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WEST PORT

GRADING **COMMON CORE'S EFFECTIVENESS** IN TODAY'S CURRICULUM

BY JILL JOHNSON

If you are a parent of a school-age child, no doubt by now you have heard of the Common Core. You may be vaguely aware of what it is or you may have spent the past year reading a tome's worth of articles on the topic. Either way, it still may be hard to say what it all means to education in Westport. Here, with insight from local educators, politicians and parents, we delve into the subject of the Common Core and the new Common Core-aligned SBAC tests.

### COMMON CORE 101

For those in the "vaguely aware" category, the national educational initiative known officially as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) introduced a set of academic standards to be used across the United States.

Proponents argue that students are not coming out of U.S. schools career- and college-ready and that we need uniform, higher standards and better standardized tests that hold schools and teachers accountable. Opponents argue that the standards were drafted too hastily, primarily by representatives from the testing industry, not educators; are not research-based or developmentally appropriate; and that states were strong-armed into adopting them in order to receive education grants and No Child Left Behind waivers. Likewise,

the SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) tests have been commended as better than previous standardized tests by some and criticized by others as confusing, too time consuming, and not providing any meaningful information to teachers, nor being a fair assessment of how they are doing their jobs.

In Westport, where our schools are among the top in the state, it's questionable whether we needed any educational reform to begin with. But with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into the rollout of the Common Core (and donating to teachers' unions, the PTA, chambers of commerce, colleges and so forth), and the state spending roughly \$38 million on it in 2014-15, the Common Core has become a juggernaut.

## PROJECTED COMMON CORE SBAC RESULTS FOR 6TH-GRADERS ACROSS THE U.S.

English/Language Arts 6th Grade

Percent failing  
to reach goal

All 6th-Graders

**60% Fail Rate**

African American 6th-Graders

**75% Fail Rate**

Latino 6th-Graders

**74% Fail Rate**

6th-Graders (Special Education)

**90% Fail Rate**

6th-Graders (English Language Learners)

**95% Fail Rate**

### THE SBAC TESTS

"One of the big objections to the Common Core is the sheer amount of testing and the pressure it creates," says local State Representative Gail Laveille. "The testing is used to evaluate how well schools and teachers are performing. The SBAC test is not designed to evaluate individual students and help them learn."

Anne Fernandez, an English teacher at Staples, interviewed teachers across the United States for the book she recently cowrote, *Schooled: Ordinary, Extraordinary Teaching in an Age of Change*. She heard complaints that "students were being assessed in narrow, standardized ways that...failed to acknowledge their different talents and strengths, much less their different paces and ways of learning."

Thomas Scarice, Madison superintendent and a leading voice against high-stakes test-based reform, recently issued a stark warning in Valerie Strauss's education blog in the *Washington Post*: History has taught us that no matter what the sector, "as the stakes rise, so do occurrences of corruption and distortion." If teachers' jobs depend upon test scores, he says the inevitable result will be more teaching to the test, cheating scandals and a decline in the quality of education.

Jack Bestor, a Long Lots psychologist who just retired after forty years in the district, comments: "The big problem I have with the SBACs is that they have been designed for kids not to be successful. I personally think they have been designed that way in order to maintain the narrative that our schools are failing and our teachers are terrible. Westport is not going to do as poorly as the inner city, where 90 percent might fail, but if even 30 percent fail in this town, people will be angry. Hopefully, they will begin to speak up."

Some parents have voiced their concerns at Board of Education meetings: test ques-

*Note:* Some names that appear in this article have been changed.

tions so poorly constructed even teachers can't answer them; a lack of transparency on what personal data is collected on test takers and how that data and scores will be used; and the muffling of teachers' voices in the whole process.

Some students sat out the SBACs this past spring, including a whopping half of the junior class at Staples. While stern emails from the administration advised that students could not "opt out," parents have the right to refuse that their children take the test—just as they could with the CMTs. In Westport, those refusals do not affect funding or school ranking. Board of Ed Chairman Michael Gordon comments: "While we believe there are benefits to testing and encourage all families to participate, we respect the right of any family that chooses not to have a child participate."

