



Bill Ferriter is a 6th-grade social studies and language arts teacher at Salem Middle School, Apex, N.C.

Her question blew me away

One of the defining moments in my career came when I was teaching a remarkable group of 5th graders — the kind of class that teachers dream of. Discipline was a non-issue because my kids cared about learning and admired me. The connections were undeniable — and resulted in unparalleled learning.

I grew particularly close to a boy named Mark, who had also been my student as a 3rd grader. Mark was an athletic boy — a custom fit for a teacher like me. The personal connection we shared translated into incredible academic success. Towards the end of the year, Mark's mom asked for a conference. "I want to review where he stands so that I can keep him moving forward," she said. "After all, he's not going to have Mr. Ferriter anymore!"

Together, we remembered two years worth of shared experiences and student growth. I spent nearly 40 minutes highlighting Mark's strengths in reading and writing — an area where he had made great strides. I'd seen him learn to add voice to his work and to structure pieces logically. He'd mastered punctuation and was beginning to experiment with compound and complex sentences. When he read, he could make connections and ask questions that reflected a deep understanding of text. Books were never far from the corner of his desk, and stories were never far from his mind.

Near the end of our conversation, Mark's mom blew me away by asking, "That's all great, Mr. Ferriter, but what does the end-of-grade test say?"

I was instantly hurt because her question cheapened the countless hours I had invested into her child. My expertise had been set aside in favor of the results of a single multiple choice exam. Not wanting to ruin a rewarding relationship, I pulled out Mark's scores and reviewed them with her carefully.

She left satisfied, knowing that her child was making extraordinary strides — and I was left to wonder about the role that testing should play in defining student success.

You see, what Mark's mom didn't know was that the standardized test only covered a narrow

slice of the required curriculum. What she also didn't realize was that unpredictable patterns of physiological development often resulted in wild performance swings on standardized tests from year to year.

She probably didn't know that four points represented average growth on an exam whose standard measurement error was three points. She also wouldn't have known that students given the chance to take the test again often saw changes in their scores

of between 6 and 12 points — calling

into question the scores of children tested only once.

But in the end, that score was what mattered to Mark's mom. To her, it was the most reliable indicator of performance.

As a career educator, that left me to wonder how we'd gotten to the point where the judgment of classroom teachers is less valuable than standardized test scores. More importantly, it left me to wonder how we can ever earn professional credibility back again. ♦



Testing cannot be the end-all.

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