

Today started testing time at Lafayette. The current flavor of the week is called the DC-CAS (Comprehensive Assessment System). Previously we took the SAT-9. Next year we will be using the new test based on the Common Core Standards called the PARCC (the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers). It seems about every five years a new test is rolled out. Maybe the next one will be called WTTtD (We Tested Them to Death).

Grades 2-5 are being tested this week in reading and math. Two mornings are set aside for each curriculum area. Almost all of our students finish the day's testing sections before lunch. But a few need extra time so they'll continue on into the afternoon. The following week the 4th grade takes a composition test while the 5th grade takes two more, one in science and one in health. And then we are done with testing for a little while.

That is not all the testing we do at Lafayette. We took PIA's (Planned Interim Assessments) four times already this year and may be taking one more in June. These tests are supposed to evaluate how well teachers taught specific skills and content during specific periods of time this school year. Three times a year we give a quick computer screening in reading and math called the STAR tests. We have been doing this for about 8 years now and have some good long term information on students at Lafayette. Of course there are various chapter tests and unit tests and short quizzes. We seem to take a lot of tests at Lafayette.

We seem to be testing a lot but in comparison to many other DCPS schools we are real slackers. I go to meetings and hear about DIBELs (Dynamic Indicators of Beginning Early Literacy) results and a whole slew of tests done through Wireless Generation that are given at other DC schools. We don't do any of those. I hear lots about test preparation time and activities. I can't imagine some of the pressure this time of year brings at other schools that are desperately trying to raise achievement. I know that the students at Lafayette will do well again this year. We seem to be floating in the River of High Scores. A few percentage points up, a few down. That is pretty much the story from year to year.

But I really don't mind some of the time we take for testing. Years ago I was taught to always triangulate your data. Never trust just one point, one test, one experience. Always try to have at least three. So taking tests at Lafayette is a way for me to triangulate my data. The DC-CAS gives me one score in reading and math. Having the composition, science and health tests give me some more. All of these should be somewhat aligned. It is hard to have great composition scores if students have challenges in reading. The science test really is just a reading test using science information as the source of the selections. So these should all be somewhat in alignment. My PIA scores should also be moving in the right direction during the year. STAR reading and math give us grade level performance on a nationally normed test. If your child is on grade level in these two areas on the STAR test, the likelihood is pretty strong that the DC-CAS scores will come back at least in the proficient range. We have 8 years of data that supports this conclusion. And in June the math teachers from Deal Middle School will come and give our 5th grade students their math placement test. A large number of Lafayette students will be placed in the advanced math classes after that test. Those students will also have done well on the DC-CAS. Another data point.

So while I wish that all the current fixation of testing would at least recede a little, I do believe some testing is valuable, especially if it confirms what you think you know about your students and is verified by multiple measures. But when I read that we are getting our children to be college and career ready at the ripe old age of seven I am a little worried. There are so many college and career skills that cannot be measured by a standardized test. And at some point in your life testing performance becomes pretty meaningless. I remember taking the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. How I did, who knows. I have absolutely no idea what I scored on my SAT's. That number ceased defining me over 40 years ago. Can a number measure leadership, empathy, caring? Can a number measure the ability to work with others, being respectful, tolerance? Can a test measure creativity, perseverance, or courage? Maybe. I haven't checked into all the tests that have been created. I hear there is one out there for creativity. But I know that the children of Lafayette should never be just a test score. They are just too imaginative. One teacher last week gave a math worksheet out in her kindergarten class. Mrs. Jeter ate 6 lollipops and then ate 5 more. What is the answer? There on the page was the answer 11. But right below the 11, the student wrote, "and she got a big tummy ache". What a great answer. Scorable, maybe not. But how true. That Lafayette student will go far someday no matter what test scores say. I hear that the ability to think out of the box is a 21st century career skill. What a wonderful out of the box thinker this little K student already is!