

DOING THE BEST ON THE TESTS:

A Suburban Elementary School's Response
to High Stakes Tests



**Reforming Teaching/Learning in a
High Stakes Testing Environment**

**Capital Region Science Education Partnership
University at Albany, SUNY**



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A Coherent and Cohesive Vision

Getting ahead of the curve

“It’s not the tests that we’re trying to meet it’s the Standards,” the Language Arts Committee Head explains to a group of teachers in a district-wide meeting. She then goes on to describe how she interacts with her students: *“When we have conversations and they write their pieces you have to stretch because I know what’s ahead of them.”*

In the Orchard Hill* School District, curriculum committee heads play a central role in the district effort to provide a coherent and cohesive vision for meeting the demands of the 4th, 5th and 8th grade state tests. They are ideally suited to this role since they both connect with the teachers and the administration in several ways. Part of a committee head’s job is to teach two classes, usually at the middle or secondary level. The Language Arts Committee Head for example, like all four committee heads in the district, teaches two classes in addition to her administrative duties. With the advent of the new state requirements, this connection to the classroom has been especially useful. As the Assistant Superintendent explains, the curriculum committee heads keep him *“in touch with kids, with what’s going on in the classroom, what’s going on at the building level... we don’t hear that, ‘that’s a good idea, but you haven’t been in the classroom in 10 years.’”*

While the committee heads communicate what is going on in the classroom to other district administrators, they also keep track of the New York State test requirements, share that insight with teachers primarily through the curriculum committees, and send the message that all teachers are responsible for students’ success on the state tests.

District Goals

To assure a dynamic, continuously improving program that is congruent with district Standards of Excellence, New York State Standards, and individual student needs, and to achieve this while balancing the community’s desire for low taxes with its desire for outstanding schools.

One way that curriculum committee heads and other district administrators get and keep ahead of changes to state test requirements is through consistent contact with the State Education Department. An administrator explains that the district had *“no surprises with regard to the test mandates...,”* because *“many of the teachers and administrators were in on the development of the tests.”* For example, she explains, *“a group of district teachers and administrators were part of the team that helped develop the 4th, 8th, and 11th grade ELA’s.”* The Assistant Superintendent adds that he *“was trained by State Education and their psychometricians”* and has *“been involved in writing the Regents component in terms of creating tests, editing tests, in both English and foreign language, was responsible for evaluating the scoring done around the state,*

* Note: To protect the identity of the participants in this case study all teachers are identified using the female gender. Orchard Hill is a pseudonym for the district.

and validation of the scores.” Members of the high school math department and the Science Committee Head also were involved in the development of New York State Math and Science tests.

This insight is passed on to teachers, as one fourth grade teacher confirms: *“Our district is proactive and even before the state said ‘Ok, you’re getting these tests’, we’d already been making some changes in curriculum and making changes in instruction because we knew it was coming down the pike.”*

Teamwork

The teachers and administrators who work on test development projects with the State Education Department bring back to the district, what an administrator calls, *“hands-on”* knowledge of the tests. This knowledge is then communicated to the subject area committees through Curriculum Committee Representatives (CCRs) from all of the schools in the district. The Language Arts Committee for example includes 14 members: five curriculum representatives (three from the elementary schools, one from the middle school, and one from the high school), five reading teachers from the elementary schools, one principal, two secondary reading teachers, and one high school teacher/coordinator. The committee is broken into two: English language arts members meet one week, and the reading members meet the next.

At these meetings, committee heads make clear that success on the state tests is reliant upon every grade level teacher, not just on the tested grade level teachers. For example, one way that committee heads connect teachers across the grade levels is by going over the state or Regents tests with them. A committee head describes this process: *“For the K-4, I gave them copies of the Regents exam so they could get a sense of what that little seven-year-old would have to be able to do.”* In a curriculum committee meeting, she goes on to explain the responsibilities of the CCRs and all teachers: *“One of your jobs is that they can read and write, and we nurture them to be good whole citizens, but they also have to pass the test. It’s only now that I see what the expectations are. I’m asking them to use the words from the question so that they can do better on the tests.”*

Through such messages, the curriculum heads and their committees reinforce a coherent and cohesive vision of shared responsibility across all grade levels for test success. A fourth grade teacher at Cherry Grove*, one of the elementary schools in the district, attests to having received this message and having participated in staff development activities to support preparing for the tests: *“I think a lot of the people at Cherry Grove know it’s not just a fourth grade test and we’ve done a lot especially when the state first introduced these tests to make all the teachers aware. Like our whole staff took the fourth grade science test. They went to all the different stations: It was really interesting because then afterwards we said, ‘OK what is your grade level doing to support what the kids need to know and what is your grade level not doing?’ Then we took a look at each grade level to find out, ‘well we need to really make sure that the kids*

* Cherry Grove is a pseudonym for the case study school.

are getting this type of activity, and everybody took it upon themselves to change curriculum, change expectations, so that they could all help the fourth grade teachers.”