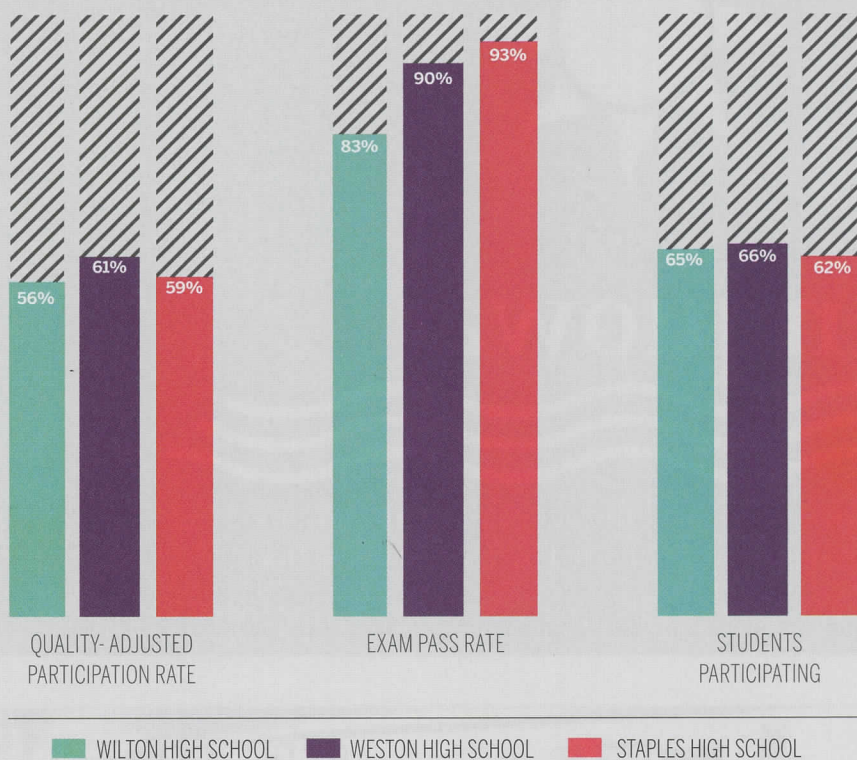
Missy Manna, a Westport parent and preschool teacher, says, "My fifth-grader took them to follow the 'rules,' but said they were long and felt bad for other kids because it was hard." (Test time totaled about twelve hours, over a period of nine days, in grades three to five.) Manna continues, "My sixth grader did not take them. He carries a ton of anxiety to perform well, so I knew the tests would be torture. He was proud of becoming a teen activist and this led us to discussing education in towns everywhere. We spoke about poverty and who makes money from these tests."

Bestor, the psychologist, laments, "All the money that has been passed through to Pearson and McGraw Hill—imagine if it had been put to good use." From massive data collection to tying scores to teacher evaluations, he says, "It's all pretty atrocious." In one of several of his anti-Common Core op-eds published in the *CT Mirror*, Bestor asks: "Would you like your potential employer to access your late-developing reading profile or your test profile during your unmotivated adolescent years?"

Bestor notes that kids' anxiety levels were similar to what he saw with the CMTs,

## TO THE TEST

ARE LOCAL SCHOOLS REALLY FAILING STUDENTS AS SBAC RESULTS MAY SUGGEST? STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON AP EXAMS IN 2014



and half like the computerized format, half didn't. A third-grader had this to say, "I liked taking the SBAC tests. It was pretty fun, because some of the questions you didn't really know and that made you think harder."

A law recently passed in Connecticut that will alleviate pressure on the most disgruntled group: high school juniors. Gail Laveille explains, "It allows schools to use a college entrance examination like the SAT in place of the SBAC test in eleventh grade. For all grades, the bill acknowledges the need to look into whether testing is excessive or useful."

James D'Amico, Westport director of secondary education, says, "I think the rush at the federal and state levels to test students using SBAC has had a devastating effect on the potential of the CCSS to positively influence education in our state. We had to

administer these tests with very little or no information about what the resulting data would actually look like, how the program would work and with constantly changing instructions from the state and an insufficient piloting period."

D'Amico adds, "I think we are so fortunate to be in Westport, where we give very few standardized tests to our students. In many schools, including my children's, there are SBAC tests on top of NWEA or similar testing, on top of district-wide standardized tests. While the new tests are not perfect and have created some challenges for us, I am proud that our focus remains on maximizing instructional time where students interact with their teachers and classmates."

### THE COMMON CORE & CURRICULUM

"First and foremost, we teach children; we don't teach standards," states Julie Droller,



“THE PROGRESS REPORTS AND TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEM REQUIRE SO MUCH DATA COLLECTING. **A LOT OF TIME IS TAKEN AWAY FROM ACTUALLY TEACHING KIDS** AND PUT MORE ON ASSESSING THEM.” —A KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

Westport’s director of elementary education. “Rigor does not negate joy...good instructional practices—kids learn through play and by doing, constructing, talking, debating, grappling—are the teaching methods we use to help kids meet and exceed the Common Core standards.” It is unconstitutional for the federal government to dictate curriculum, so the standards are meant as guidelines and districts are adjusting curriculum to enable students to meet them. Droller says the biggest changes have been an increase in informational text (non-fiction), interactive read-alouds and other methods to improve comprehension, and a focus on problem-solving and perseverance in math.

