

**Study Guide and Discussion Guide for Conversation on
*The Testing Charade: Pretending to Make Schools Better***

February 6 --- Chapters 1-5, pp. 1-72

Chapter 1 --- “Beyond All Reason”

1. What is it about today’s standardized testing that ratchets up the pressure?
2. When Koretz writes (p. 5) that test-based accountability has become an end in itself, what does he mean?
3. Which other goals of public education have been replaced by the goal of raising standardized test scores?
4. Koretz writes a lot about using standardized tests as an incentive. What did policy makers aspire to incentivize by attaching rewards and punishments to a school’s or a teacher’s test scores?

To summarize: **facilitator reads or has someone read** quote from p. 1. “Pressure to raise scores on achievement tests dominates American education today. It shapes what is taught and how it is taught. It influences the problems students are given in math class (often questions from earlier tests), the materials they are given to read, the essays and other work they are required to produce, and often the manner in which teachers grade this work. It determines which educators are rewarded, punished, and even fired. In many cases it determines which students are promoted or graduate. This is the result of decades of ‘education reforms’ that progressively expanded the amount of externally imposed testing and ratcheted up the pressure to raise scores.”

Chapter 2 --- “What Is A Test?”

5. Koretz explains that standardized tests work like opinion polls---by sampling. What do the tests sample?

Facilitator reads or has someone read short quote from p. 13: “Rather than sampling a small number of people to represent a population as pollsters do, the authors of tests sample a small amount of content to represent the larger domain... Tests are not fully representative of domains they are intended to represent.”

6. What are some of the flaws of sampling? (pp. 15-18)

Chapter 4 --- “Campbell’s Law”

Who will explain Campbell’s Law?

Facilitator reads or has someone read Campbell’s Law: “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intend to monitor.” Koretz continues, quoting Don Campbell: ”Achievement tests may well be valuable indicators of ... achievement under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence. But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways.” (pp. 38-39)

7. What have been some of the consequences of the testing regime? (pp. 46-48)
8. As parents we are very aware of the pressures on our kids of too much testing at school, and as teachers we are aware of myriad pressures on us to focus on tests to raise scores, but what do these beginning chapters tell us more broadly about what ”the testing regime” has done to our education system?

Chapter 5 --- “Score Inflation”

9. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) is used pretty regularly as what Koretz calls an audit test. What happened when the No Child Left Behind-mandated state achievement tests in language arts and math were compared to NAEP?
10. Koretz writes: (A)ll that is required for scores to become inflated is that the sampling used to create a test has to be predictable.” (p. 62) In what way is the sampling used on state standardized tests predictable in a way that has caused score inflation?
11. Koretz adds: ”All that is needed is that teachers feel pressure to raise scores on a specific test.” (p. 62) What are the pressures on teachers these days that make them feel pressured to raise scores?

12. This chapter is complicated. What are some of the reasons Koretz worries about test score inflation? After you briefly create your list of concerns, **facilitator reads or has someone read this quote**:

“Why should we be concerned about this (score inflation)? ... “The first reason is that we are identifying the wrong teachers, schools, and systems as successes and failures... The entire logic of our reforms depends on rewarding school that do better and punishing those that don’t. However, because in most contexts we can’t separate score inflation from legitimate improvements, we are sometimes rewarding people who game the system more effectively, and we are punishing educators who do good work but appear to be doing relatively less well because they aren’t taking as many shortcuts.” He continues: “The second reason to worry about variations in score inflation may trouble some people even more: a small but growing number of studies have found that score inflation is more severe among disadvantaged students, specifically racial and ethnic minorities and poor students.” (pp. 63-67)

13. Which students are hurt worse from all of the ways educators have been pressured to raise scores at all costs? Why does Koretz believe there is more danger of score inflation in schools serving children in communities where poverty is concentrated?

Facilitator reads or has someone read this quote: “Lower-performing schools often face severe barriers to improvement... Faced with these obstacles, teachers will have a stronger incentive to look for shortcuts for raising scores. Ironically, one of the elements of school reform intended to help low-achieving students appears to have backfired, making these incentives worse.” (p. 68)

Chapter 3 --- “The Evolution of Test-Based Reform”

This chapter simply provides the history behind this whole movement for test-based accountability reform. Test-based accountability began in the states. It was cast into federal law in 2002 by No Child Left Behind, which demanded annual testing in grades 3-8 and once in high school (with a science testing requirement added later). NCLB punished low scoring schools which could not make Adequate Yearly Progress with threatened turnarounds like firing principals and teachers, charterizing schools, and closing so-called “failing” schools. In Race to the Top and later in NCLB waivers, Arne Duncan began demanding that states evaluate teachers with students’ test scores. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act dropped some of the punishments for schools and dropped the requirement that states use student test scores to evaluate teachers. But it continued to make states create improvement plans with their own incentives and punishments. And it continued to demand annual testing.

Open Discussion

14. Were there any surprises for you in these chapters?
15. Before you read Koretz’s book or before our conversation tonight, what were your concerns about standardized testing in schools today? In what ways did our conversation tonight or your reading change your thinking?
16. Has the reading so far raised particular questions or concerns for you?

Koretz concludes (**facilitator reads or has someone read**): “Ironically, our heavy-handed use of tests for accountability has also undermined precisely the function that testing is best designed to serve: providing trustworthy information about student achievement. It has led to ‘score inflation’: increases in scores much higher than the actual improvements in achievement that they are supposed to be measuring. It is not uncommon for gains on high-stakes tests to be several times as large as they should be. The result is illusions of progress; student performance appears to be improving far more than it really is... Perhaps even worse, these bogus score gains are more severe in some schools than in others... And an increasing amount of evidence suggests that on average, schools that serve disadvantaged students engage in more test preparation and therefore inflate scores more, creating an illusion that the gap in achievement between disadvantaged and advantaged children is shrinking more than it is... The evidence of these failures has been accumulating for more than a quarter century. Yet it is routinely ignored.”(pp. 6-7)

17. Consider also what is likely to happen when schools serving children who start out behind do not choose to engage in the kind of practices we are going to discuss next time---the test prep and the cheating? When scores do not rise and appear to demonstrate that gaps are closing, what punishments do states, including Ohio, impose on the so-called “failing” districts with low scores?