The K-12 curriculum committees, in the words of the Cherry Grove Principal, *“are the most valuable assets this district has in terms of communication directly to teachers about preparation for tests, understanding skill sets associated with tests, and understanding how analysis of our test data can lead us to improved instruction.”*

Packed to the gills

Tuesday, February 04, 2003

From: K-12 Science Committee Head

To: Cherry Grove Principal

Cherry Grove CCR

CCR's from other schools in the District

Cc: Education Council

Agenda for K-12 Science Committee Meeting:

- 1. Discussion of Land and Water kit and whether it is appropriate to place in either 3rd or 4th grade*
- 2. How and where will Earth Science topics be taught?*
- 3. Matter is listed in three different grades in present Science topics sequence – can we reduce that to only two grades or even one?*
- 4. Does climate need to be taught in 3rd grade in Science if Social Studies teaches climate and after weather is taught in 2nd grade?*
- 5. Do we need the Butterfly kit if we teach frog and toad life cycle in 2nd grade...?*

(email message from Science Curriculum Coordinator)

Even though administrators and teachers of all grade levels accept that test preparation is a shared responsibility, a lot has been added to the fourth grade curriculum to prepare for the fourth grade state tests. For example, during a Science K-12 Committee meeting teachers and administrators talk about how the district will address the additional and often changing mandates set forth by the State. They discuss ways the standards can be met and what materials and curriculum would support meeting those standards: The impetus for the discussion revolves around a need to adapt what is done in each grade to what will be expected on the revised Science-4 test to be implemented in the next school year.

The changes to the fourth grade exam for the 2003-2004 school year raise issues for the committee as they try to decide what grade level should teach those standards that are not addressed sufficiently before fourth grade and what STC (Science and Technology for Children) kits could support teaching those standards. The “Land and Water” STC kit for example is proposed as a possible addition to what the schools already have in the way of STC kits. However, in the meeting, several teachers point out that that particular kit is “messy” and therefore would be harder to use with younger

children. So it would be best for fourth grade. But, a teacher explains the dilemma: *“A lot of things get loaded on the fourth grade.”*

During the meeting, the Committee Head explains to the CCRs that third grade teachers were asked if they could do the kit in their grade, but he says: *“The idea was not received warmly.”* He admits that the third grade teachers *“have legitimate concerns; they are packed to the gills.”* The Committee Head says that he wants to *“hear what people have to say”* in terms of what teachers feel they should cover in their grade level, but also asserts that *“we have to compact the curriculum.”* Trying to find where hands-on activities, like those included in the STC kits, can fit confounds the issue. A third grade teacher explains: *“We have about 90 minutes to teach science per week. It took nearly an hour to set up a kit – charts, recording, lab – I can’t have this!”* Frustration brews as some teachers feel that they have less and less say about what and how they teach and less time in which to do it. The same third grade teacher insists: *“We have to say you have these kits and give teachers suggestions.”* She wonders why the teachers can’t come up with their own lessons like they used to instead of using an STC kit. The Committee Head counters: *“I agree. I like to have the teachers have freedom. I like to have energetic teachers, but I’m afraid of the teacher who is afraid of science.”* The Science Committee Head feels that the district needs to utilize experienced teachers’ knowledge of what makes the kits work better to meet the standards, but still provide the kits to less experienced teachers to ensure those standards are taught.

This is the story of a suburban elementary school’s response to the fourth and fifth grade New York State tests. In a historically top performing district such as Orchard Hill, expectations are high. District level efforts to provide a coherent and cohesive vision for meeting those expectations on the New York State tests provide the foundation for this story. How these efforts play out among students, parents, teachers, and administrators reveals the sometimes conflicting, other times, contradictory messages behind teaching for test success. This is the story of how doing the best on the tests is both reinforced and resisted in the day to day interactions at Cherry Grove Elementary School.

The Playing Field

A yuppie school

“The playing field is really a great field to be in.” –fourth grade teacher

Cherry Grove Elementary School is located in a suburban and rural area of approximately 40 square miles. The district is relatively free of traffic congestion, has no economically depressed areas, and is an easy commute to several larger cities. Working farms, orchards, suburban single-family homes and residential developments line the country roads leading to the school. Total student enrollment in the district has been remarkably stable, ranging from 3,300 - 3,400 students annually since 1987. The district’s three elementary schools enroll about 450-550 students each: Cherry Grove has 460 students in grades K-5 for the 2002-2003 school year.

Table 1: Cherry Grove Demographics 2002-03

# of Students	# of Teachers	Free & Reduced Lunch	Race/Ethnicity	English Language Learners	Grade levels
460	31	2.9%	Black – 0.4% Hispanic – 0.0% White – 99.3% Other- 0.2%	0%	K-5

The school itself is orderly. With a brick exterior, square shape, and circular driveway, the school looks substantial, organized and inviting. An expansive playground and field outlined by trees surround the school. Once inside, a large glass window, usually left open, and a door to the principal’s office greets visitors. Hallways, wide and bright lead the way left or right to different wings of the building. Students, led by their teachers, can be seen quietly moving in single file on their way to the well-equipped computer room, music room, playground, or state-of-the-art library. Artwork adorns the many large bulletin boards hanging in every hallway and a center garden illuminates both the hallways and interior classrooms.

