

St. Theresa test scores worth bragging about

By Mike Filce

While so much news about education these days highlights the negative, we need look no further than a small local school for the positive.

St. Theresa School, going strong since reopening in August 1994, approaches standardized testing differently from its counterparts. Students in grades 2-8 take the ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) in the third week of September, rather than in the spring when public schools conduct their standardized testing. The test has a mixture of questions covering key information from the prior school year, and introductory information from the current grade level expectations.

This year, grades 3-8 scored in the top third or higher nationally, and all grades performed above grade level. These most recent results show the third-grade class testing at a grade equivalent of 3.9, which is just short of fourth grade. That trend widens to 6.5 for fifth-graders, 10.1 for seventh, and 11.3 for eighth-graders.* (*Composite class scores rather than individual student scores.)

Each year, the school receives the results in early November, at which time the staff reviews both individual and grade-level results to plan and guide instruction for the rest of the year. This approach allows teachers to focus on each student's weaknesses rather than teach to the test, according to third-grade teacher, Anne Filce.

Kelly Shanahan, parent of a sixth-grader, finds it "remarkable" that the teachers and administration "have the guts to test at the beginning of the year, before the students have been exposed to the material"; she appreciates how

teachers then “take the testing information and tailor it to improve their curricula instead of spending time on state standards in which the students are already proficient.”

Principal Danette Winslow, clarifies, “the purpose of testing for grades 2-8 is diagnostic only ... we are looking at what the students are bringing into their academic experience after having three months off of school. Teachers use the test scores as a barometer, to help guide them in their instruction.”

Matt Tillson, long-time middle school teacher at STS, expresses similar thoughts. He believes the “the test scores in the fall are a more true or accurate indication of the child’s memory and knowledge, versus in the spring when teachers have had the opportunity to teach to the test, which may not provide as true an indication of what they know.”

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