



# Reversing the Trend—

## When Assessments Trump Curriculum Connections

BY JACK BERCKEMEYER

It's no secret that students in the United States lag behind other countries in their abilities to score well on standardized assessments. Please note: I purposefully said, ***in their abilities to score well on standardized assessments*** and not ***“in their abilities”*** or ***“in their knowledge of content.”***

I have the privilege of being invited to work in schools all over the country, and it's impossible for me NOT to notice the extreme preoccupation (Dare I call it “an obsession”?) with students' standardized assessment scores. And it's impossible for me NOT to wonder: With all the time and energy focused on practicing for such assessments, what time or energy is left to thoughtfully plan for the big picture of what we (as a school or district) teach and how and when we teach it?

Here's the problem as I see it and as numerous educators across the country have expressed it (said expression often accompanied by the tearing out of large clumps of hair): In too many schools, the approach is: “Just give us the curriculum. We don't think about content as a whole—we just need to know what we have to do to get kids ready for the assessments.”

State standards, including the Common Core State Standards, are **not** intended to define curriculum. Indeed, statements within the standards documents emphasize that the standards are **not** intended to dictate what content to teach or how to teach it.

Nevertheless, in too many places, the instruments that assess the standards **are treated as the heart of the curriculum**. Teachers, committees, or administrators are not sitting down together to talk about what needs to be taught when and where and how—about aligning curriculum across grade levels or connecting content across subject areas or about what their students, as a whole, need for relevant learning experiences. Instead, they are frantically trying to extrapolate content from the questions they see on the tests. Assessments trump curriculum connections.

Recently, an experienced teacher in Florida told me that her students were required to take some form of a benchmark test, district assessment, or state-mandated test every 18 days. Wait! It gets better (or worse)! A school district in Ohio has created a district-wide, color-coded calendar that highlights all the expected tests and assessment dates. The colors indicate what type of test is to be given and when. Just looking at this calendar gave me a migraine. And we wonder why students are losing their love of school. Could it be that just when they might experience the joy of learning something, they have to stop and take a test, and not the authentic, formative assessment that belongs in every classroom—but something that practices for “the big test”?

And we wonder why teachers are burning out at an ever-increasing pace. Maybe it's because they did not choose this profession intending to spend every 18th day prepping for a high-stakes standardized test.

### Making Connections

In American education, standardized assessments remain a constant, while curriculum is an ever-changing variable. It seems to me that the oil-change rule has been applied here: Every 3,000 to 5,000 miles, it's time for new oil. Every three to five years, it's time for new curriculum. And in the hurry to try something new, when we barely had time to get our feet wet with the last set of solutions—we start assessing the new set of curriculum standards before we've even had time to train the teachers well or allow our students time to adapt to a new paradigm. Then the whole society screams because test scores flounder!

The poor students (and their teachers) can't keep up with this curriculum “predetermined” by what's on the tests! What's the solution? Too often it's this: Hey, let's add to the pressure! Let's slap a pacing guide on students and teachers. Let's create a rigid schedule of when and how to teach each chunk of content! That's

how we'll force these teachers to force their kids to cram this stuff into their brains!

Yet, are those pacing guides aligned to other subjects so that students can see the sense and use of the content they learn...so that they can integrate it into their lives with those "deep understandings" we all say we revere? Have we connected the science, language arts, and math curricula to the social studies content so that teachers can parallel teach topics—helping students sustain understandings and not compartmentalize what they have learned? Are we communicating within departments, across departments, on core teams and school-wide teams about this?

In many cases, the answer is, "No." Yet we all know that students need to see connections in the curriculum in order to make the content relevant. (We learned this in Education 101, didn't we?) Once again, the frenzy to get ready for assessment trumps connected curriculum; the result is that our students leave math at the math classroom door (and the same with all other subjects).

It was no surprise when a teacher told me, "Samantha can give the factual answers about water conservation and climate control in science class, but she has no idea how that information connects to her own house or living environments around the world—let alone to broad environmental or social issues." Sure, we can blame some of this on the teacher, but it's also a major result of the school not having connections across subjects and grades to foster relevant learning. A single teacher, even the sharpest and most creative, cannot do this alone.

## Breaking Down the Walls

Without the cross-subject communication and alignment, we have created what I call "subject bunkers." It occurs at the state and district levels where subject area gurus focus only on their own content. We even hire reading, math, and literacy coaches to help with individualized subjects. This increases the bunker mentality. To solidify this, we base most curriculum discussions and decisions within departments.

Okay, so the social studies teachers know about students' achievement successes and struggles in social studies. But why shouldn't **all** the teachers know about the students' needs in **all** subject areas? Maybe, just maybe, achievement and scores would go up if all teachers within the building knew that students struggle with fractions and measurement or statistics. Perhaps, PE teachers could then incorporate work with fractions and measurement into their activities or could

help students collect, analyze, and display data about their sports performances!

But, wait! Wait! That would mean we might need to blow up a bunker and break down those cement walls around departments!

Educators can do this! We are clever and wise enough to make such content and curriculum connections. What we need is the belief that it's necessary—that it **will** make a difference in our students' success. And we need the time to work outside the bunkers. Here are three easy ways to start to break down the barriers:

First, stop setting **yearly learning goals**. These are created to appease the school and district hierarchy. How often are those yearly goals discussed once they are created at the beginning of the year?

Next, work on core teams of teachers (not department teams) to set **10-day educational goals** based on student deficiencies. The data and information can be supplied by subject-area departments. The team decides what concepts and skills will be interwoven throughout all the subjects within the team. This allows all core teachers in the building to help improve student achievement and success. Plus, it keeps everyone focused on the learning goals of their own students.

Finally, have the **essentials teachers** (This is my nomenclature, as self-appointed Ruler of Education, for those absolutely essential colleagues sometimes called **electives teachers**) also create **10-day learning goals** for students, based on data and knowledge of student deficiencies. This helps students see the connections outside the core subjects and further contributes to the demise of curriculum bunkers. Again, data can be supplied by the departments; but understand that these teachers also observe student needs. Allow for the essentials teachers to pick the focus over the 10 days.

We have been inundated with enough student achievement data that at any moment any one of us could burp up a binder filled with scores, assessment results, and academic trends. But are we actually using those data to make any difference? Presenting these data to the staff at a once-a-year meeting has this effect only (from what I have seen): It bores the staff and leads to mass tune-out, as proven by the glazed eyes and fingers busy texting. But these simple steps that use real data instantly and constantly to make relevant connections **right now** actually do make a difference.

Empowering grade-level teams and core teams to tackle content and connect curriculum is a much-needed win for our students. And you know what? When learning experiences are relevant, connected, and inviting—students engage! They want to learn! And a

side benefit of that is that kids do way better on those assessments that used to control your life.

I don't advocate a change to: "Curriculum should trump assessment." That's not the answer, either. Well-planned curriculum connections and assessment are powerful partners. Schools must find ways to integrate the two, working together across grade levels and subject areas to set and implement learning goals relevant to students' academic needs. **AM**

**JACK BERCKEMEYER** is an author, humorist, and speaker with Berckemeyer Consulting Group. He will be a presenter at AMLE2014.

✉ [jberckemeyer@yahoo.com](mailto:jberckemeyer@yahoo.com)

🔍 [www.jackberckemeyer.com](http://www.jackberckemeyer.com)

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Harrison M.



Amanda N.