Table 2: District and Statewide Graduation Rates 2002

	District	State-wide
Graduates going on to college	91%	80.4%
Drop out rate	1%	3.8%
Verbal SAT scores	534	494
Math SAT scores	545	506

Source for State-wide data: “Report to the Governor and the Legislature on the educational status of the State’s schools: Submitted June 2002”

According to a teacher, Cherry Grove is considered by some in the community as the “yuppie school” out of the three elementary schools in the district. The school gained its nickname due to the fact that it lies in the more fashionable and upscale part of a top performing district. The district attributes its enviable high performance on state assessments to students who are intelligent and willing to work hard, parents who value education and support their children to excel, teachers who are well qualified and continually work to improve the curriculum and instruction, and a community that demands outstanding schools. A fourth grade teacher explains: *“We’ve got a good group of teachers and we’ve got a good demographic. And that’s half the battle right there. You’ve got good teachers and you’ve got good students so we’re going to do ok.”*

From a parent’s perspective, Cherry Grove is a “dream come true” school. One parent who recently moved to the district describes his feelings about the community and school: *“I think it’s real community related here and you know the parents get involved because it’s a small community it seems. Where I was it was desegregation and you couldn’t guarantee your brother and sister would be going to the same elementary*

school, so we put them in private school and no one got involved with the school system. Different kids in your neighborhood would be going to different schools around the town. You had three high schools in the city. So, yeah I love this place.”

Parent after parent attests to their confidence that the school is doing right by their children:

“Oh it’s a great school.”

“The Principal’s great. The teachers - I haven’t run across a bad one yet.”

“I would agree with you too. I mean having five kids go through and personally I’ve never seen a bad teacher.”

Table 3: Standardized Tests Taken by Cherry Grove Students

Grade	Standardized Test given at Cherry Grove	Type
Kinder	Boehm Test of Basic Concepts	Achievement
First	Gates-MacGinitie*	Achievement
Second	Gates-MacGinitie* Stanford Diagnostic Math Test* Terra Nova (Reading, Math)	Achievement Achievement Achievement
Third	Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* Stanford Diagnostic Math Test* Terra Nova (Reading, Math) School & College Ability Test (SCAT**) Cognitive Abilities Test	Achievement Achievement Achievement Aptitude Aptitude
Fourth	New York State ELA-4 School & College Ability Test (SCAT**) New York State Math-4 New York State Science-4 Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* Stanford Diagnostic Math Test* ESPET	Achievement Aptitude Achievement Achievement Achievement Achievement
Fifth	Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* Stanford Diagnostic Math Test* New York State Social Studies-5 Terra Nova (Reading, Math) School & College Ability Test (SCAT**)	Achievement Achievement Achievement Achievement Aptitude
	*test administered only for remedial population ** SCAT – qualifying test for entrance into Gifted services for grades 4, 5, 6 State Tests highlighted	

Some parents involve themselves in the school by volunteering as in-class helpers and participating in the PTA which boasts a 75% participation rate according to a PTA representative. A School Board Representative affirms the effectiveness of the Cherry Grove PTA at a PTA meeting: *“I marvel at your organization and the continuity of your leadership– I wish the State would work so well.”* He says that the PTA at Cherry Grove is *“phenomenal, sharp, organized, but still*

cooperative”, and *“there is a great spirit of cooperation and mutual respect between the PTA and the teachers.”* *“Parents are highly educated: It’s the best situation,”* says the faculty representative to the PTA.

Besides the PTA, some parents join advocacy groups such as Parent Advocates for High Ability Learners (PAHAL) in order to lobby for programs they believe are in

their children’s best interest. These parents say that the school board “*sometimes acts, but always listens* [to the organization’s requests].”

Teachers and administrators acknowledge parental support as part of the reason for success at Cherry Grove on not only the state tests but on all other standardized tests taken by the students. A teacher describes her impression of Cherry Grove parents: “*I think we’ve got parents’ support. The kids write. They send email messages. They go on vacations. They write in their journals. They do things. They see writing modeled in their home. All that is important ultimately to these tests: Advantaged vs. the disadvantaged.*”

And most parents confirm this belief and assert that their efforts are essential if their children are going to do well in school. A mother describes her view: “*I’m not sure if we weren’t behind them saying ‘What have you got to do?’ and ‘You’ve got to get that in’, and ‘You have certain sets of responsibilities here’, that they wouldn’t just say, ‘I’m not doing it. I don’t care’. You have to get that care attitude ingrained in them. You do care. You care because I care. And I’m going to make your life miserable if you don’t care.*”

Mixed responses

Cherry Grove students’ scores on standardized tests are consistently among the highest in the area: For the 2002-03 school year the district was ranked by a local newspaper as 3rd out of 85 area school districts based on test scores in English, science, math, social studies, and graduation data.

Table 4: Fourth Grade State Test Scores

ELA	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
2000-01	0%	8%	61%	31%
2001-02	0%	11%	48%	41%
2002-03	0%	18%	52%	30%
Math				
2000-01	0%	6%	35%	59%
2001-02	2%	8%	52%	39%
2002-03	0%	8%	52%	39%

Science	Below State Designated Level	Above State Designated Level
2000-01	5%	95%
2001-02	3%	97%
2002-03	8%	92%

Even though state test performance has consistently been exemplary in the Orchard Hill district, perceptions of what the test scores represent, their purpose, and their effects vary widely among parents, teachers, and administrators. These differing perceptions present challenges to the school and community in adhering to a coherent and cohesive plan for academic success.