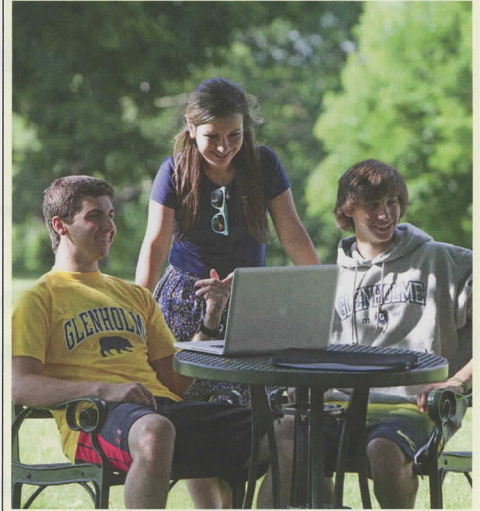
“I’ve seen a vast change in going from teaching rote reading skills to meaningful reading, and my students still read plenty of fiction,” comments Kim Phillips, a Westport kindergarten teacher. “The negative is how boxed in you are and the dramatic shift in the amount kindergarten kids need to know. They just are not ready. The district keeps raising the literacy level K kids should reach, and sight words have jumped from twenty to fifty. When I look at the standards, they don’t say the kids need to have a certain number of words. The Common Core is used as the reason for the change, as it has been for lengthening the kindergarten week and the new progress reports, which I feel don’t tell parents anything about the kids. The progress reports and the teacher evaluation system require so much data collecting. A lot of time is taken away from actually teaching kids and put more on assessing them.”

At the secondary level, James D’Amico says, “We have not made major changes to the curriculum. We have certainly emphasized the use of informational text in our English/language arts classes but have found that across subject areas we are, by and large, meeting the learning objectives of the standards.”

Some confusion stemmed from the initial plan to reduce high school language arts to 30 percent literature and increase informational text to 70 percent. “It was a relief to discover that the 30/70 rule was meant to cover students’ reading across all subjects by their senior year,” says English teacher Anne Fernandez. “I have found the handful of vocabulary standards to be positive; if followed, they lead to a focus on teaching and learning vocabulary in context versus the study of word lists.”

While many argue that CCSS advances critical thinking, Darcy Hicks, who taught at Kings Highway for nine years and has trained teachers, has concerns. “Critical thinking is dependent on the ability to imagine and empathize. When we ask children to analyze fiction and works of art, they step into the shoes of the writer, the characters, the artists, the paintings, the performers. This requires imagination, empathy and critical thinking. Unfortunately, these are the very things that have been pushed out of the Common Core and, consequently, our curriculum. Writing now is more formulaic, dry and impersonal than it was when students were writing from the heart, as imaginative, authentic children with worthwhile stories to tell. They need to love their topics or both reading and writing become a chore, not a lifelong skill.”

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# BURGERS & BAR flipside



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Julie Droller assures Westport is not sacrificing the creative side that some find lacking in the Common Core. “We are very fortunate to be in a district, and community, that values the arts, physical education, social skills—a commitment to educating the whole child,” she emphasizes. “Arts education is not something that we consider an add-on; it’s an integral part of our program and, actually, the thinking skills in the Common Core—analyzing craft and structure, considering authors’/artists’ perspective and stance—have always been a part of instruction in the arts.”

## COMMON CORE CAUTION

Kaitlyn Forester, a Staples grad who now teaches fourth grade in the South Bronx says, “I think overall it’s good to have a generalized set of standards, but a test doesn’t show the beauty of what happened in my classroom this year, so it’s sad.” Forester reminisces about her years at Staples: “I remember all the trips we took, the arts, the role-playing, making books, fancy projects. Will teachers in the future be afraid to spend time on these and worry that kids then won’t be prepared? I think having to express my knowledge in so many unique ways made me more prepared. Let kids be intrigued and engrossed by their learning.”

That goal will require creative thinking on the part of educators, vigilance on the part of the Board of Education, and awareness on the part of politicians and parents. Laveille says: “We just passed another bill, which allows any district to apply for a waiver for certain mandates if they have a proposal to do something differently. It can be in any educational area. It’s a really good, new development. All districts are different; if one has a good idea, they ought to be able to indulge it and share the results with other districts.”

D’Amico concludes, “I think a strength of the Westport Schools is that we can use the CCSS as a basis for our academic programs, but use our incredible human, financial and physical resources and community support to ensure that we offer a rich program that stretches beyond just the standards.”

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