# Countering

Pressure to raise test scores stems from five myths. Let's challenge them.

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and Paul Gorski**

This fall, during a workshop for art teachers in Minneapolis, several teachers reported that their principal had warned them: If standardized test scores do not improve, we will eliminate arts from the curriculum and replace them with more reading instruction and math drills. These teachers were familiar with evidence that incorporating art into writing improves students' writing skills (Olshansky, 2006), and they were horrified. This ultimatum seemed to reflect how narrowly some educators and policymakers now define education—and how much we risk losing if teachers accept that definition.

Other teachers report that not only are schools suppressing the artistic dimensions of kids, but they are also neglecting the physically active side of students' lives. Schools are eliminating recess in favor of more time to boost test scores. What is lost by such policies? We think of a middle school student named Sothol. In class, Sothol was sullen and withdrawn. Yet during recess, he sought out his teachers on the playground to talk about his life, worries, and joys. Out in the air, he
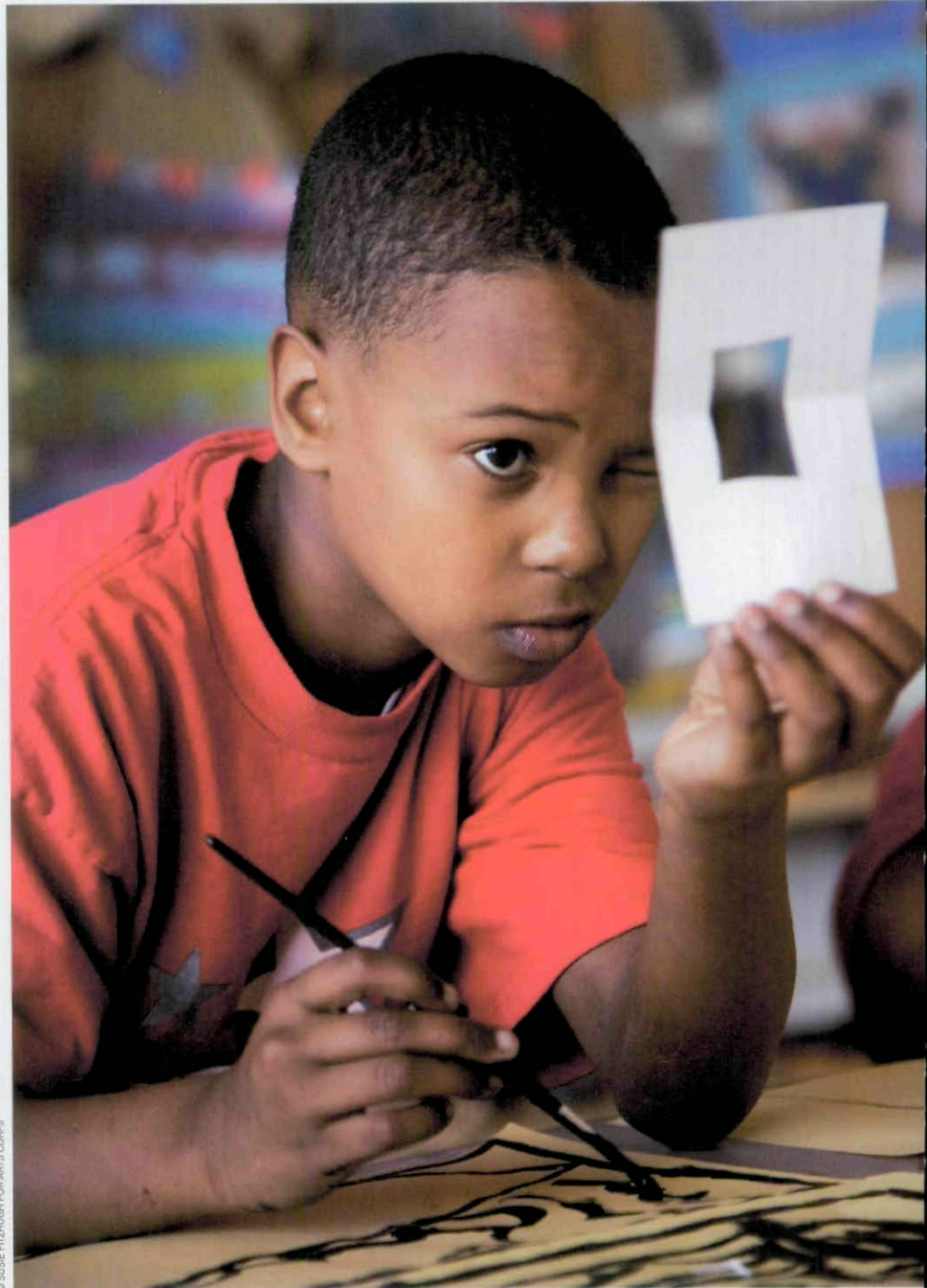
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Standardization

became open, even hopeful. To deny students like Sothol the kinesthetic part of their lives is to deny them part of their humanity.