For many parents the state tests, and the preparation that goes into those tests, does not go unnoticed because they see their children preparing for the tests earlier and earlier in their schooling. A parent notes the pervasiveness of test preparation across grade levels: *“They do practice ELA and even like for the 6th graders now are getting ready for 8th grade ELA tests. And in science and, well for all of them, I guess. They’re starting now so that when they come up in 8th grade they’ll do well on those tests, so it kind of trickles down and gets them younger and younger I think.”*

The pervasiveness of the state tests across grade levels and the perceived emphasis placed on them disturbs some parents because they don’t see them as important. These parents are more concerned about tests of ability that may qualify their children for special programs. *“I get the scores, but they don’t use that information on your child. They don’t use that information... in any way.”*

Although the New York State test scores are used to identify students for AIS (Academic Intervention Services), many parents are still unaware of this if their children have not been identified as qualifying for AIS. So, they wonder if the real purpose of the state tests is to evaluate the teachers and if test scores are an appropriate way to do this. A parent comments: *“But I don’t know that you can assess the teaching methods based on what the kids get on these tests. They might teach, be great teachers, but the kids if they’re not taking it in, they’re not studying it or maybe they don’t care or whatever they’re not going to perform well on the tests.”*

From some teachers’ perspectives, the state tests have provided the focus and incentive for developing more challenging class work and raising expectations of students. A teacher explains: *“I think that assessment actually has driven our instruction, and I think in a better way. To be honest, I’m really in favor of the state assessments. I think they’re rigorous and though it took time, because in the beginning we we’re all panicked about it, I think the instruction is better now because of it.”*

Other teachers feel compelled to prepare students for the tests because they know test scores are published in the newspapers and children are judged according to how they do on them: They don’t necessarily do test preparation because they believe it is the best way to teach or the best way for children to learn. A teacher comments: *“In the end we know that these test scores will be published. They’re going to be in the newspapers. They’re compared not only within the district, but against other schools and I feel as a teacher it’s my job to really best prepare the kids as best I can. So, I never feel pressure from anybody but myself because I want the kids to do as best they can. So, I’ve never been told by an administrator- your test scores are low or I’ve never been told by anybody that I need to teach it a specific way or make sure that they know the rubric but I know as myself I want to make sure that they are doing their best. I feel that this is the best way to prepare the kids so that they can show their potential.”*

Still other teachers wonder why their students seem to be required to take what they see as more and more tests. As this teacher comments: *“It would be interesting to see where this testing all goes. They tell you to give these tests and I don’t know what*

comes out of it. I think that needs to be more clearly defined. What comes out of these tests? Why are we giving a Terra Nova? Why are we giving a June assessment? The Math-4 test?"

Many teachers feel that they must juggle what needs to be covered, in terms of format and content of the tests, with teaching the district's core curriculum which they maintain is their "Bible". A fifth grade teacher comments: *"This [a test practice activity] is taking a lot of time out of things I know that I have to prepare them for so that they have it for the middle school. So, I'm spending September., October, and part of November to teach them how to write a DBQ for the social studies that they are going to be taking, and I don't really know if that's the right way to go."*

Administrators, including district committee heads and the Cherry Grove School Principal see the value of the state tests in informing themselves, their teachers, and the community about where the school may be missing the mark or more hopefully, where they are excelling. They also are resigned to the idea that the State has always mandated assessments and always will, so conforming to those mandates is accepted as the typical mode of operation. However, there are concerns that in a historically high performing district such as Orchard Hill, teachers don't over teach to the test which some see as potentially lowering their own high standards. The Cherry Grove Principal explains this view: *"I think everybody here has accepted the fact that our State has mandated a lot of assessments and now with the NCLB legislation which I think is just now filtering out to the community, so we're not getting a lot of questions about that probably because we traditionally have been successful in any assessments that have come up. As administrators we talk all the time about how do we maintain the position that we shouldn't be focused exclusively on preparing kids for the test as much as preparing kids to deal with those skills necessary to be successful on any kind of assessment. And I think we've done a good job of that. I really do. Our staff, in this building particularly, has over time maintained a position of, 'we need to step away from over-preparing kids for tests and focus on instruction', and I'm comfortable that even through our school council you'll see that that's the route we've taken."*

At question among some parents, teachers, and administrators is in whose "Bible," (the district's core curriculum and "Standards of Excellence" or the State's tests and Standards), should Orchard Hill maintain their allegiance?

What is actually said about the tests, in the words of one fourth grade teacher: *"The tests aren't really a problem for our kids"* – and what is actually done about the tests – test preparation in all subject areas across grade levels – suggests that views concerning the importance of state tests in measuring the district's success and the importance of preparing for the tests, are varied, unstable, and sometimes diverge from the district's vision of excellence in education.

The call to perform

The blinds are closed. Desks previously clustered around a fourth grade classroom in groups of five or six face toward the white board in straight rows. In this room, as in the other three fourth grade classrooms at Cherry Grove, students have placed their “manipulatives” (paper rulers and counters), pencils and books on their desks as they have for each day of testing. The fourth grade teacher waits for the end of morning announcements then begins class for the third and final day of the New York State Math Test.

