Dancin' Circles

by Daniel Ferri

Last March, I, like thousands of other sixth-grade teachers across the state of Illinois, stood in front of my classroom and tore the plastic from a stack of papers. On those papers were printed the topic my sixth graders, and thousands of other Illinois sixth graders, would spend the next forty minutes writing about. We would all be graded on the results of the standardized tests: the students, the teachers, and the schools.

For eleven years, I've been teaching in School District 44, a public school system just outside of Chicago. Like the forty-nine other states that have adopted similar programs, Illinois decided that the best way to improve our schools was not by hiring more teachers or upgrading our computer labs or providing more resources and training, but by making students take a test.

In 1985, the Illinois State Legislature passed a law mandating our version of the tests that state legislatures across the nation have become so obsessed with. Since President Clinton made testing a national priority through his Goals 2000 program four years ago, we have all but stopped questioning whether it makes sense for state school boards to spend millions of dollars developing tests, millions more administering them, and still millions more hiring consultants to tell us how to teach our students to score well.

At best, the tests are a waste of money. Measuring the richness of learning by giving a standardized test is like judging chili by counting the beans. Yet somewhere along the way, we stopped thinking of test scores as a tool and started thinking of them as a goal. Taking the Illinois Goal Assessment test, the IGAPs is a state law, so all across the state students take the same test, write about the same topic, at the same time, and follow the same rules, so that everyone, everything, is the same.

It's a law because the easiest way for politicians to pretend they care about education is to stand up and declare that students are not learning because teachers can't teach and the schools are rotten, and they are going to fix it by ... administering a test. Not that those politicians have any idea what we would test for, or how we would test for it if we knew, but that does not matter. It sounds good on TV. So the Illinois State Legislature told our state bureaucrats to design tests in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, and make everyone take them. And so, for two weeks in March we all take the IGAPs; that way everyone, everything, will be the same, almost.

By law, Illinois students learn to write by the numbers. The first paragraph of a paper must do this, this, this, and this. The three main body paragraphs must do that, that, that, and that. And the conclusion paragraph must begin with two this's, followed by three that's, and end with an exciting this. And these are just the rules for a persuasive paper. We learn different rules for writing expository and narrative papers. This is not how people write. This is how people fill out tax forms.

The kids hate it. The best writers especially hate it. “Mr. Ferri, haven’t you ever heard of foreshadowing? If I want to tell my story a different way, why can’t I?” I explained that our state legislature had determined that we must have standards of instruction. The children looked at me like I needed to blow my nose.

I told them about basics of form that, once mastered, can be improvised on. They kept looking at me.

I tried to convince them that these are efficient formulas for clear writing. They kept looking.

Finally I said, “Look, none of us has any choice about this; I have to give you this test, you have to take it, and some poor soul in North Carolina has to read and grade five hundred of them a day. The graders have a list of the rules you learned for writing each kind of essay. If you don’t follow a rule they take points from your score. They don’t care what you write. They only care about the rules. If you don’t follow the rules, you get a bad score. The scores are published in the paper. If our scores aren’t good, then people won’t think our schools are good and they won’t want to move here, which will make the real estate people mad, and they will yell at the school board, who will yell at the superintendent, who will yell at the principal, who will yell at me. This is not about writing, this is about not getting yelled at.” This, they understood.

Each student receives an IGAP test booklet. The front page is for student information. Students must record his or her name, grade, student ID, date of birth, ethnicity, and God knows what else on it. Each letter or number goes in a box, then under the box, in number-two pencil, the student must fill in a circle that corresponds to that letter or number or ethnicity. The page looks like a loan application and an optical illusion had a baby. If the boxes and circles aren’t filled out right, or the marks aren’t dark enough, the machines can’t read them and we get yelled at.

I had the students fill out the information pages on the day before we began the tests. When they were done, the pages looked like they had been used to line bird cages. Random marks were everywhere, so my teaching partner and I stuck Post-it notes on the worst of them saying, “Print your name more clearly,” or “Fill in circles under date of birth,” or “Darken circles.”

The morning of the first writing test my students sat vacant and resigned, like Pickett’s Virginians waiting for the charge. I picked up the packet of prompt pages with the writing topic printed on them. They were sealed in plastic for secrecy. I
broke the plastic and my teaching partner and I handed them out. Then we handed out the student’s test packets, some sporting Post-it reminders to, “Print your name,” or, “Darken circles.” Then I stood in front of the class and read from my booklet, which were by law, the exact same words thousands of other sixth-grade teachers would also read that morning. “You will have forty minutes to . . . .” ending with, “Turn over the prompt page, read what the topic is, and begin writing. Good luck.”

I wasn’t bound by law to say good luck, but I thought it might be okay throwing it in there. The topic was, “Should students be required to wear uniforms to school?” The children picked up their pencils, took a breath, and wrote. The only sound was the turning of pages, the scratching, and the sharpening of pencils. As required by law, I announced when twenty minutes were left, then five, and then when time was up. We collected the prompt pages because they must be counted and sent back to the state. We collected the test packets and I set them on my desk while the students stretched and talked quietly. Then I heard Duane ask Becky, “What did you write about?”

“I wrote about uniforms. We all did. It said so on the paper.”

“Mine didn’t say that. Mine said to write about dancin’ circles.”

Becky and I both said, “What? What did you write about?”

“I wrote about dancin’ circles, here, I’ll show you.”

I reached for the pile of prompt pages, but Duane was already rummaging through the stack of test booklets. “No it’s not on that page, it’s on these.”

Becky said, “Those pages didn’t say what we were supposed to write about!”

“Mine did.” Duane pulled his test booklet out of the stack and pointed to the Post-it stuck to the front page. On the Post-it I had written, “Darken circles.”

“See, right here, it says ‘Dancin’ circles,’ so that’s what I wrote about.”

That morning, thousands of sixth graders across the state of Illinois sat at their desks, curled themselves around their pencils, stuck their tongues between their teeth, and wrote five paragraph essays about wearing uniforms. All, except one. His essay began, “Well, I never thought much about dancin’ circles before today, but if that’s what you want to know about, well, here goes . . . .”

And somewhere in North Carolina some poor soul will reach into the stack of five hundred essays he or she will read that day. Four hundred and ninety-nine of them will be about wearing uniforms, and one won’t. I would love to watch her face when she reads it.
There may still be hope.