Even those teachers whose subjects are not threatened with elimination feel pressured to prepare their students for high-stakes tests. As a middle school language arts teacher explained,

> I want to follow my conscience and expertise, help my students think critically, help them learn how to learn. But those tests are hanging over me. And when they're not hanging over me, my principal is: "How's that lesson going to improve test scores?" We don't even talk about achievement and learning. We don't talk about children any more, about arts or civic engagement or play.

The Myths Behind the Pressure

We believe that the overemphasis on test scores that has raised these teachers' concerns grows from a set of myths that are inconsistent with both research and common sense. In part because of these misconceptions, our schools and curriculum are becoming increasingly standardized.

As educators, we cannot change course until we disprove the following myths.

MYTH 1: The arts, recess, physical education, and second languages are frills.

What we know: Such offerings encourage independent thinking, creative problem solving, physical health, and academic success (Burton, 1994; Garrison, 2001; Wong, 2007).

Teachers should be empowered to draw on their expertise to develop, adapt, and use whatever pedagogy will work best with particular students and content.

Research demonstrates that students who know multiple languages are stronger learners in all academic areas than their English-only peers (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Moran & Hakuta, 1995). With the advent of video games and high-fat meals on the go, we know, too, that daily exercise and physical education are essential for promoting healthy living. Yet when we base the worth of a school solely on reading and math, we eliminate these activities first to create time for an extra reading class or math review period.

MYTH 2: A standardized curriculum is essential for the success of every student .

What we know: Such uniformity runs counter to research findings. Research shows that when teachers connect to a student, his or her parents, and personal interests we see remarkable leaps in learning (Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004; Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). Sheldon and Biddle argue that excessive standardization removes the

possibility of tapping intrinsic motivation—which is better nurtured by appealing to students' particular interests and giving them some autonomy. For too long our schools have offered young people curriculums based on outmoded content and delivered through ineffective teaching methods, particularly at high-poverty schools. Such inferior teaching contributes to the achievement gap, which actually might be more accurately called "the opportunity gap." This must change. The curriculum must be built on both a standard set of knowledge and skills that are important to the development of all students and on knowledge and skills that are specific and relevant to

> **Growth is not steady, forward, upward progression. It is instead a switchback trail; three steps forward, two back, one around the bushes, and a few simply standing, before another forward leap.**
> — *Dorothy Corkville Briggs*

students' cultures and communities.

For example, students at North Community High School in Minneapolis learned math, botany, sculpting, and drafting while building a wooden entrance for their community library. The design incorporated themes from African American and European American cultures, which reflected the students' cultural origins. Throughout two summers, two artists (one of whom was also an English teacher at the school) guided this work. Students mastered prescribed skills through a building project in their neighborhood.

Our schools need a curriculum that challenges all students. But we should achieve such a curriculum by using connections to the arts and to the knowledge and history of all students' home cultures to both engage students and encourage them to inquire into the world around them. Teachers should be empowered to draw on their expertise to develop, adapt, and use whatever pedagogy will work best with particular students and content. Standardization, especially at the level of prescription, cheats teachers of the opportunity to do this. As a result, it cheats students.

MYTH 3: Teaching critical thinking and social consciousness is political.

What we know: As curriculums become more standardized, and in some cases prescribed through minute-by-minute curricular guides, opportunities for teaching critical thinking and building social consciousness are disappearing. A common justification for the absence of critical-thinking activities and discussions of social issues in schools is that education is meant to be politically neutral. Certainly, the issues we tend to uncover when we encourage critical thinking—such as the dynamics of power and privilege or a critique of the social norms that discourage critical thinking—are often politically charged.

But it is a dangerous fallacy to believe that our attention to charged social issues is more political than our inattention to them. And it is equally fallacious to imagine that anything about education is politically neutral. The movement toward standardization and the increasing pressure on teachers to prepare students for high-stakes tests at the expense of critical and creative growth are political. Likewise, the tendency to reduce the national dialogue on student achievement to examining test scores, rendering all other measures invisible, is political. If educators strive to produce an informed citizenry that is able to lead, make important decisions, and collaborate toward a better future, we must begin by acknowledging the politics at play in our classrooms, communities, countries, and world—and helping students do the same.

MYTH 4: A student's failure to learn reveals a deficiency in aptitude in the student or a lack of attentiveness on the part of the student's parents.

What we know: Compared with wealthier schools, schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students have larger numbers of inexperienced and unlicensed teachers, less access to the Internet, less adequate facilities (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2004), larger class sizes, higher teacher-to-student ratios (Barton, 2003), and less overall funding (Carey, 2005). We know that children who are hungry, homeless, cold, or tired cannot learn efficiently. And we know that moving from one school to another within a year has a drastic effect on a student's ability to concentrate.

In *The Shame of a Nation* (2005), Jonathan Kozol points out that not only do teachers expect less of students in low-income, underresourced schools, but also students in such schools become discouraged and unable to envision themselves as high school graduates or college students. This tendency has nothing to do with these students' intelligence or their parents' attitudes toward education.

