

Educators grapple with necessity of mandated testing

By Kathryn Reed

Testing was going on this past week in many classrooms within Lake Tahoe Unified School District.

Nothing out of the ordinary about that.

And that is the problem for some educators. Testing seems to be more common than teaching.



Is education in the United States best defined as No Child Left Untested?

Politics is a large part of the problem. It's people in Washington, D.C., and Sacramento telling local school districts what to do. These people may not have been in a classroom since they were a student.

Superintendent Jim Tarwater says the powers that be ask districts what they want or need, districts respond, and the politicians do something else.

If he were in charge of the state or federal Education Department for a day, Tarwater said his first priority would

be to measure schools on growth and not against one another.

“I would set up a plan so every child would have one-on-one computing from third grade up. Assessment would only be for growth and how to support kids, and I would not compare them to other kids,” Tarwater said.

He would also eliminate the high school exit exam.

“They don’t do that in college – take one test to see if you get a degree,” Tarwater said.

Part of the problem is the federal No Child Left Behind, which is still in place even though President Obama has introduced Race to the Top to supersede his predecessor’s education policy. NCLB mandates all students – including special ed and English learners – be at a proficient level by 2014.

“There is definitely a level of frustration in having to move to that performance level,” said Sue O’Connor, English learner program coordinator for LTUSD. “We hear the federal government is moving to a growth model. We just haven’t seen it.”

LTUSD board President Wendy David would like the state and feds to give school districts more flexibility.

“I would like the pendulum to swing back so there is some choice for teachers and students,” David said. “Maybe the financial crisis will do that. Testing takes away from valuable learning time.”

Board discussions

Some teachers call it No Test Left Behind.

At the Dec. 14 school board meeting, Bijou Community School second-grade teacher Loreen Norberg read a holiday themed testimony about testing into the record. With her, she had a stack of material related to the myriad tests she gives – and this is to 7-year-olds.

"I don't have time to teach children before the next assessment," she told the board. "In my mind, what we are doing is backward. This testing is ridiculous."

That night, David said, "Learning should be our most important focus."

At the Feb. 2 board meeting, a discussion item was the movie "Race to Nowhere" that had been shown on the South Shore in January. The movie's website describes it this way, "Featuring the heartbreaking stories of young people across the country who have been pushed to the brink, educators who are burned out and worried that students aren't developing the skills they need, and parents who are trying to do what's best for their kids, Race to Nowhere points to the silent epidemic in our schools: cheating has become commonplace, students have become disengaged, stress-related illness, depression and burnout are rampant, and young people arrive at college and the workplace unprepared and uninspired."

One issue in the movie is the amount of homework students are required to do each night. LTUSD's homework guidelines call for 10 minutes per grade level. This means a second-grader has 20 minutes and a senior two hours.

That's the suggested minimum.

"I agree it sounds good, but there is no maximum," board member Larry Green said. "So many times they are coming home with so much more."

David relayed the story of a young man she worked with through CASA who had been accepted to the Naval Academy. He never made it to Annapolis. He shot himself. He left a note saying something to the effect of, "I can't do this anymore."

"In honor of him, I think we always need to be cognizant of that – and the need for counselors," David said.

South Tahoe High School Principal Ivone Larson said homework is a unique concept to the United States. International students at her school are used to studying from a book.

She said the percentage of homework fluctuates from teacher to teacher.

Jodi Dayberry, second-grade teacher at Tahoe Valley Elementary School, told the board, "As you discuss homework changes, please include teachers. We are the ones responsible for assigning it. The second piece is assessment."

She wants the district to look at what is mandated v. what the district has implemented when it comes to testing.

Kathy Haven, a former teacher and now ardent parent supporter at Bijou, said, "We need to create learners, critical thinkers and problem solvers. We need to teach parents more about what to do at home."

She also stressed the need for teaching more through hands-on learning and less through worksheets.

"If something should be changed, I think it should be teacher driven," board member Sue Novasel said.

Novasel said she had to intervene in her children's education at South Tahoe High because they were getting burned out with all the advanced placement courses they were taking. Those classes require a specific test from the private AP company. So many colleges require those classes for a student to be accepted.

Inside the classroom

This past week it was the Blueprint testing that was going on. It's a test to gauge how the students will do on the state mandated two-weeks worth of tests in May. The district has been doing this for five years.

