

Since December 2009 I have been serving as an educator in Ohio and have had the opportunity to work with a variety of students and educators. I have been a substitute teacher, an AP Government teacher, a coach, a club adviser, and an online charter school teacher for at risk students of Ohio. Furthermore, I am a 2005 graduate of Avon Lake High School, my current employer. Over the last 15 years, Ohio has pursued education policy reform that tries to set a higher graduation standard, improve teacher accountability, and promote college and career readiness. One of the most significant effects of the pursuit of these goals is a new era of standardized testing in Ohio. While these goals must remain important priorities in education, the standardized testing has negatively affected the overall curriculum, does not provide reliable data, and promotes a “one size fits all approach” to learning when an infinite number of variables exist.

The negative impact on curriculum as a result of testing mandates has become more apparent each school year in my district. The Avon Lake City School District offers a number of AP courses which require students to take an end of course exam in order to achieve their college credit. However, testing constraints in the 4th quarter of the 2018-2019 school year, forced Avon Lake High School to have four consecutive weeks of shortened or eliminated class periods. Plus, in the 2018-2019 school year I was forced to cut lessons on military/foreign policy, environmental policy, social welfare policy, and immigration due to testing. Instead of allowing AP students to finalize preparations for AP tests that align with their future goals and plans, these students are left using valuable time toward the completion of OSTs. For example, during the last three school years, my students have completed part one of the government OST on one day, part two of the government OST on the next day, and then took the course AP test on the third day.

The purpose of Ohio’s current standardized tests has been to ensure that important pieces of the curriculum are being taught in high school. However, it is reinventing the wheel. As a high school student and educator prior to the current OSTs, I have the first hand experience to confirm that topics such as the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence were being taught with greater depth and creativity than before OSTs came into existence. Graduation requirements were set up by the state and enforced by districts in a way that was best suited to meet the needs of Avon Lake’s student population. Now, with the current OSTs, teachers have no choice but to narrow the curriculum in the weeks leading up to state testing because a teacher’s formal job performance evaluation is tied to test results. Making matters worse, the AP Government curriculum does not fully align with the tested topics of the government OST. Therefore, for the past three school years I have been presented with a choice each spring; continue teaching the curriculum of the AP Government course to best prepare my students for the AP test or focus on the OST in order to obtain the best possible rating on my job performance evaluation.

Current educational research has also exposed significant problems with linking the results of one test to the abilities of a student, the effectiveness of a teacher, and the success of a school district. Some examples of variables that have impacted a student’s performance

on a test that I have experienced in my career include lack of sleep or food, death of a family member, the arrest of a family member, victim of bullying, testing anxiety, and the recent ending of a long relationship, just to name a few circumstances. Several years ago one of my most accomplished students faced minor adversity on the day of her course AP test and she fell just short of passing and earning college credit. She is currently a highly accomplished student at Harvard University.

Furthermore, under current mandates educators and districts have greater incentive to manipulate data or “play the system” out of a basic survival instinct. Teachers throughout Avon Lake High School that are the most respected by our community, students, and administrators, face data discrepancies because they teach high achieving students making OST growth hard to measure or they have chosen to sacrifice “teaching to the test” for a reason such as preparing for AP tests or a deeper curriculum. The minority of teachers that are teaching for the wrong reasons tend to be the best at gaming this system by utilizing memorization activities on a narrow set of topics for a few weeks prior to the OST. My personal experience showed that prior to the implementation of utilizing OST data my teacher evaluations reported a “5” or “highly effective” teacher. In the most recent three years of OST data my teacher evaluations report a “1” or “completely ineffective” teacher. These dramatic shifts on this scale and lack of evidence in the middle is proof of flaws.

In a time of education where we are attempting to promote critical thinking, problem solving skills, and college or career readiness the current mandates have only encouraged a one size fits all approach that teaches no skills that translate to real world experiences. For academically gifted students I have worked with in my career, the tests are far too easy and serve only as a hoop to jump through. For the impoverished students the tests have brought a great deal of anxiety and do not measure true knowledge because the student has had limited life experience with the technology and formatting of the current OSTs. For the average students the tests measure how well that student has memorized very precise information from the previous few weeks and not any real comprehension or critical thinking skills.

Overall, these ripple effects of the current OST mandates in Ohio are only the tip of the iceberg as far as obstacles to quality education that are faced by school districts across the state. The feedback I receive from colleagues, students, families of students, and community members over Ohio’s current path is overwhelmingly negative. They feel Ohio is going in the wrong direction. Please speak and hear how your decisions are impacting students and educators. Thank you for your time and consideration on this topic.

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