content standards. As long as progress is primarily measured through multiple-choice tests, to educate will mean to teach content, and teaching content will squeeze the development of innovative, well-read and organized humans, especially among poor and immigrant children.

If the state and federal governments want to compare schools, testing a sampling of students can be as accurate as testing every child — without taking up to 18 hours out of the life of every student.

If our goal remains to gauge the individual student's progress, we should use the multiple measures advocated by the National Education Assn. and the National Council of Teachers of English, including open-ended or short-answer tests and portfolios that demonstrate the students' reading, writing, abstract thinking, problem-solving and organizational skills.

For our children and our future, we must reestablish democratic control over the standards, revise them to be educational — not merely content — standards and track progress through meaningful multiple measures.

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