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Education

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Why is standardized testing the lifeblood of education policy? We're failing our students.

I wonder if those who mandate tests then crush us with data know how school resources are allocated to subjects for which students will not be tested and administrators will not be judged.

Larry Strauss Opinion contributor

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Here comes another standardized testing season with all the administrator anxiety, teacher turmoil and student disaffection. So much of it that, at least in high schools, those mass assessments do as much to measure student alienation and boredom as academic ability.

Yet these instruments of stress and torture have been the lifeblood of educational policy, which is why their worst aspect is the inexplicable emphasis on just two subjects, sometimes at the expense of everything else.

I do not mean to question the importance of math or English (which is the subject I teach). Literacy – numerical and linguistic – are survival skills. Fluency and mastery are paths to professional success in many fields.

Yet how are science and history, government, economics, non-English languages and the arts not equally important to students' long-term success and well-being and to the well-being – and survival – of the human race?

Students need more learning, less testing

In an increasingly connected world, don't we want to ensure that our children can speak more than one language? We actually do a pretty decent job helping children from other countries learn English – for which they are regularly tested – but a shamefully inadequate job helping U.S.-born students to achieve fluency in other languages.

Thanks to a massive push to improve STEM in our schools, science education, despite not being universally tested, has received increasing support pretty much everywhere – but it hasn't been enough to prevent a large segment of our population from thinking that the Earth is flat, that science is a belief system and that climate change is liberal propaganda.

With democracy under attack and an epidemic of civic ignorance, deprioritizing social studies education is a perilous proposition.

And in the midst of a teenage mental health crisis, we would be wise to marshal our resources for arts education.

Maybe standardized tests aren't racist? Using the SAT, ACT in college admissions isn't 'racist.' What else has the left got wrong?

I wonder whether those who make education policy – who mandate these tests and then crush us with the data they produce – are aware of what happens in schools and how resources are allocated to subjects for which students will not be tested and administrators will not be judged.

“Data-driven” decision-making it's called – and is supposed to compel us to “data-driven” instruction. If teachers aren't at least a little subversive, such philosophy can drain the life out of teaching and learning and replace any vision a school might have with the simple and cynical goal of raising state test scores in math and English.

To be clear, many colleagues of mine – across the country – are doing spectacular work teaching science and social studies, foreign language and the arts (along with math and English) but they are often accomplishing this despite the grim cynicism of the data drive and the misguided focus on those two subjects.

Am I suggesting we ought to add more standardized tests to include every vital subject we try to teach? No.

We need less testing! We need to rethink our entire approach to measuring student learning and the effectiveness of teachers and schools. Let's take those measurements every day and let's do it in a way that doesn't obstruct us. We have the technology to do that.

In most schools, students submit their work through an internet platform. Let's have outside evaluators sample student work at random to measure progress. Take the science of political polling and apply it to evaluating students, teachers and schools. It will be imperfect but better than the current mess.

Test obsession ruins education: Standardized testing has sucked the life out of learning. Stop focusing on test scores.

We need to teach students how to learn, and to value learning

Evaluators can start with my classroom. Read what my students are writing. Look at all the ways in which my students demonstrate learning. Then let's have a conversation about it – not, as is now the practice, an accusation based on often inaccurate numbers.

How did we even get here: a system built around suspicion and mistrust in the ability or commitment of teachers and the administrators who are supposed to support them?

What do you need to get into college? How 'objective' assessments fail my students.

How about instead we begin with the premise that every student wants to learn – which is ultimately true, whether they can marshal any effort on a given day (or in a given year) – and that teachers want passionately to see our students succeed.

Take a real interest in what we are doing together in our classrooms. And, please, let's blow up the hierarchy of academic disciplines. No subject is more important than another.

Education is a continuum. And learning is contagious.

We can't teach our students everything they will need to know. Even so, if we teach them how to learn, and teach them to love learning, value knowledge and aspire to be clear and deep thinkers – who can read and listen with an open mind and heart and just enough skepticism to demand and detect reliable and verifiable evidence – then they might have a realistic hope of personal success and collective survival.

Despite the hideous mess we've created for them.

Larry Strauss, a high school English teacher in South Los Angeles since 1992, is the author of more than a dozen books, including "Students First and Other Lies: Straight Talk From a Veteran Teacher" and his new novel, "Light Man." Follow him on

Twitter: @LarryStrauss