

Enough with tests, teams;

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our values are wrong

PETER RELIC

As parents, let's resolve to keep our anxieties to ourselves and work on teaching our children the joys of living, learning and playing.

In fairy tales in olden times, children were boiled in big witches' cauldrons. In modern America, of course, we are much more sophisticated, we have changed our techniques. We put our little ones in pressure cookers.

Adults in the United States have crossed the lines that should mark the boundaries of childhood so many times and in so many ways that it has become downright frightening. That our children are confused and acting out in ways ranging from mildly irritating to shockingly violent should not surprise us.

Imagine yourself asked these questions:

"What are the SAT scores of the children you have taught?"

"What is your record of placement in Ivy League universities?"

Mind you, you are not a high school teacher or a college counselor. You are a kindergarten — yes, kindergarten — teacher. And when you attempt to turn the conversation to creativity and teamwork, to discipline, the foundation of learning and social responsibility, the parents lecture you on the realities of a competitive economic world and the high test

scores of Japanese 5-year-olds. Parents' overzealous and ill-timed concerns are not lost on the children, no matter how young. That kind of anxiety is contagious.

State legislators and members of the U.S. Congress also cross the line with vitriolic rhetoric inappropriately deployed in the education debate. Teachers are described as lazy, children labeled pathetic underachievers doomed to failure in life. Only 10 years ago there was hope that the nation's standards and assessment movement was committed to quality and concerned with real reform in education. But sadly, testing has taken on a life of its own.

The purpose of most state-sponsored tests is political. The political objective? Either (a) look good with astronomically high scores even if it means abandoning mean-

ingful curriculum to teach to the test or (b) demonstrate that schools are failing and punish teachers and children. In Ohio (an Objective A state) many schools report a 100 percent student pass rate on the state proficiency tests by cramming and teaching to the test. In Virginia (an Objective B state) more than 90 percent of the students fail the state examinations. Some brave young people and teachers are rising up: in Massachusetts students have boycotted tests, and in Texas there are court cases challenging the fairness of the exams.

What greater evidence do we need that the system is out of whack than the appalling but not surprising news that New York City teachers and principals either encouraged their elementary students to cheat or cheated for them on standardized reading and math

tests? Shame on them. Shame on us as a society for allowing things to deteriorate to such a point that desperate educators are teaching the lesson that "it's OK if you don't get caught; honesty is for losers."

Let us listen to the wise counsel of Nicholas Lemann, author of "The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy." "The obsession with testing measures chiefly one virtue: the ability to take standardized tests, not wisdom or originality or humor or toughness or empathy or common sense or independence or determination — let alone moral worth." Vito Perrone, director of teacher education programs at Harvard, is also critical, advising us that the assessment movement "is more about standardization than standards, and the great danger, given all the state mandates, is that the richness of classroom dynamics will be narrowed and stunted."

Of course in the area of sports, the trilateral conspiracy of parents, the media, and state athletic associations has come together to obliterate any line between physical education for children and the adult American

obsession with sports. Mothers and fathers on the sidelines are regularly yellow-carded for screaming at their offspring, who are just toddling around on a soccer field. Elite elementary school teams actually travel out of state to compete. Some high school boys will wrestle in 50 matches this season. Some high school girls will swim competitively year-round with no break. Some high school football teams played 14 games this past season. The adults rationalize these decisions saying the pros play that many games and more.

There are other telltale signs that it is time to come to grips with our fixation on being "world-class" in everything. Did you know that one of the strategies for winning the World Cup in soccer by 2010 is to persuade as many outstanding high school athletes as possible not to go to college but to train? Did you realize that at Wake Forest the athletic department and alumni boosters are trying to figure out how soon they can sign a ninth-grade quarterback in a Charlotte school to a letter of intent to become a Demon Deacon? Even as former Northwestern football players are convicted of

shaving points, some newspapers continue to publish the point spreads — a euphemism for betting odds — not only of pro and college teams but also of high school games.

In our kindergarten classrooms, in the legislatures and on our athletic fields, it's time for an attitude adjustment. Let's get our children out of the pressure cookers we have created for them. As parents, let's resolve to keep our anxieties to ourselves and work on teaching our children the joys of living, learning and playing. Let's refocus the education debate about standards by connecting testing to the curriculum and emphasizing schools' accountability to parents for quality performance.

Let's find ways to reinforce the concept that coaches are first and foremost teachers and that we invest in physical education not only to develop our children's skills but also to build character and to foster sportsmanship and teamwork.

Together, we can do it.

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