T: *“Before the test gets here, how many minutes do you have to take this session?”*

Students respond in chorus: *“50.”*

T: *“Why do they give us 50 minutes?”*

S: *“Because they give you just the right amount of time.”*

T: *“Right.”* She pauses, then adds, *“Please use all your test taking skills.”* She pauses again, *“Any questions?”*

A student raises her hand and asks, *“Can I have a pencil?”*

T: *“Yes we’ll pass those out. Do you want minutes remaining?”* (referring to writing the minutes remaining to finish the test on the board.)

Several students raise their hands and say, *“Yes.”*

T: *“Anything else we have to cover?”*

S: *“Can we make the book time like fifteen minutes?”* (“book time” is the amount of test time the students are allowed to use for leisure reading after they finish the test.)

T: *“No we have 10 minutes. Who needed to borrow a pencil today?”*

The teacher hands out pencils to students with their hands raised, walks to the white board and writes: *“You will have 50 minutes to complete session 3. Start: _____”*

She turns to the class and asks,

T: *“Can you make mistakes on this test?”*

Students in chorus reply with a resounding, *“Yes!”*

T: *“Can you fix your mistakes?”*

Again, students respond exuberantly, *“Yes!”*

As the class continues to wait for the Principal to deliver the test, the “Question of the Day” student comes to the front of the room and asks his question. A few minutes pass with the question of the day activity and the teacher says, *“Now we just wait. Those of you who would like to read you may. Those of you who would like to talk quietly to your neighbor you may.”*

Some students talk in hushed voices while others read as they wait. Moments later the Principal arrives with the tests in hand. In a spirited, pep rally voice he begins a chant the students have gotten to know well from the ELA and now the Math test:

Principal: *“Do your best on the-”*

Students: *“Test!”*

Principal: *“If you do your best you’ll be better than the-”*

Students: *“Rest!”*

The Principal's chant is only one of the many ways Cherry Grove students are encouraged to do their best on the state mandated tests. The message of the chant frames the test as an opportunity to rise to a competitive challenge. The Cherry Grove Principal describes his vision of competition: *"I'm not an advocate of competition for kid versus kid. I'm an advocate for motivating kids to better themselves or challenge themselves and hopefully be rewarded for that kind of challenge."*

Cherry Grove teachers and students must challenge themselves since, as one fourth grade teacher put it, *"these kids don't seem to be rattled by the test."* However, just as a top performing team is expected to outperform other teams, a high scoring school such as Cherry Grove is expected to outscore other schools. So, keeping state test requirements in sight is important. The Assistant Superintendent explains: *"In a community that already has high expectations for the school district and the performance of its children in all areas, whether its academics, music, art, or athletics- [a report of state test scores] maintains those expectations and even raises them. Which I think is a positive thing. We are blessed with a community that has the education of its children as a really high priority. Property owners tell us that by far the reason people are moving into this area is the school system. So, people come in with high expectations and our community is generally supportive of education and of the schools."*

With the State's bar low in terms of their own district standards, stakes high in terms of accountability to the State and community, administrators and teachers try to reassure students that they are likely to do just fine on the tests and that the responsibility for doing well on the tests is not solely on them. At the same time they must make students aware of how important the tests are to the school, teachers and their parents. So, well before a state test arrives at a fourth grade classroom door, Cherry Grove fourth graders are reassured that they have been prepared. They have been taught how many minutes they have to complete each section of the test, how many questions are on each section, how different types of questions are scored, and much more as in this class a week before the state math test:

T: *"In your manipulative packet..., next week you'll be given a clean one that hasn't been used, right now you should have a ruler that measures centimeters and inches. I can guarantee one part of the test they are going to ask you to measure something, probably trying to figure out the length of something. Next thing you should have in your manipulative kit are purple squares. These are counters. Please push those off to the side."*

After review of a few math questions from previous years' tests, the teacher assures the class: *"You are ready for this test: You are absolutely without a doubt ready for this test. The reason we are doing [test practice] today is so that next week when you get the test, you'll know session two because 'Mrs. T. showed us session two.'"*

In addition to reassuring the students they are prepared, some teachers also try to take pressure off the students by talking about the responsibility the teachers and their principal have for their success. A third grade teacher says: *“I do a lot of reading about tests with them. There are different trade books that we talk about. One of them is actually right up there, it’s “Testing Ms. Malarkey”: It’s a good book. It talks about how everyone gets stressed out about taking a test and how it’s not just for the kids. You know. The pressure’s on the principal. The pressure’s on the teachers. The pressure’s on the support staff...everyone. It’s really testing everybody I guess. I try to make it that way so again you can spread out the uneasiness. I tell my kids if you try hard I’ll be proud of you. If you go rush through it, I’m gonna be upset. And I think for the most part they understand that.”*

This teacher continues: *“I do a lot to alleviate the stress. I sit them down and say, ‘You know what? This isn’t a test about you. It’s a test I want to know if I’m teaching you.’ So I try to put all the pressure back on me. And I don’t know that, for some of the kids I think they buy that. For other kids they don’t buy it. You know it depends on the kid.”* In this way, some teachers send the message that the entire school is working toward the same goals together. The “uneasiness” about the tests is shared by everyone. So, students don’t need to feel wholly responsible for their state test scores.

