

TESTS

WHAT YOU VALUE

Eight suggestions for good testing in Christian schools.

by Daniel R. Vander Ark

TESTING HAS BEEN A MINEFIELD OVER THE PAST decade. You can't read a professional journal without tripping over "authentic assessment," "rubrics," and "student portfolios." States and provinces have issued curriculum standards and tests to match. Multiple choice, true/false, and fill-in-the-blanks are out; student projects, free writing, and problem-solving are in. Rubrics are graded with numbers (4, 3, 2, and 1) while A, B, C, and D—seemingly their equivalents—are out of favor. Some schools advocate paying teachers on the basis of their students' performances on tests. Meanwhile, a critic like Alfie Kohn in *Punished by Rewards* claims that gold stars and honor rolls hurt children by killing their intrinsic motivation to learn.

Knowing all of this, teachers in Christian schools must ask what to test. In testing whether students in your classroom are making progress toward the mission of the school, consider the following suggestions.

1. MEASURE WHAT STUDENTS KNOW

Of course, you say; that's what every teacher does. Not always. Some teachers take secret delight in finding out what students don't know. Some teachers compose multiple choice questions in which three of the four possible answers are extremely close in meaning. Others compose essay questions that are so complex that they violate the Bible's prohibition against frustrating children given to fathers in Ephesians 6:4.

Before creating any test, ask: What testing instrument can I use to allow the largest number of students to show what they have learned? Have high expectations for students. Create rig-

orous and demanding test questions and projects, but try to measure what students know rather than what they don't know. Any given question could seem like a curve ball to one student and a straight and true fastball to the next. Your job is to judge your own motives for asking the question. Your students' responsibility is to answer it as best they can.

2. TEST WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT

Some students like details on tests because good cramming assures them an A. Spelling lists were like that for me. I memorized 20 words, did a pilot test with my parents or peers outside of class, and then took the test, basking in the glow of knowing that I "did 'em right." You may be tempted to test trivia because it's easy to grade, you can make minute distinctions with percentages, and no student can question your marking. When you ask "In which year did humans first walk on the moon?" the answer is "1969." It's not a matter of opinion.

You may say that you and your colleagues value everything on the curriculum map equally. I doubt it. Some things are more important than others. You expect that when your students are 35, they will have forgotten some things but still be practicing others. By stating its mission and goals, your school has clearly identified certain things as important and others—which are unnamed—as less important. A good test, then, should measure most what you value most and measure least what you value least. This doesn't mean that you should avoid testing what some observers might call minutiae. For example, knowing exact definitions for key words in math, science, and history is valuable. Detail is worthy in any discipline.

But how do you measure what you value the most? Before you teach any unit, state what is most important for students to know, do, and appreciate. During class time, focus on the

unit's highlights, spending more time on valuable things than on trivial ones. Students pick up clues about what is likely to be on the test by the emphasis you place on certain concepts in the classroom. Before a test, tell students what the test will focus on. Construct tests that give students the opportunity to express what you have taught as valuable. When you mark the test, give the most points to the valuable things and the least to the trivial things.

3. ASSUME THAT STUDENTS WILL INFER YOUR VALUES FROM YOUR TESTS

I once heard a graduate student say, "It's frustrating to prepare for a first exam when you don't know what the professor thinks is important." It's no different for a first grader who is hoping for a smiley face or a sticker; the difference is that the first grader can't express it in words. You may think that your words in class, your pat on the back, or your manner of teaching counts the most to students. They do care about these encouragements, but they also think that what matters the most to you is what's on the test. If you preach principles and test details, students will think that you value details. Tests are that important in teaching.

If you want students to value most the school's mission and its goals, include questions that reflect the mission and goals. For example, one goal at a Christian high school was for students "to distinguish Christlike values from the world's values." A final exam question was, "Compare hedonism, humanism, and 'Seek first the kingdom of God' (Matthew 6:33). Give clear examples to show differences." A middle school goal was for students "to see God's hand in the unfolding of history." A test question asked, "What conditions in the Roman Empire helped the spread of Christianity?" An early elementary school goal was for students "to investigate the beauty,

order, intricacy, and variety in God's world." A test question read, "Name five living things that God supplies water to."

4. REMEMBER THAT YOU GET WHAT YOU INSPECT, NOT WHAT YOU EXPECT

John Carver, who has written books on what it means to be a board member, thinks that boards ought to regularly inspect whether any organization is meeting its mission. He makes this point: "You get what you inspect, not expect." The statement also applies to students. If you expect neatness in writing but don't test for it (including penalties and rewards), only a few perfectionists will give you neatness.

You should inspect whether students are reaching the goals and objectives you have set for their good. If your curriculum map states that you expect students to serve others, students will serve others if you test whether students have done so and how well. If you expect students to do science experiments, do history, do art, and do mathematics, you need to inspect their doing of these things. If you expect students to apply biblical principles to the stuff of living, you must inspect how well they do it.

Of course, this assessment must follow your teaching of the concept or skill. It is unfair—and exasperating—to students if you inspect something that you haven't taught them. John Carver also states this point well: "If you haven't said how it ought to be, don't ask how it is." Tell students what you expect, follow that with teaching, and then inspect the results. Inspect everything you expect.

5. HAVE CONFIDENCE IN YOUR JUDGMENT

Teachers at every level mistrust their judgment of students' progress. When they doubt, they head for details, like Linus to his blanket. Consider this sequence of events. Two students stand in

front of you. Katie, who got the lower mark on her artwork, whines that her painting is as good as Robert's. Katie points out similarities and asks, "Why did Robert get a better grade than me when mine is just as good?" Your grading esteem starts to sink. Two days later another student shows you his project and its "bad grade," complaining that "My mom says you aren't fair sometimes." Your grading esteem sinks lower. You make the next "test" more specific and easier to grade so that no one will be at your desk arguing about a grade. Essays and projects go out; true/false and fill-in-the-blank tests take their place.