“It’s required by the state as monitoring of student learning; to see what they need extra work on,” Tarwater said.

But this means students are being tested on something they may not have learned for a test that is three months from now.

Because LTUSD is labeled a program improvement school under No Child Left Behind, this is another round of testing the feds require.

Five out of six LTUSD schools are Title 1 – meaning at least 35 percent of the school population qualifies for a free or reduced lunch. Title 1 status means more federal dollars. But LTUSD isn’t even allowed to say no to these dollars and therefore try to get out of NCLB.

Bijou first-grade teacher Susan Earnest calls Race to the Top “No Child Left Behind Lite” – adding, “It again is punitive rather than based on success. I do think testing is helpful. I just don’t think it is being used correctly. It’s labeling staff and schools as failures.”

For Dayberry at TVES, she is frustrated that one test can have so much impact on a child’s life, the fate of a district, the money that comes with a test score.

“We are putting labels on kids,” Dayberry said.

Earnest believes the quick fix mentality in Washington is not allowing for systemic changes to occur that will bring the United States’ level of education up to that of other countries.

Gene Matteucci, fourth grade teacher at Tahoe Valley, said, “It’s frustrating to be told (what to do) by legislators who have never been in the classroom. They know very little how a classroom operates and what kids need. They don’t ask me what works.”

He has 32 students, no classroom aide. He doesn’t have time to

give individualized attention when there about 320 minutes in the day.

Much of the testing requires Scantrons – those cards with bubbles to fill in.

Tarwater believes Scantrons are on their way out and testing on computers will be the norm. The district is moving toward having most students have a netbook. He believes testing using tools students are used to will engage them more. It also could provide for more accurate answers and no bubble designs. At the younger grades they don't have the manual dexterity for Scantrons, but still must use them.

Melissa Bornstein has to administer a test to her second-graders at Bijou that requires them to circle about 150 bubbles. And this is a test to gauge how well they read.

"If they read to me, I know if they can read," she said.

Bornstein knows testing is good to decipher how students are doing, "but I feel like we test too much. I would like to be teaching a little bit more."

After teaching for 28 years, Bornstein believes she has a strong grasp on identifying students who are getting the material and those who are not.

Matteucci feels the same way.

"We don't need the frequency of tests. When you are in the class you know what they know and don't know," Matteucci said.

Bornstein said, "If a child doesn't get it, my options are limited. I have been told my goal is to get to the end of the pacing guide. But, personally, I want to teach them."

Pacing guides are used to make sure students and teachers are where they should be along a time line set by people who don't work at the school site.

All of this rigidity has also taken a lot of the personality out of the classroom so it's difficult for the teacher to bring his or her twist to teaching that makes that room unique. It's all about jumping when the district, state and feds say jump. Asking, "Why should I jump?" does not appear to be an option for teachers.

Dayberry, at TVES, said the problem is teachers are always feeling like they are playing catch-up.

It's test, assess, reteach, retest and so on. But the learning part – the real learning, not the learning to take a test part, is what seems to be missing.

The four-times a year diagnostic testing the district requires is helpful to Earnest. It requires her to sit individually with each student for 30 to 60 minutes.

"It does take up a lot of instructional time, but the payoff is you can target instruction much more accurately so you don't waste time teaching what they know. This way you are not shooting at the middle," Earnest said.

But she admits if no aide is available to help during this time, she has had the rest of the class watch an instructional video.

"Nationally and statewide we need to look at how much time we are taking to administer tests," Dayberry said.

Matteucci is also an advocate of diagnostic testing as well as a proponent for taking a holistic approach to each student.

"We give them language arts and math and if they don't get it, we give them more language arts and math," Matteucci said. He wants arts, music, science and history to be as important and not threatened to be eliminated because of budget cuts.

"Test scores are going up, but are kids really smarter?" Matteucci asks. "I want to instill a lifelong love of learning

and that is more than filling in bubbles.”

Furthering the discussion

Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village this academic year has been putting on a series called Discussions in Education. The third presentation will be March 3 from 7-9pm in rooms 139/141 of the Tahoe Center for Environmental Sciences at SNC.

Learning in the 21st Century is the topic next week. Educators and researchers will share insights into the necessary changes needed in the United States' education system. A video from Sir Ken Robinson and Daniel Pink will also be shown.