Different teachers, however, respond to the demands of the tests in different ways. In a conversation shortly before the ELA, two fourth grade teachers talk about how they deal with the call to prepare students for the tests:

T1: *“[Fourth grade teachers] are not stressing so [students] are not stressing. We say ok we’ve got to do some ELA practice because the test is coming. Do it. Ok. We’ll try it. Put it away.”*

She turns to another fourth grade teacher and asks: *“Do you find that? Do you find that you have been stressing over the ELA? I’m not finding stress because I’m not stressing and maybe I should be... I find my kids are competent writers.”*

T2: *“They’re competent writers. I’m not worried about whether they’re competent writers. I’m worried about whether they’re going to choose the details that the test thinks they ought to choose. They’re not putting enough details in to support their answers. They’re beautiful writers, but are they doing what the test wants them to do? No. Two different things.”*

T2 in this excerpt teaches a classroom with a number of special education students. So, her issues with meeting the expectations for the test are different in some ways than the other three fourth grade teachers who have few, to no, special education students in their classrooms. She also points out the issue of differences between her own definition of competency in writing and the State’s: An issue arising again and again in all of the fourth grade classrooms.

In addition to trying to communicate to students the conflicting message that the tests are not that important for them, but then again they are, teachers and administrators also try to settle some parents' worries about tests and test scores. At Back to School Night, for example, fourth grade teachers tell parents that they *"don't put pressure and don't talk about the tests," "the curriculum is not about testing,"* and *"the fourth grade curriculum is interesting and hands-on."* They also reassure parents that the teachers *"don't say anything about the tests to the kids before January."*

Letter to parents:

We appreciate your assistance in providing a quiet study spot at home and by encouraging your child to review the material [Social Studies review book] from time to time. Developing good organizational and study habits is a process that requires time, patience, and practice, yet reaps life long benefits. Thank you for your continued support.

Sincerely, Fifth Grade Teachers

However, the administration is also aware of the need to explain to parents what the school is doing in terms of testing and test preparation. They also want to enlist parents to help their children succeed on the tests. One of the ways the principal and teachers rally parents' support is by providing Cherry Grove parents a review book entitled "Mastering the NYS Grade 5 Social Studies Test." This review book is accompanied by a letter to parents outlining a suggested time line for covering practice exercises for the state test and a call for their support in preparing for the test.

In addition, the district provides a brochure ("A Parents' Guide to Standardized Testing") which explains why the district administers standardized tests and outlines all of the standardized tests given in the district. Also, the Cherry Grove school sends home letters before each of the state tests to encourage parents to ensure their children have *"eaten a good breakfast and gotten a good night's rest"* before they take their tests. The Principal explains: *"We've sent a letter home in advance of every test reminding parents of the dates and the times and what we hope their kids will be ready to do. And again we send a letter home with the results after state testing."* Ultimately, parents, students, teachers, administrators and all the staff at Cherry Grove are called upon to ensure high test scores, but it is at the district level that a coherent vision of how those test scores are going to be achieved takes place.

Alignment

To succeed on the 4th grade and subsequent state tests, curriculum committee heads along with the CCRs (committee representatives from each school), the Assistant Superintendent, and school principals have devised several strategies for success. Like many other districts, a main strategy for integrating the State Standards and testing requirements into the district curriculum has been to align the district curriculum to State Standards while keeping the state tests and the format required for answers on them in mind. In a language arts committee meeting, held shortly before the fourth grade ELA, CCRs discuss issues raised by teachers in their respective schools with regard to achieving this alignment. They talk about:

- How not to make what the bottom third of students need to do for the test, dictate what they do for all students.
- How to respond to the new rules about special education modifications (making the students fill in all the bubbles even if they don't know the answer or can't/don't want to complete the test).
- How to respond to the emphasis of multiple choice questions versus writing on the ELA test.

In addition, the Language Arts Committee discusses plans for offering professional development activities in areas where they believe teaching could be improved such as summer workshops concentrating on the connection of reading and writing. They do this since they believe that their students need to improve on their abilities to write critically about what they have read and to edit their writing. The committee finds both of these issues are reflected on the state tests.

A mid school-year science committee meeting discussion also centers on alignment. The committee reviews the State's "Core Guide" which shows the K-4 science alignment and breaks down the standards. The curriculum committee had broken down those standards into grade alignments and levels of mastery. For example:

E= exposure
 I=instruction
 M=mastery
 R=review

Standard	K	1	2	3	4
1	E	M	R	R	

In the committee meeting they try to outline what content is being covered in each grade level, take out what is not in the Core Guide, and add what is.

The Cherry Grove CCR explains the process of aligning the science curriculum to the standards and tests. She says that since the "Core Guide" came out the district has been focusing the curriculum on the new standards and tests. Also the district decided to adopt STC (Science and Technology for Children) kits to provide the hands on experience students would need for the performance section of the state test. According to the CCR, for the 2002-03 school year, STC kits are used at each grade level. Some grade levels use two. Others use optional kits bringing the number up to three or four. She summarizes: *"What we've done in the Science Department is look at K-4. We're really in the process of aligning the curriculum and making sure concepts are taught at an early grade and built upon, and built upon, and built upon until they reach the assessment period at grade 4. So, instead of having piecemeal instruction a little bit of this concept and that concept, we're looking really closely at the State Standards and the state assessments, and trying to align everything so that the kids get richer instruction, but fewer scattered topics, and not as many repetitions as they go through the years."*

Process of Alignment in Science

2001-02: Alignment of core guide to standards. K-4 teachers met and identified what content they were teaching and to what extent: I-introductory, M-mastery, E-exposure, R-review

2002-03: Topics chart was revised to coordinate with the alignment of the core guide and standards.

