

EOGs: Love, hate - or all of the above - IN MY OPINION – Peter St. Onge

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In preparing for this week's End of Grade tests, the fifth-grader in our house took sample exams that called on him not only to grasp early algebra and geometry, but to show comfort with comparing and contrasting data and identifying complex numerical patterns.

In reading, he needed to demonstrate the ability to identify fictional plots and themes, to understand and explore words through the author's perspective and intent, and to use deduction to sift meaning from non-fiction material.

So why is it again we don't want teachers teaching to these tests?

This is the week to officially hate our North Carolina EOGs. Go ahead. They're too high-stakes. They don't measure different kinds of learning. They're stressful for students and teachers and parents.

At our house, for our student, the tests will be a factor in classroom placement for middle school next year. That means his parents have attempted the delicate balance of noting the importance of EOG focus and care - without freaking our 10-year-old out. Youth sports parents might recognize this strategy - the "have fun out there, but it's more fun if you do these 11 things correctly" approach. Not exactly Dad of the Year stuff.

And that, anti-test folks say, is part of the danger of high-stakes testing - that it steals the joy from learning and teaching. It's a message that's finding real traction.

A national resolution condemning high-stakes testing is circulating the country, with hundreds of school boards approving. In Charlotte, advocacy group **Mecklenburg ACTS** has asked the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board to give the resolution a nod. The group's thoughtful co-chairs, Pamela Grundy and Carol Sawyer, wrote an op-ed for the Observer this week echoing the resolution and calling for testing to be only "a periodic sampling of schools and subjects."

Doing so, advocates say, would allow us to return to classrooms in which teachers were free to lead engaged students through diverse curricula filled with deep thinking and innovation. (Translation: Not teaching to the test.)

But in that idyllic world, too many teachers weren't doing those wonderful things, and too many students weren't learning what they needed to know. No Child Left Behind, flawed as it is, introduced testing that shone a light on struggling schools and forced change by providing something measurable to improve.

Deemphasizing those tests does a disservice to parents who otherwise don't know their children are falling behind compared with other classrooms and other schools. It's a disservice to teachers whose classes are slowed with students improperly promoted through subjective evaluation. It's a disservice, most of all, to the students - whether they're the ones who see a teacher's attention directed elsewhere, or the ones unprepared for all the next steps they take, including college.

Yes, CMS sometimes splashes around too much in the test data pool, including last year's 50-plus "field tests" the district quickly abandoned. But our classrooms still have plenty of time for other learning. My sons' excellent teachers have launched their students on projects about the environment and history, on book discussions that promote real depth of thinking. Great educators across Charlotte have told me about similarly engaging projects. The best of them understand the need for a classroom blend of basics and breadth.

For many of those teachers, the issue with tests isn't how you measure learning, but how to measure teaching. They worry that high-stakes tests don't calculate the intangibles they provide, or the challenges students bring from home environments. They worry, too, that tests don't measure all the things and ways students learn.

That's true, but it's an argument for better tests, not few tests. Because unless CMS chops its classes in half, standardized testing is the best way to measure broadly how students are learning. The alternative is knowing less about what our children know. It's trusting that all of our teachers and principals are as good as we hope, or that they'll tell us if they're not.

Our schools have already taken that test, and we know the result.