

Testing: First, Do No Harm



Last spring, I started a journey to remove my kids from standardized testing.

The journey was frustrating.

My motivation is simple. We live in Wake County, and my children attend Sycamore Creek Elementary. When I looked at the county and school's mission statements, I saw words like "growth mindset," "life-long learners," "compassionate, productive citizens" and "personal excellence" (Sycamore Creek Elementary), "full potential," "lead productive lives," "collaborative, creative, effective communicators and critical thinkers" (Wake County).

Pearson, the company that makes hundreds of millions of dollars a year in testing and test prep, concluded that students need [soft skills](#)--creativity, communication, and problem solving--to be successful. [Google's Human Resources Department](#) looks for new hires who are "emergent" leaders and who have the ability to learn; he said that "test scores are worthless."

My fifth grader will take a state-mandated End of Grade (EOG) test and 11 separate local benchmark assessments this year. These assessments take up 28 hours of class time (each local benchmark takes 2 hours). If one includes test-prep activities (that aren't activities FOR learning but measurements of content) such as Study Island, as well as actual testing time, it is easy to reach more than 40 hours of instructional time wasted on EOGs and benchmarks. Note that that is almost an entire week of instructional time when my child is not learning, but merely sitting, silently, filling in bubbles on paper.

Benchmarks and standardized tests don't measure soft skills that make students successful when they leave school. Why are students required to spend time away from learning in order to take tests that only measure content knowledge, not critical thinking or leadership skills? What is the school district doing to ensure teachers are effective in creating assignments and activities to teach my kids these critical soft skills?

State End of Grade tests do not provide ongoing feedback to inform instruction. They measure students' content knowledge, teacher effectiveness and they are used to grade schools. Through my investigation, I discovered I actually could not opt out of end-of-grade tests, due to state law and Race to the Top funding. End of grade testing is just part of the public school "package"--case closed. So, I turned my attention to the 11 (22+ hours of) local benchmark assessments.

At a teacher-parent conference this past fall, I asked my daughter's teacher which was more valuable in assessing my child's needs: benchmarks or classroom observations/assessments. Her answer was revealing. She knows more about my daughter's strengths and weaknesses than any

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standardized test could give her. I asked the same question to my son's third, fourth and fifth grade teachers. Their reply was similar -- because they spend hundreds of hours with students, they understand what enrichment and remediation individual students deserve more than any multiple-choice test.

These conversations reinforced the idea that benchmarks are a waste of time, energy and money if the data is not any better than the data teachers already have. I learned that no school system is required by the state or federal department of education to give benchmarks. I then decided to have my children opt out of local benchmarks.

I emailed Sycamore Creek's principal. She forwarded my request to the area superintendent. During two different conversations totaling three hours, we discussed formative and summative assessments, effective teaching, soft skills, standardized teaching, research and accountability. The end result, though, was that benchmarks are "policy." My interpretation: "Your children must take benchmarks because we say so." There was no rationale for this policy other than to hold teachers accountable for teaching curriculum and measuring if students were learning content. I traveled to WCPSS's board policies website. There, I noted that benchmarks are listed as one of several formative assessment options, not a requirement.

Next, I talked to the Senior Director of Elementary School Programs. He responded that benchmarks help determine which teachers and schools need extra support. However, we already have data points that can guide those decisions. Report cards, observations, and EOG scores can deliver the same information without wasting 22+ hours of instructional time.

My frustration mounted, and it continues to do so. All students in all schools deserve effective instruction that gives them the time and opportunity to develop into lifelong learners...to learn how to be successful. Benchmarks do not measure which schools or students are developing the necessary communication or problem solving skills kids need. Therefore, we need to reallocate those hours so teachers have the class time to help develop those skills and attitudes that will best serve students' interests in the future.

I ask that parents with any student who takes benchmarks to request that their child be removed from these redundant tests. I ask all teachers, who have insider information about the time-wasting nature of benchmarks, to educate the general public and stand up for a more rational educational policy.

If you have school-aged children, write a letter to your principal telling him/her that you are opting out of benchmarks.

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