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## Closing the Gaps of No Child Left Behind: The Assessment Debate for Essential Schools

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Recently, a local reporter asked me if No Child Left Behind did more good than bad. I was sitting at my desk with a reporting folder for our district's upcoming NCLB audit. We had already spent countless hours putting together data to illustrate our decisions. In fact, we hired a consultant to strategize ways to "make the grade" with the state auditors. As the district's curriculum and instruction director, I was assigned to report on what we are doing about low test scores among specific populations in all grade levels. I looked up from the data to the local reporter and said, "There is no good in spending a disproportionate amount of time and money on reporting when the money and my time could be spent in classrooms. Nor is it a good thing to make decisions based solely on test scores, because soon enough, our decisions will translate more and more into teaching to the test, cutting out what is truly vital and essential for meaningful learning."

For the most part, our NCLB academic reporting reflects standardized test scores. Neither the report nor any NCLB funds link to our high school exhibitions. Unfortunately, the reporting and remedy structure that's been imposed on us forces us to commit to quick fixes implemented with little turnaround time. The word "curriculum" is being altered to mean programs—scripted and lackluster programs. We fear that the assessment systems in our district schools will look more and more like the specific tests that the students take annually in the spring. Especially in the early grades, teachers agonize over dumping meaningful, robust lessons that are not "scientifically" proven. As of late, the high school also has a Reading Recovery program. Teachers and kids do see improvement on their reading, but to what end?

Sedona Red Rock High School (SRRHS) serves a distinctly diverse community of learners. Within a five mile radius from the high school, there are five million dollar mansions, mobile home parks where two or more families share a trailer, and lots of other types of housing in between. The English Language Learner population is at least 20% and growing. Though some Sedona Red Rock students have lived in town all their lives, most have come from other parts of the country and from outside the United States.

To graduate from the high school, each student must earn 30.5 credits and successfully execute a senior exhibition. Most of our classes are project based and are aimed at preparing students for their exhibitions. This high stakes assessment is required for everyone, even our foreign exchange students. As in most CES schools, the level of scaffolding varies from student to student, yet everyone's work is judged with the same rubric. Since our first graduating class in 1997, four students have not graduated because they did not complete their exhibitions. In 1999, the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) was introduced as the standardized state graduation test, and in 2006, students were required to pass the AIMS Reading, Writing and Math tests in order to graduate. Our students now have four high stakes graduation exams, three at the state level and one exhibition, and more are on the way.

Though SRRHS has preserved exhibitions as a graduation requirement, six years ago we reduced the number of graduation exhibitions because of the imminent tests. The decision was made despite incredible debates among the faculty. The conclusion was that the faculty was worn thin mentoring exhibitions and that time at school would soon be consumed by the state tests. And in fact, more than ever, the state tests threaten to eradicate the CES practices we've worked so long to create, such as integrated curriculum, mixed age level courses, and heterogeneous grouping.

Holding on to CES practices at our high school and progressive practices at our elementary schools has been difficult. Over the past few years, the district has spent money on test prep materials at all of the schools, and most teachers use these materials for two weeks prior to the test. This time eclipses time for hands-on math and exciting science, and sometimes, it cuts recess short.

Even though all of our schools are doing well according to Arizona's NCLB classification system, the students who do not meet the standard are assigned to remediate with Reading Recovery programs and other materials that have little connection to the content of the curriculum. Because struggling students are pulled out of class while their counterparts get enriched reading lessons, the testing structure is destroying our heterogeneous classes as well. And the situation is going to get even more difficult: in 2008, Arizona will institute a state science test in fourth and eighth grades, a social studies test in fifth and seventh grades, and end of course testing in science and social studies at the high school level by 2010.

I do appreciate the fact that NCLB has woken us up out of our sleepy resistance to truly educating English Language Learners (ELL) and other struggling children. As Ted Sizer observed, I like the fact that "NCLB does not permit warehousing students until graduation day." Since the implementation of NCLB, our district has hired more ELL-endorsed teachers and hired more certified ELL teachers and aides specifically to work with teachers and students. We have also restructured our ELL reporting system to track individual ELL students' achievement in their course work and test scores. All teachers in Arizona are required to take sheltered English immersion instruction. However, at this time, there seems to be more pull out than push in. But the goal remains to have more people and other resources focused on this population.

