

## **Controversial Issues**

### **Standardized Testing at Brasswood Elementary School**

*Please read the following case study and review the instructions at the end of this document on how to compose your response.*

1. Brasswood Elementary School has just completed the practice run-through of the upcoming state achievement test and teachers have received a printout of the school's performance by grade level in their faculty mailboxes before the start of the day. It is the end of the day, and teachers are making their way to the faculty meeting that has been called for the express purpose of discussing the school's dismal results on the test.
2. As the last of the teachers find an empty seat, the assistant principal, Ms. Lui, begins to address the faculty. "Well, ladies and gents, I am sure you all know why we need to meet today. I have already spoken to many of you and I am aware that most of us are clearly stunned by the rather disheartening results from the practice tests. I know we are all in this together and need to figure out how to remedy this situation as best as we can before the real tests start in just a few months. I hope I don't need to remind anyone just how important these test scores are for the school's image with both parents and the community. Don't get me started on the implications for district attention if we receive failing scores after our rather dismal performance last year! Unfortunately, I don't have the answers here. I want to immediately turn the floor over to open discussion. What are the big factors influencing such poor score? More important, what can we do differently? How can we better prepare our students?"
3. Penelope Johnson, a third-grade teacher, immediately jumps on Ms. Lui's first question, "Ms. Lui, now I know you and I have spoken of this before, but I feel I should bring it up for the entire faculty. A real problem that is factoring into many of my students' grades has little to do with achievement and a great deal to do with the fact that their first language is not English. For instance, I have one student who excels in science and mathematics, but he is having difficulty understanding the questions on the test. This raises a real issue as to the validity of these test results. His scores are less a reflection of achievement than a reflection of his hang-up with the English language; with the great population of immigration and migrant families in the area, I am sure I am not the only teacher here faced with this contradiction."
4. Ms. Lui nods her head in acknowledgement of Penelope's statements, "Penelope raises a very important issue with our ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students. Last year we also had a serious issue with our African American and Latino students scoring lower than the median score. After using the state's revised version of the test, I am happy to say that we have seen a real narrowing in the gap between our different student populations. However, the gap is still there and, unfortunately, the pleas of many administrators across the district have gone unheard in reference to the consideration of performance and portfolio-type assessments to complement these more traditional types of assessments. The spirit of the standardized test is that all the questions are exactly the same and score the same; however, our students are not the same

and are a diverse group. How do we account for how much standardized tests favor one group over another? How can we make sure the test is really reporting what students really know?”

5. Another teacher, Bruce Williams, immediately picks up where Ms. Lui leaves off. “I agree. This happens every year, and it is quite upsetting for parents. Every year I have many parents who are visibly upset by these tests. They want to set up conferences to discuss these tests and what the options are for their children. However, recent legislation has focused national attention on these tests and there is so much pressure on students, parents—and us! Parents and administration will think we are poor teachers if our students do not perform at the top.” Penelope questions, “now if you don’t mind my asking, Bruce, what do you tell these parents when they ask what they can do at home to help their children perform better on these tests?” Penelope continues, “I have given some worksheets to parents who are interested, but other than those meager resources the only advice I know to pass along is that staple we all give about being prepared for the test. Things like make sure the students have plenty of sleep the night before and a nutritional breakfast. You know, go through the items they are really sure about before working on those they find more challenging. But it seems there have to be some other options we can give those parents who actively seek to help out at home.”
6. Bruce answers, “Actually, I usually work with parents to help develop their children’s metacognitive study skills—skills that are going to be helpful for their academic career in general. These metacognitive skills include spacing out their studying session, teaching students how to detect when they do not understand information, and teaching students how to self-regulate their own study habits. But I also feel it helps if parents have a good understanding of what these test are like. Only then can they really be a resource to their kids. It’s unfortunate, but when you are dealing with parents, many don’t even understand the testing pressures we feel as teachers. Sometimes I am at real loss as to what to tell them. Heck, I don’t even agree with the amount of weight that is put on these test scores! Because they carry so much weight, many of us find ourselves sacrificing instructional activities that engage students in higher-level processing or problem-based learning in order to go through yet another set of instructional drills that encourages rote memorization geared toward the state tests. Teaching to the test might help them perform better on the end-of-the-year test; however, I know it is not helping them develop problem solving skills or be prepared for the real world after school.”
7. “Now, I know I am going to be asking for it by mentioning this, but I feel it needs to be said,” Marc Diaz tentatively interjects, “let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater here. I agree there are some questionable forces at work as to how these tests scores are used, and maybe too much weight is put on them. However, they are not going away and I don’t really think we are truly answering Ms. Lui’s question. After all, standardized testing does let us compare our students’ performance with other schools. Plus, we can pinpoint where our students are falling short. Isn’t that a good thing?”
8. The teachers are clearly frustrated with standardized testing as they continue to brainstorm potential solutions to help all students achieve without having to “teach to the test” and drill students.

*Instructions:*

*After reading the following case study and viewing module materials, please respond to the following prompts listed below. In order to appropriately develop and elaborate on your ideas, your response must be a minimum of 1,500 words total for the whole document (which includes making sure each question has a response). Please compose your work in a Word document using, 12-point font, Times New Roman. You do not have to include in-text citations in your response. Please compose your response by numbering each question. Please do not repeat the question in your Word document.*

1. Based on what you learned from the module materials, what are the key controversies that currently surround standardized testing?
2. Imagine you are a teacher at Brasswood Elementary participating in the described faculty meeting. Mr. Lui, the assistant principal, looks for advice and asks you the following question, “*what do you think about standardized testing? Do the benefits outweigh the downsides?*” In response to this question, please pick a side and create an argument on why standardized testing is beneficial for students or why standardized testing is harmful for students. Your argument should be well-developed and be composed of at least three main points. There is no clear answer on what to do about standardized testing, so make your best case for or against this type of testing. Please note, you will not be graded on your opinion whether you select for or against; you will be graded on the accuracy and development of your response.
3. Think about the ideas in this module that were most important to you. Based on what you have learned about standardized testing, compose your own advice about standardized testing that you would give to new teachers. Secondly, compose your own advice about standardized testing that you would give to a parent or caretaker who wants to help their child improve their score.