Carver says that "a crude measure of the right thing beats a precise measure of the wrong thing." Christian school teachers don't measure the wrong thing as much as they measure less important things.

Dare to measure what you think is most valuable, something that illustrates a goal or mission of your school, even if your judgment of the students' response may be flawed. Stand up for that judgment. You have been hired to make these careful and educated judgments.

6. GIVE STUDENTS MULTIPLE MEANS OF SHOWING WHAT THEY KNOW

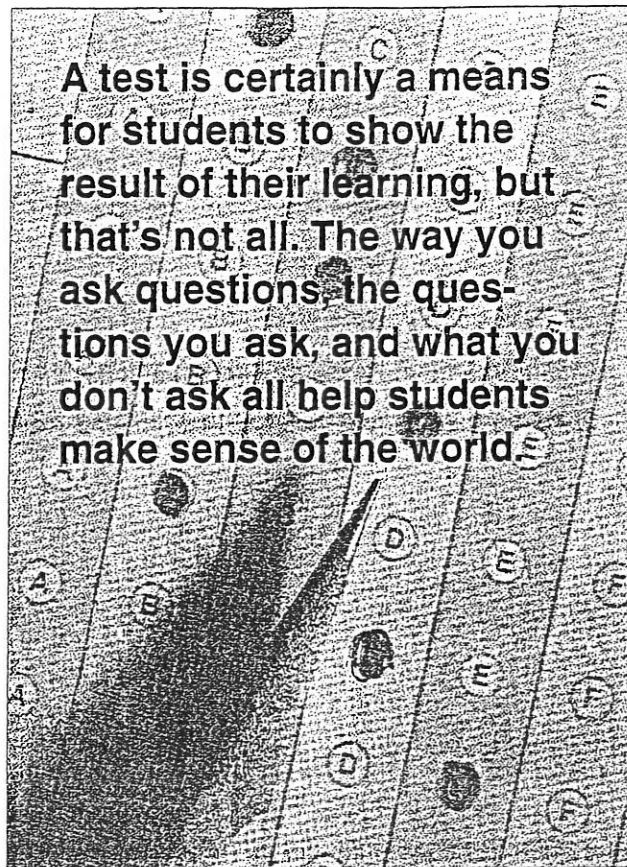
Most teachers think that the word *test* means to have students individually recount in writing, without assistance, what teachers have told them that they need to know about a short unit of study. Critics claim that this kind of test majors in nitpicking details and is used by teachers who love to sort students and label them as superior or inferior. That's an unfair charge for those of you who hold high expectations for your students in the accumulation of knowledge (not only facts, but also principles and their application). A conventional group test does hold students accountable for mastering concepts and broad

skills of recall, analysis, synthesis, and application. But there are other means of measurement: portfolios, projects, performances, and exhibitions. You may also give "credit" for teamwork, homework, seat work, workbooks, and even punctuality.

Perhaps the best test of your school's mission is a culminating project for all students at the end of each stage of schooling: elementary, middle, and high school. A true exhibition is seen by a broader audience, especially the most caring audience of all—the students' parents and grandparents. The best exhibitions are those that show a student's ability to draw from knowledge of a variety of disciplines to make a point through multimedia. Science, history, art, and writing fairs catch the idea best, using principles that students learned in a classroom. Concerts, contests, and drama display the learning of a group of students; fairs show the work of individuals or smaller teams.

The best projects or exhibitions illustrate the principles of faith that inform your curriculum. A casual observer watching 20 exhibitions ought to come away with the distinct impression that Christ pervades the thinking of the students in your school. Teachers ought to test their own teaching by examining the themes that the exhibitions reflect. If teachers have persistently taught the school's mission and goals, students will exhibit their achievement of these goals just as surely as they will perform well on the Iowa Basics, the SAT, or the provincial exams.

Projects or exhibitions allow each student to use his or her unique talents to display intersections of faith and life especially to parents, the ones primarily



responsible for their child's nurture. Parents are the ones who pay dearly for the mind and spirit formation that your Christian school promises to give. They are the ones who need to see how well God is shaping their children through you and your colleagues.

7. TEACH STUDENTS THROUGH THE TEST

A test is certainly a means for students to show the result of their learning, but that's not all it is; it is also a way to teach. The way you ask questions, the questions you ask, and what you don't ask all help students make sense of the world.

For example, in a grade one science lesson about water the objective was to name who created lakes and other sources of water. As a class, the students went to a stream and named living things in the water. They read Genesis 1:9, 20 and Isaiah 43:20 and drew pic-

tures of the Bible's descriptions of water. The test question continued to teach the intersection of biblical principle and nature: "Name five living things that God supplies water to." This test helped register in children's minds that God made the things they had observed in his creation. It taught the truth, a key thread in a Christian education. Good tests teach while they show what students have learned.

8. TEACH TOWARD THE TEST

Your teaching will be truly centered on your school's goals if you write the test before you teach the unit. First set down the objectives for your unit, then write the test or exhibition that you will use to measure how well students have met the objectives, and

then find the strategies to get the most students to pass the test. This will concentrate your teaching best to carry out your curriculum for the good of God's children.

TESTING IS MORE THAN JUST A way to figure out what grades belong on whose report cards. When you stop and think about it, testing may actually be one of the most important things that you as a Christian teacher can do. It's one more way that you can advance the mission and goals of your school. ♦

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