But what I dislike the most about NCLB is that it flies in the face of what we know in our hearts and through research to be true: that no single decision should be made using test scores alone, especially for the purpose of graduation. In fact, on just about every educational test is a warning label addressing this fact. However, basing progress on test scores—specifically on a single form of one test—is the premise of the interpretation of the No Child Left behind Act of 2001. Researchers have known for years that instruction and assessment are closely tied. Now we all know this. We know it so well that we fear the tests will take over our dominion as free thinking teachers.

At the 2006 CES Fall Forum, representing the Forum for Democracy and Education, Stanford University education professor Linda Darling-Hammond spoke about the national testing craze in ways that I found inspiring. She commented that "tiny cracks" in the current testing system were motivating her desire to get involved with NCLB's upcoming reauthorization. These cracks, in states like Nebraska, give her hope regarding changing the nature and the stakes of the states' assessment systems. Darling-Hammond also shared information about the 2006 Florida gubernatorial election, which had educational testing as its central argument. She believed we needed to capitalize on these cracks and bust them open. Darling-Hammond spoke frankly about the deep ironies that are resulting from NCLB. Sensible teachers are making nonsense decisions, such as putting a letter grade on diagnostic tests or excluding low performing students from time with an artist in the classroom so they can practice reading.

Many educational researchers and even more educators will stand by the knowledge that performance based assessment should be valued at least as much as standardized multiple choice tests. It's clear that many schools like Sedona Red Rock High School are persevering, but not thriving like they could. What is needed at the school level are meaningful conversations about all of the CES Common Principles. School people need to take action and be conscious of keeping a healthy balance between real teaching and test preparation. Meanwhile, teachers and principals need to take every opportunity to showcase publicly their performance based work and invite local and state lawmakers, community members, and local media to take part. For the sake of our students, we need to leverage demonstrations of mastery to find the tiny cracks in our local settings in order to create real change that will benefit all students.

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## SIDEBAR

Three years ago, I was teaching humanities at Sedona Red Rock High School and writing my doctoral dissertation, in which I asked, "What's happening to graduation by exhibition programs and practices with the growing imposition of high stakes tests under No Child Left Behind?" My findings, which follow, show that even in NCLB's early days, it was having a detrimental effect on some students, particularly in schools that serve students of color at which the standardized tests determined graduation or were otherwise high-stakes.

***Perceived Effects of High Stakes Testing on the Internal Assessment Systems in Coalition of***

### ***Essential Schools***

This mixed methods study examined the perception of 184 Coalition high school teachers and administrators from 46 schools in 21 states regarding the impact of NCLB on school designed performance based assessment systems. The respondents answered a survey regarding their level of agreement with NCLB's influence on curriculum and instruction, assessment, staff development, course offerings and student groupings.

The study also examined the results across four conditions: high stakes, high minority schools; high stakes, low minority schools; low stakes, high minority schools; and low stakes, low minority schools.

Key findings indicate that teachers and principals only perceive a slight shift in priorities in student groupings toward homogeneity, reduction in performance assessments and alignment of these assessments to state standards. There was a bit more of a shift in course offerings, aligning curriculum to the test and, test prep time taking away from innovation and an increase in staff development focusing on testing.

The most significant shifts came in high stakes, high minority schools, with the exception that at low stakes, high minority schools, staff development time regarding tests exceeded that of schools in the other groups.

The qualitative data indicated more frustration with NCLB than statistical data indicated across all of the conditions. The qualitative findings indicated that respondents from high stakes, high minority conditions reported more hostility and anger and philosophical opposition to the changes prompted by the tests.

### **Marisol and Julie: Beyond Assessment**

Julie and Marisol represent two ends of Sedona's economic and cultural spectrum. Julie was born and raised in a wealthy family. Her parents are college educated, and she always knew she would attend college.

Marisol walked to Sedona from Mexico to join her older brothers after the death of her father. Marisol had a relatively good life in Mexico, but after her father's death, her mother abused alcohol, and the desperate situation forced Marisol, her sister and her mother to seek a new life. Marisol entered high school with a sub-par education and not one word of English. She tells us now, four and a half years later, her dream was to make some friends and try to graduate. Marisol also wanted to find a place where she could go to ride a horse; she loved horses and had a place to ride in Mexico.

Julie's dream in ninth grade was to also make some true friends. She was born with a deformity of her jaw which affected her appearance and her ability to chew and swallow properly. She was slated for orthognathic surgery when she turned 16, She had faced incredible ridicule from her peer group and could not wait for a new face.

In March of their junior year, Julie and Marisol had to write their senior exhibition proposals. Marisol chose to study the food and nutrition needed to keep horses healthy, as well as the physical grooming needed for a healthy horse. She also wanted to learn what it would take to become a trainer or a veterinarian. Julie had undergone successful surgery. She wanted to chronicle her medical and emotional experience and create an educational video and handbook for future patients whom she would counsel as part of her project and her possible future career. All students need to write a substantial research paper addressing all or part of their thesis statement.