Over the 2003 summer: Each grade level gets a binder including lessons and assessments.

-Cherry Grove Curriculum Committee Representative

A fourth grade teacher comments on how the state tests have provided an incentive for teachers to align the curriculum to the standards and across grade levels: *"It's made teachers focus on the actual New York State objectives and I think that's very good because*

there have been units we've taught in the past that really didn't match what needed to be done for the New York State Standards, so in that respect we've gone back and done some analysis of what we do and what's expected and what the kids do need to know and we've adjusted. We're not doing a 'Rocks and Minerals' unit because it wasn't really expected and some of the other skills we've sort of beefed up, so that we could make those units more appropriate to the standards."

One of the products of the committees' alignment work is the subject area "binder". The social studies binder, for example, is the result of an effort to align the curriculum across elementary, middle and high schools that started around 1997, according to a Cherry Grove teacher. She recounts the role of the binder: *"This binder is to help the 5th grade teachers align their Social Studies units to the NYS Standards"*. The social studies binder includes the following sections:

- Introduction
- NYS testing information for parents
- A "Back to School Night" letter
- Sample test copy
- Guidelines for DBQ and constructed response questions
- Examples of questions
- Historical Documents
- Content Units

Each binder is unique to the content area. A fourth grade teacher shows me the math binder: *"This sheet,"* she explains *"has been derived from exercises and the McGraw-Hill math book,"* which was adopted in 2002-03 by the entire district. The teacher explains that she made exercises linked to the "strands" from the district to complement the binder. The "strands" are tied to the State Standards. She says that in the Spring of 2002-03 there was a district wide math meeting in which teachers in grades one through four met to discuss how they could:

1. Reduce redundancies where they were over-teaching a concept and...
2. Introduce concepts at different grade levels.

She says this comes from a feeling that *“the students in fourth grade don’t have certain skills and they have a lot of skills in areas which are not emphasized in the state curriculum.”* The Math Department, according to this fourth grade teacher, is attempting to use the same process that the science department is using in which they map out the district math strands, the State Standards, and where students are in the range of “emerging” to “mastery,” in different grade levels.

Showing results

Orchard Hill administrators know the school report cards that appear in local newspapers and district bulletins show *“only the numbers.”* They also know that those *“numbers”* are sometimes misunderstood. An administrator recounts her experiences with test score reporting: *“The test scores are not always reported in the media the way they actually are. Sometimes it’s the fault of the actual data that we have gotten from the State that’s been incorrect and other times it’s been the fault of being misinterpreted by the media. This last roll-out they had was delayed. It was my understanding it was delayed because there was difficulty interpreting some of the data.”*

The media, to this administrator, is merely getting *“information from wherever they can get it. They’re obviously going to any State web site they can find anything on. They’re going to any of the data that the districts will share with them.”* So, although administrators know the test score reports presented by the media show a limited picture of how well the schools in the district are doing, they are important for several reasons nonetheless. One district administrator explains that the test scores can have an *“impact on real estate and the ability of the district to attract teachers.”* This is a particularly important issue to the district Staff Development Director since, she says, *“the district has experienced tremendous turn-over in faculty due to retirements,”* and they want to hire experienced people to fill their positions.

In addition, administrators recognize the importance of showing results by way of test scores because parents pay attention to them. But when standardized test scores and in-class assessments show different results, some parents feel confused and even deceived. A parent recounts her response to her daughter’s standardized test score: *“[My daughter’s] teachers have always praised her writing, but when I got the writing test score it was lower than all the rest. It wasn’t a low score but it was lower than I would have thought based on what her teachers had told me...I said to her, ‘Your teachers always told me how well you write.’ I know I sounded like a monster when I said it. I should just be grateful, shouldn’t I, because she loves to write?”* So, although parents

The following points will impact development of the 2003-04 budget:

Academic achievement is a priority in this district. The performance of our students must remain high. This must be achieved within the District’s local tax base to balance the desires for affordable taxes and outstanding school programs....

- From the Budget Development and Communications Plan

receive plenty of information about their children's in-class and standardized test scores, with so many different tests with so many different scales for comparing those scores some parents have difficulty making sense of it all.

Administrators raise another issue emerging from misunderstandings about standardized test scores. The Math Curriculum Committee Head describes times when parents of children who received high scores on state tests, expected that their children would be placed in a particular high ability group. *“When a child says they got a level 3, it sounds pretty good. But, it could be very low and it could be one point above a level 2. Most of the children in [Orchard Hill] do get levels 3 and 4, so that doesn't really tell us much except they did better than a good portion of the kids across the State. [The state test] is designed for children in the most disadvantaged place in New York City or Buffalo or wherever, and for children in very wealthy districts who live in communities where all of the parents are either engineers or professionals or something like that, we need to differentiate. And as a result we don't see that that fourth grade test, especially the fourth grade, but to a certain extent the eighth grade too, differentiates enough for us to be able to place kids properly. Parents will say, 'my child got a level 4', assuming my child is the best in the State. That's not true. There's a lot of distribution in the level 4 grade. So we take a look at the local percentile. We do not look at the levels as much as if we're going to place a kid in a low, a middle, or above average class. We take a look at how they did compared to the rest of the children here in Orchard Hill.”*

