For The Love of Learning, Let’s Fix This

TEDx Charlottesville Talk by Smith Coleman

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I’m a teacher. Not long ago, I was working with a sixth-grade student who had just passed a history test. The fact that he’d passed his test was good news. He’d correctly answered one particular question I knew about - The Missouri Compromise question. He’d picked the right answer out of a lineup.- I think it was C.

For this child, we go all out in public education. We need him to pass tests. In particular, we want him to pass his Standards of Learning tests. We spend a lot of time and money getting him ready for those, and his scores matter. They matter to him, his teachers, his school, and his county.

Anyhow, he’d passed a practice test, and he was proud. His teachers were proud.

Now, I know this kid. He doesn’t like school and he doesn’t have fun there. That’s what he told me. And he’s not a good reader.

I had a question, though, so I asked him one day walking down the hall: “Billy,” I asked (his name isn’t Billy), “what is... Missouri?”

He had no idea. We looked it up on my phone, and he learned that Missouri is a state in the United States.

I didn’t ask him about compromise.

So here we are at this place in public education where we work with a child who needs to learn how to read better, to be exposed to maps. He needs experience with the world around him, and we spend our time and money teaching him to pass multiple choice tests.

That’s where we are.. That’s the game. And that game is played out thousands of times across Virginia - every day. It’s about improving data.

I wish it was all about teaching kids like Billy to read better and love learning. I wish it was about exposing him to the world around him, but it’s really not.

Now, I started teaching young. I taught everything from fly fishing to hang gliding. After graduate school, I left to teach. And I was happy.

Until high-stakes testing happened. That hit hard around 1997. So I switched subjects - and

for a long, happy time I taught things they didn’t make tests for - canoeing, kayaking, climbing. We planted American Chestnut trees. We camped in the mountains of North Carolina. My assignments were about what kids did. What they wanted to do.

When the recession came there was no money for my program. So I went back to school for another degree. But I wanted to get back to teaching. When I finished school, I took a post working with gifted students in a nearby county. I didn’t test them. They loved learning. We read a lot. We had fun.

And about then, a huge debate began about high-stakes testing in Virginia. It looked good. The talk was good. Things would change.

And then, they didn’t. SOL tests were immovable.

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Somehow, Virginia lawmakers found a way to continue paying lots of money to a testing corporation. The lobby was powerful.

I have always believed in public education. It’s one of our best ideas. And I couldn’t do it anymore. So I quit.

Now, I’m head teacher at an independent school. North Branch School, in Afton, Virginia. At our school, kids love to learn. They go deep into ideas. And, they play. At our school, we teach everyone to read in every class because we know that without that skill, a child’s horizons are limited. We know that learning is a process, not easily (or summarily) quantified. We constantly teach and assess our students, but we know that assessment is the ongoing art of communication. Yet, we never use high stakes tests. Ever.

I wish public schools were a place where learning was fun, where reading was celebrated, and children were inspired, but often, they just aren’t. I know. My own children told me.

Now, I don’t have time to follow the testing money, but I believe if I did, I’d find a corporate boardroom of people figuring out how to make money from public schools. I don’t think I’d find them figuring out how to make learning what it should be: fun, challenging, inspiring.

So, I ask you to ask your children a few simple questions - is school inspiring? Is it fun? And, if it isn’t, ask the principal, the superintendent, and all your representatives, why that is?

I wish many things for this world. But in my small part of it, I wish parents and communities would raise a big stink about high stakes testing in Virginia public schools.

I have been actively fighting for doing away with high stakes Standards of Learning testing in Virginia for much of my career, and I ask for your help. Please call your representatives. Let’s make a stink.

For the love of learning, let’s fix this.