As one of her committee members, Marisol's proposal process was incredibly difficult for me. We pantomimed, drew pictures, and worked with two other committee members and the ELL teacher until we had something polished. She wrote 14 drafts before we were able to sign off on the project. We also needed to find a mentor with a horse for her.

Julie's proposal was intense as well because of the wide range of what she wanted to cover. She also was emotionally attached to the project and still overcoming the enormous physical change of her looks, her new relationship to her peer group, and her ability to chew and to swallow.

The proposal writing process is infamous at SRRHS. Past graduates moan about 25 drafts, controversial

topics, and nitpicky teachers. Though Julie and Marisol's proposal processes were exhausting for me, I found myself boasting about both of them when the committee finally signed off!

The proposal work was just the tip of the iceberg. Teachers also spend oodles of time with the kids coaching their required research paper. The exhibition process for our students, although uniform on paper, is completely customized for each student because they come to the work with such a wide range of skills, attitudes and natures of their studies.

Julie's stumbling blocks were surprisingly similar to Marisol's in many regards and expectantly different in others. Julie and Marisol had to rely heavily on other people for interviews, resources, and encouragement. They both faced a lot of emotional stress: Marisol's language barrier, and Julie's experience of the tension between some people who did not understand the difference between cosmetic surgery and required surgery for better health as well as continued adjustment from her experience. The girls each had more than one caring adult by their side. They both worked several hours after school in spa industry related jobs, and they both were retaking the high stakes standardized tests. Marisol was trying to pass and Julie was trying to exceed the standards.

Julie's final product was incredible. Her ability to write about the medical and emotional aspect of the procedure flowed from her pen. Her doctors in California, and Sedona consistently supplied her with interviews. She had medical books, editing equipment for her film, and transportation at her disposal. She was also applying to several colleges during the process. Her presentation was riveting. She invited nearly 50 people to her exhibition in addition to her three judges, one of which is always a trained community member.

Marisol, along with three other SRRHS students, got permission to delay her exhibition presentation because she was also working intensely on receiving tutoring for the AIMS tests in reading, writing and math. Midway through her senior year, the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction sued the prosecutor and our district court in a 10 year trial on ELL funding, and overturned the decision of state exams, resulting in the fact that all ELLs had to pass AIMS to graduate. Marisol passed the math test and the writing test after five attempts, and though she struggled mightily with the reading test, her score improved, but she did not pass. She was able to receive an augmentation score from her grades in order to graduate, but the entire process was bittersweet for her as she was also diagnosed with a learning disability two weeks before the results came back. This diagnoses, had it come earlier, would have excused her from passing the tests at all!

Marisol's exhibition was a triumph. She befriended our school resource officer who owned a police horse. Rena, the officer, shared many hours with Marisol of riding and caring for the horse. The librarian of our school who tutored her on the AIMS reading and writing tests was also her exhibition sponsor and taught Marisol how to make a Power Point presentation on feeding and caring for the horse. She also helped Marisol structure her ten page research paper that exceeded the typical number of five drafts by five!

She presented the entire project in English. Her Power Point was professional, and Dr. Suzy Ort, a former teaching colleague from our days at New York City's University Heights High School, attended the presentation. Marisol's mother and sister were also there, along with her sponsor. We went outside for a demonstration with the horse, and when it was over, there were tears of joy. The level of learning and demonstration of knowledge and skills blew the lid off any state exam.

At the start of this school year, I was asked to recommend several young women to a very prestigious group in town called Sedona Women, better known as Dames who make a Difference. They wanted to recognize damsels who made a difference and they wanted to feature them in a talk show based on "The View." Each damsel would share from her past. The nominating committee came to my office and already had damsels in mind based on recommendations from our community judges. It was no surprise that Julie and Marisol were two out of the five that were chosen.

During the Dames' version of "The View," Julie presented a segment of her exhibition. She spoke candidly about the process and how it changed her life to be able to present and truly examine her journey. Marisol spoke about her journey from Mexico to her exhibition and passing the state exams in reading and writing. She let us know that she had started classes at our nearby community college and was promoted to manager at her job in a hotel restaurant. The two young women shared so much more than any state test

score could ever demonstrate.

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### **Note to Readers**

Ted Sizer relayed his thoughts about No Child Left Behind in the course of an interview with Lisa Hirsch.

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