

Teachers, Testing, and Terminations

Teachers have always tested students. Most “tests” are designed to give the teacher daily or weekly feedback to how students are learning and how well the teacher is communicating with his/her students. Tests or assessment are either classroom based or standardized and are designed to assist with instruction.

Recently, however, national and state officials have focused “reform” efforts on student testing. The motives of the elected officials may be altruistic or, as some suspect, sinister with the objective of promoting the privatization of public schools. Whatever the motives, state legislatures have adopted mandatory student testing programs that include publishing the results of the tests.

Several teachers have been disciplined and some terminated for testing protocol violations. The Utah State Office of Education has advised the Utah Education Association that it intends to more strictly enforce disciplinary rules against educators that violate testing protocols. (One teacher is currently being investigated and threatened with termination because her students tested above their expected range. District officials have accused her of cheating and reported her to the Utah Professional Practices Commission. The evidence is simple: her students test above the expected range. The district has chosen to ignore the possibility that excellent teaching may be a possible explanation.)

How test results should be used by the public is open to debate, but the right of the legislature to mandate testing and public reporting of tests results is not. Legislatures have the right to operate public schools including the right to mandate uniform student testing. They also have the right to impose sanctions and remedies on schools that do not perform. Tests that have consequences such as school restructuring, financial rewards or penalties are called “high stakes.” The Utah legislature has not presently mandated sanctions against schools that do not meet standards although that has been discussed. Additionally, high achievement on tests for students can mean a scholarship, admittance to a good school, and success in life. All of this contributes to “high stakes testing.”

We know that some educators artificially attempt to increase student scores on tests. There are reports from around the country of administrators and teachers being terminated because they changed the marks on score sheets, manipulated the test audience, gave students the answers to the test questions, or went over the test questions prior to the time for taking the test.

There are more subtle ways to improve student performance on standardized tests some of which are permitted and others that are unethical and constitute violations of testing protocols. It is important for educators to know what is permitted and what is not permitted when preparing students to take tests.

All standardized tests are accompanied by a “test administration manual” that informs administrators and teachers exactly what is and what is not expected during test

administration. Administrators and teachers should carefully read the manual. The test administration procedures should be discussed in faculty meetings. To help remind educators about ethical and unethical practices regarding testing procedures, the USOE has produced a 12-minute video, *Fairness and Equity in Statewide Testing*, which outlines the elements of good testing. In the spring of 2001, the video was distributed to all districts. A copy was provided to each school. You may obtain a copy from your district testing director if your school needs a copy.

Here are a few important rules for educators to follow:

1. The best preparation for testing is teaching the Utah core curriculum (see “www.usoe.k12.ut.us/curr”).
2. Make certain your instructional materials are aligned to the core curriculum.
3. Never copy a test.
4. Keep all tests and test manuals in a secure area.
5. Count all tests and test manuals.
6. Monitor the location of the test.
7. Never use old tests for any reason including practicing test preparation.
8. The teacher and the building principal should agree on the number of tests given the teacher and returned to the principal. The USOE numbers all tests and manuals to help keep track of their number and location.
9. Only qualified staff can administer tests; students cannot be used to monitor testing.
10. The test manual instructions are to be precisely followed. If the person administering the test is in doubt as to whether something or some conduct is permitted, don't do it. Begin instructions to students as directed in the manual. Distribute the tests at the time and as directed. Collect the tests at the time and as directed. Never leave the testing area during the administration of the test.
11. Test administrators are usually limited to clarifying directions and explaining how to mark the answer sheet. Do not rephrase questions, give hints, analogies, or other information.
12. The rules for special needs students may be different, but make certain that you know the rules. The rules can be found at “www.usoe.k12.ut.us/eval”.
13. Scores can be improved by “teaching to the test.” Educators know what areas are to be tested. Simply spending more time teaching those subjects will improve test scores.
14. Practice test taking (but not “the” test). Prepare students physically and psychologically to take the test. It is during the “practice” that teachers can give hints about answering questions, making corrections, and guessing. These helpful hints **cannot** be given once the testing procedure has begun.
15. Assist students to remove external stress and noises.
16. As part of the practice for test taking, tell students to answer the questions they know the answer to and to return later when they have time to work on those they do not.

17. Tell students that they should erase marks they know to be wrong. Erasures should be clear.
18. Tell students to get a good night's rest prior to taking the test and to have a good breakfast the morning of the test.
19. Make certain students have pencils, paper, and a good working (testing) environment.

The Evaluation and Assessment section of the USOE has additional information on its web site: "www.usoe.k12.ut.us/eval".

News. anTestingProtoc