MYTH 5: Students learn most effectively when they are tracked into classes with peers assumed to be similar in ability.

What we know: Research on the effectiveness of tracking is inconclusive. One of the few consistent findings of large-

scale studies on tracking is that although high-achieving students show slightly faster growth when tracked with similarly achieving peers, our most disenfranchised students, those populating the lower tracks, learn best in heterogeneous ability groups (Oakes, 2005). Once students are on a track, upward mobility is rare. Moreover, what students learn depends largely on their opportunities. Because students in lower tracks tend to be subject to lower-order thinking pedagogy, any ability gap can grow over time.

Countering the Myths with Common Sense

Given the prevalence of these myths and the ways they now drive education, education leaders must find ways to counter them. First we must acknowledge our own expertise. We see students before us every day. We know their complexities. We know that engaging them, expecting them to think deeply, and facilitating social consciousness is not "dumbing down" the curriculum. There are meaningful actions we can take to advocate for kids.

Challenge policies and politics that insist we make false choices. So often we are told it's either/or: Either pass the tests or offer gym; either improve writing or discuss racism. We can insist that it is possible to fund education that includes both recess and math tutors. When art or gym teachers are told they will be laid off, we can testify to what we know of the importance of art and music, physical education, and time outdoors.

Counter the culture of standardized curriculum and "teaching for the test." We can draw on practices that we know excite and involve students, such as service learning in their neighborhoods. Students do not all learn well sitting in rows, feverishly taking notes. Although some students do thrive in such an environment, others yearn to participate and tackle provocative questions.

We need not advocate giving up one way of teaching for the other, trading

lecture and memorization for dialogue and engagement. Instead, we should stand up for teaching that adjusts to students' needs, that exercises and reinforces students' intelligences—including musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and visual-spatial intelligences—as well as their critical-thinking skills and social consciousness. To do this, we must be deeply convinced that all kids can learn

and that the best conditions for learning reinforce the whole child.

Stop blaming the kids and start speaking up about inequities. Instead of locating the problems of public education in our most disenfranchised students (or their parents), we can solve problems in the system that perpetuate disparities. We can arm ourselves with research to back up what we observe of inequities in the

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Strategies for Engaging the Whole Child

Seek Potential in Troublesome Students
Teachers: Notice the social intelligence that some of your toughest kids possess and reframe these students as leaders.

Administrators: Help your administrative team develop nonconfrontational discipline strategies. Work with teachers to find positive leadership potential in struggling students who do not even know they have such potential.

Reframe Perspectives
Teachers: Encourage critical thinking by helping students explore their own and others' perceptions. Begin with how we perceive elements in visual art and lead into an exploration of perception in history, economics, and community issues. Discuss how problems in learning might be perceived and described differently, such as replacing the term *achievement gap* with *opportunity gap*.

Administrators: Challenge teachers to reflect deeply and think critically about their teaching practice and their perceptions about students' capabilities.

Collaborate to Solve Problems
Teachers: Problem solve with your students. Solicit their feedback on topics from test taking to global warming. Plan with them ways to change the school, the city, the country.

Administrators: Draw parents into problem solving. Find out what the community wants from the school. Push for your building to be open at night for activities that will further those desires, such as providing adult education.

Change What You Can
Teachers: Identify what you and students can control in the school environment. Engage students, whether it's by decorating your walls, selecting interesting books, or even thinking of ways to add art materials to social studies or math class. Use your lunch hour to enrich students' learning, inviting a few students to join you once a week. Set out chess boards, crossword puzzles, and drawing materials during these lunchtime gatherings. Play music and poetry CDs, encouraging students to expand their knowledge beyond popular culture.

Administrators: Support teachers who go above and beyond the call of duty. Identify businesses in the larger community that will help support your teachers' efforts.

school system every day. We can go before school boards, legislatures, and mayors to speak about what is lacking from school buildings—from computers and textbooks to paper and pencils. We can tell policymakers how much money teachers spend out of their own pockets to provide basic necessities. We can form alliances with parents.

Strengthen our own critical-thinking skills and social consciousness. We can begin by identifying any unconscious biases, including our own. We can challenge ourselves to think critically about the information we consume and the current education milieu, asking such questions as, What will be the long-term outcome of curtailing learning activities that facilitate critical thinking?

Be honest about our concerns about the world and the state of education. We can talk with students and colleagues about substantive issues, sharing our worries over inadequate school funding, or about any racist, sexist, classist, or heterosexist undertones we may perceive in education policies.

Get students of color and economically disadvantaged students into gifted and talented programs. We can work with all parents to ensure that they have the information they need in a system that tends to reward students from the most vocal, privileged, or connected families.

In short, we can each work to subvert the myths in our own ways (For more ideas, see Strategies for Engaging the Whole Child, p. 43). We can create spaces in which we value art, write poetry, discuss problems like racism, teach critically, and rediscover the humanity that we lose in standardization. **EL**

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