

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

February 13 --- Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11, pp. 73-159, 175-192

Review from Last Time...

To summarize from last week's session, **facilitator reads introductory statement from first chapter**: "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." (p. 1)

Last time we also covered **Campbell's Law: (facilitator reads or has someone read)**: "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 intended 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)

And we ended last week's session with the chapter on **Score Inflation**, in which Koretz describes ways in which high stakes pressure on educators too often shifts the focus from helping students explore the curriculum to raising test scores as an end in itself.

Tonight...The next two chapters we will begin with are about the ways---because of the high stakes attached by federal and state governments to standardized testing---that teachers have responded to the pressure artificially to raise scores.

Chapter 6 --- "Cheating"

1. Who have been the cheaters and what are the kinds of cheating Koretz describes in this chapter? (p.74, and Heights Coalition's *Summary* [pp. 3-4] as a reference)
2. If you watched the trial of teachers in Atlanta on *C-SPAN*, you will remember that the judge self-righteously blamed the teachers for ruining the futures of their students by getting the tests in advance and overtly preparing their students or erasing and changing their students answers. But Koretz considers a different point of view: Koretz wonders about the moral implications of high-stakes testing. **Facilitator reads or has someone read**: "But this prompts the larger and more uncomfortable question: Just who is responsible? Is it just the people who actually carry out the fraud or require it? Or are those who create the pressures to cheat also culpable...? (p. 91) Where do you locate the moral responsibility for what happened in Washington, DC and Atlanta, for example?"

Chapter 7 --- "Test Prep"

3. Should teachers have to prepare students for the **FORMAT** of a test---the question styles? What about teachers teaching their students tricks? What are the tests really measuring---the academic content or the quality of the test prep?
4. From your point of view as a teacher---or a parent--- or a community member, how much test prep should be happening? Is test prep inevitable? To what degree should we be condoning test prep?

Chapter 8--- "Making Up Unrealistic Targets"

This chapter is one of the most important in Koretz's book---about the way the passing "cut" scores have been set to decide which students and schools---and under Arne Duncan---which teachers are proficient. To introduce this chapter, **facilitator reads or has someone read**: "In a nutshell, the core of the approach has been simply to set an arbitrary performance target (the "Proficient" standard) and declare that all schools must make all students reach it in an equally arbitrary amount of time. No one checked to make sure the targets were practical. The myriad factors that cause some students to do poorly in school---both the weaknesses of many of the schools they attend and the disadvantages some students bring to school---were given remarkably little attention. Somehow teachers would just pull this off. (pp. 119-120)... One aspect of the great inequity of the American educational system is that disadvantaged kids tend to be clustered in the same schools. The causes are complex, but the result is simple: some schools have far lower average scores---and particularly important in this system, more kids who aren't 'proficient'---than others. Therefore, if one requires that all students must hit the proficient target by a certain date, these low scoring schools will face far more demanding targets for gains than other schools do. This was not an accidental byproduct of the notion that 'all children can learn to a high level.' It was a deliberate and prominent part of

many of the test-based accountability reforms... Unfortunately... it seems that no one asked for evidence that these ambitious targets for gains were realistic. The specific targets were often an automatic consequence of where the Proficient standard was placed and the length of time schools were given to bring all students to that standard, which are both arbitrary.” (pp. 129-130)

5. When Koretz says the targets---the performance standards or cut scores---are arbitrary, what does he mean? (p. 120)
6. Koretz thinks it is unfair to expect all schools to raise the scores of all students to a particular target by the same date. Why?
7. Consider the implications of setting unrealistic targets as public policies here in Ohio punish students and teachers and schools with low scores---the Third Grade Guarantee---the A-F School Rating System---the HB 70 Youngstown Takeover. Which districts and schools and teachers and students are being affected by these policies?

Chapter 9 --- “Evaluating Teachers”

Koretz explains why holding teachers accountable for students’ test scores fails to encourage good teaching. **Facilitator reads or has someone read:** “First, many good (educational) activities... fall outside the range most standardized tests can sample well... Second, while good instruction in general will improve students’ mastery and therefore, should increase scores, it won’t increase scores on a specific test as much as instruction---and test-prep---aimed squarely at that particular test. In other words, teaching to the test can increase test scores more rapidly than high-quality teaching not focused narrowly on the specific test used for accountability.” (pp.139-140)

8. What are some of the reasons why students’ test scores don’t accurately measure quality teaching (See sub-headings pp. 144-159.)

Summary about VAM---Value-Added Modeling? Facilitator reads or has someone read Koretz’s definition of Value-Added Modeling: “Schools don’t have a lot of background information about students, but the variables included in the VAM model can include gender, receipt of free or reduced-price lunch, limited proficiency in English, or disability status. Either way, each student’s deviation from her predicted score for the current grade is assumed to measure the impact of a teachers work. The estimate of a teacher’s value added is obtained by adding these deviations from prediction for all of her students. If a teacher’s students do better than predicted, that is taken to show that she is effective, but if they do worse, she is ineffective.” (p. 150)

Koretz quotes the American Statistical Association’s statement about the danger of VAM for evaluating teachers. **Facilitator reads or has someone read the ASA’s warning:** “VAMs typically measure correlation, not causation: Effects---positive or negative---attributed to a teacher may actually be caused by other factors that are not captured in the model.” (p. 151)

Chapter 11 --- “Did Kids Learn More”

Koretz’s conclusion, facilitator reads or has someone read Koretz’s takeaway: “It’s no exaggeration to say that the costs of test-based accountability have been huge. Instruction has been corrupted on a broad scale. Large amounts of instructional time are now siphoned off into test-prep activities that at best waste time and at worst defraud students and their parents. Cheating has become widespread... The primary benefit we received in return for all of this was substantial gains in elementary school math that don’t persist until graduation.” (p. 191)

Open Discussion

9. Were there surprises for you in these chapters?
10. As you consider what we have read and discussed, what are your greatest concerns for teachers? For our children?
11. As you consider what we have read and discussed, what are your greatest concerns about the implications for your own school district? For the greater Cleveland area? For Ohio?
12. Is there any particular learning from this book or from our conversation that seems particularly important to you? Has this book study supported or changed any previously held beliefs you had about testing?