

Good Morning:

My name is Paul Vermette ; I am a resident of Niagara Falls NY and have been one for almost all of my 65 years. I am a native born US citizen, I am a husband and a father, and I have been a full-time Professor of Education at Niagara University since 1985, where I both teach and study teaching. I started teaching High School Social Studies in 1971, received a doctorate from U/B in 1983 and have been involved in many formal Education activities over the years. I have published (or co-authored) 5 books on instructional practice and about 90 articles on various aspects of learning from teaching.

I am abhorred what has happened in our great state.

I will not flood you with a mountain of data or pages of reading lists or the emotion-laden words of parents and children who are aghast at what is happening.... but will keep my message short, sweet and simple. **PLEASE NOTE** that this is very difficult for me to do because

____(a) the issues involved are very complex and multi-faceted.

____(b) there are many stakeholders in the situation, each with a different perspective

____(c) I am very wordy and verbose...and redundancy has been shown to make a positive impact for long-term learner/reader retention (so I intentionally repeat myself)

____(d) I am a “scientist” at heart...which means that I try to sort through research, assessing it, examining it and using it in appropriate ways. (This also means that a lack of research support makes me doubt the wisdom of a decision).

If one turned the above paragraph into a multiple-choice test item, asking “Which is the author’s reason to keep his argument ‘short’ ?” perhaps the right answer would be “all the above” because they are all TRUE. On the other hand, one could make the case for each one as the “most important” of the offerings...but would have to provide **EVIDENCE** for such thinking. This evidence would need to be explained and would be difficult to jam into a MC format. The **SKILL** involved in this activity seems to be important, revolves around reading for meaning, deciphering the author’s thesis, comparing and contrasting plausible alternatives...each of these is not only a worthy cognitive skill to possess (and use) but is indeed, aligned, with the Common Core Skills. This is a good activity: difficult to assess but a good activity to use to help develop deep understanding in learners.

(l) This leads us to my first point: **IF the learning is valuable, it is difficult to measure accurately with a multiple choice test (Ravitch, 2013)**. Most standardized tests give somewhat

useful programmatic data, numbers that can show trends in groups of students. They are practically useless to measure individual students deep conceptual understanding, especially **IF teachers are never allowed to see the data that is generated or the test items that are being used. (2)** This is my second point: in NY, teachers (and learners) can never see what students actually got right or wrong...so there is **NO INSTRUCTIONAL VALUE** in the millions of dollars spent and thousands of hours of educational time invested...to get test scores. Let's play with these two ideas as they are seen in the various hypothetical scenarios offered below.

1. On the "big MC test", Johnny got item #2 wrong. (the answer is b and he bubbled d). What should happen next ?

One might think: check to see if it is a good test item and is aligned with the purposes invoked (Standards). If the answer to that is no, ignore it and dump the question. If the answer is YES, re-teach the content to him. This is **NOT THE ANSWER IN NY**. Everything is kept secret so the student stays deficient, the teacher cannot help him learn this important idea or skill; eventually ..over enough iterations... the curriculum narrows into a guessing game ...and everyone suffers.

2. At Happy Hills Middle School, 46 % of the 5th kids missed test item #14.What should happen next ?

Because there is no public airing of the testing process, even highly qualified academics, people who study test construction for a living, can assess the alignment of the tests with the standards involved. No one can see where the problem indicated by this data, lies, except people who work for the private company who made the test and perhaps some folks at SED. This is not a system designed to help kids learn.

3. On the "big test", Ramona got 25 items right...and Blaze got 25 items right as well. What should happen next ?

For starters, most of us think that these two youngsters learned the material **EQUALLY WELL**. They got the same exact score...yes. However, in almost all such comparative cases, they got different items correct...and thus still have at least some gaps in their knowledge...and these gaps are different. Again, the secret nature of the enterprise means that no instructional improvement can happen...yet there will be a rating given to these students. After looking at all the data from all the students across the State AFTER THE TEST IS SCORED, the Commissioner decides on a **CUT SCORE, meaning that his office determines the four categories to rate the students**. Ramona and Blaze will be in the same category, whether it is "deficient" or "proficient". They will be treated as "exactly the same"when everyone from their families to their neighbors KNOW they are not the same. Even if these two are identical

twins, they are not the exact same person. While the standards could be good, the standardization process is seldom good (Polka, 2013)

Interestingly, contrary to popular wisdom, the number of items on the test does not really matter. (In some cases, standardized test items are not even ‘counted’ for the student; they are being ‘field tested’ so the private corporation can get free information they find useful.) Some folks reading this item might wonder about the 25 right the two girls scored: they might ask “out of how many” ...because they don’t realize that it doesn’t really matter. “Number of questions on the test” is not a factor in a standardized test.

(3) Finally, here is my third and final point: **Researchers ...the very bright and highly qualified people who study this stuff all the time, do not have any faith that large scale high stakes testing is a valuable enterprise.** All the angst, all the “test prep”, all the hype, all the heat, all the blaming of teachers, all the finger pointing, all the avoiding meaningful learning experiences....has little or no value. (I cite Ravitch, 2103, Lee (2013) and Dee and Jacob (2009) as my **evidence. Moreover, like Ravitch, the great James Popham changed his mind about testing when he saw how they were being used**) The country the US seeks to emulate is Finland, which has no standardized testing programs but does have large-scale and polished professional development plans. (I cite Ridley, 2013, Darling-Hammond (2013) and Sahlberg (2012) as my **evidence.**)

Moreover, I ask you to check **YES or NO** to each of the following items that you might wish to see as **OUTCOMES** of a p-12 public school education at this time:

_____ curiosity _____ reciting the Preamble of the Constitution _____ adding fractions
_____ empathy _____ compassion _____ empathy _____ work ethic _____ grit
_____ solving quadratic equations _____ verb-noun agreement _____ teamwork
_____ naming the Capital city of the USSR in 1948 _____ self regulation _____ adding in
base 12 _____ using the word “demonstrative” correctly in an original piece of
writing _____ punctuality _____ playing notes on a flute correctly
_____ identifying poor reasoning in an argument

I dare say that you noticed that some of these might not be measureable by standardized tests, and in truth, some of them are NOT measured by today’s NY tests ! Moreover, if these are the really important ones to you...character and social-emotional competencies like self-regulation, persistence and grit...you might feel worried that they are being squeezed out of the normal operations of the school day. “what gets measured is what gets done” is an old, and true, saying. This is very sad to me personally, since I have listened carefully to the work of **Heckman (2013), Duckworth (2006), Tough (2012), Durlak et al (2008), Goleman (1995), and Elias (2009)**, who have made the case that affective competencies are at least EQUALLY

IMPORTANT as cognitive skills, and certainly more important than tests scores. If we educators fail to teach the “whole child”....in a mad dash for a few more enlightened guesses on a multiple choice exam with little importance (Lee, 2013)...we will pay a huge price down the line.

Thanks for listening to me: my messages are somewhat simple. To re-iterate.....

1. keeping the tests secret...and not using them with a well articulated purpose, is an enormous disservice to all;[it is also a monumental and mis-directed waste of taxpayer money]

2. important learning is not measured by the tests and will be driven from a curriculum evaluated driven only by test scores

3. researchers have nothing kind to say about Testing Programs like the one we use in NY. There is no indication from learned people that we are using a sound system.

It is very difficult for a scientist/scholar like me to go against the data and findings that are at hand. I could not possibly be in support our system given what we now know about the construction, use and impact of the tests.