In general, as one teacher claims: *“I think parents in this community expect the best”* and in Orchard Hill many children do score above average on standardized tests, but this does not always equate to above average performance in the classroom. Teachers, therefore, find themselves explaining to parents that, *“the scores reveal how the student performs on the activities on the test, but are not equal to ability or performance in class.”* This is a tricky message to get across since most parents see the state tests as tests of the district curriculum. Taken a step further, some parents see the state tests as tests of how well the teachers are teaching the curriculum. In a parent discussion group in which some parents commiserate with the pressures on fourth grade teachers due to the high stakes attached to state tests, others talk about their perceptions of the teachers' responsibility in preparing students for the state tests: *“I'm not a teacher. I'm not. But I would expect a teacher to know that their class is going to be tested at the end or middle of the year on the curriculum. So, I don't see where someone could say it would be hard for the fourth grade teacher if they already know that that curriculum is going to be on the test, and this is what they're going to be tested for. If they're doing their job correctly it won't be hard for them.”* So, some parents expect state test scores to be high if the teachers are doing their job (i.e. teaching the curriculum). This assumes that the content of the curriculum and the content of the tests are closely aligned.

Some teachers say parents' expectations with regard to showing good results on state tests have increased and become the primary issue of discussion between teachers and parents. A teacher explains her frustration with having to explain in detail what she does in preparation for the state tests instead of talking about what she teaches and how she teaches it: *"At Back to School Night, [parents] don't care what [students] are doing in the classroom. They don't care what your rules and consequences are. They want to know how you're getting my kids ready for the tests. The last two years I've been drilled on that. 'Well, what are you doing to get them ready for the ELA in four?' And I'm like, 'Well, it's a process.' I'm not starting the ELA four practice tests now, but I do have to spend some time talking about the process, as to, have we prepared them for the ELA, for the Math, for the Social Studies in 5th?"*

According to a teacher, the message of the importance of showing results on the state tests moves on to students via primarily the parents: *"Parents realize the importance of the tests so the parents talk to their kids. That's where I think [stress on test scores] comes from. I know it's not coming from me. I don't think it comes from the administration. I think the administration pretty much feels that we do a good job of preparing our kids academically and we do a good job of preparing our kids for the tests."*

However, from some parents' perspectives, there is too much pressure on children to perform well on the tests and they see that pressure coming from the school. A parent says: *"The teachers talk to the kids about the testing so you hear it from your kids too, that the tests are coming up."* Some parents' concerns over how their children are being pressured to do well on tests are confirmed by staff members at the school who recall overhearing teachers talking to students about tests. They say that some teachers warn students that if they don't try really hard and do well on the state tests, they'll be pulled out of their classrooms for AIS. AIS (Academic Intervention Services) is the supplemental assistance schools are required to give to all students falling below the passing score on the state tests. As a third grade teacher admits, AIS is not something teachers want students to have to do: *"It's high stakes now. You don't do well on the ELA you're automatically in AIS. It doesn't matter if you have A's. You're automatically in it. And you don't want to put a kid in that situation."*

From the desk of the principal...

Dear Parent: ...Often children do poorly on tests because they get overly anxious. Many feel that their parents' love for them is tied directly to school performance. Make sure your child understands that you won't withdraw your affection if he or she fails to produce top grades...

...you can also advise some test-taking strategies:

- *Don't take too much time struggling with a difficult question. Answer the easier ones first; then return to the tough ones.*
- *If there's a reading passage followed by questions, read the questions first. This will help your child know what to look for.*
- *Use estimation with multiple choice mathematics items. It will often be the quickest way to find the most sensible answer.*

This advice, plus day-to-day encouragement will help your child do his or her very best on important standardized tests".

(From Cherry Grove PTA Newsletter, March, 2003)

Special needs children with IEP's (Individual Educational Plans) have even more challenges reaching the expectations of the tests. Parents of IEP students wonder why their children have to take the state tests at all, much less be reminded of how important they are in light of all the other tests they must take to qualify for special education services. But, as the State continues to limit the criteria for who can be exempted from the state tests, who can receive test modifications and what kinds of test modifications they can receive, the pressure increases to make sure that even the *"skills kids – low functioning"*, in the words of a district administrator, show results. He explains: *"We used to tell [students with IEP's] to close your book, but now we're going to make them fill [the "bubble" sheet] in. Our kids have to do better than 1's or they don't get counted...the message: 'Don't get 1's.'"*

Not getting 1's has become important to the district since, according to another district administrator, each schools' performance on the SPI (State Performance Index) (an index to show students' relative strengths and weaknesses in relation to key ideas) is calculated by adding the percent of students scoring a Level 2, 3, and 4. The percent of students who score a Level 2, for example, are counted once and the percent of students who score in Levels 3 & 4 are counted twice. Level 1 scores do not "count" in this performance index.

In the resource room, encouraging special education students to use the extra time to complete the ELA test strains some of them to their limits. A teacher responds to a special education student's question:

T: *"I can't tell you what to do."*

The student crosses her arms as her eyes well with tears. She then sits rubbing her pencil eraser at a scab on her arm. This student later asks another question and the teacher rephrases the question for her. She again begins to cry quietly. The teacher responds in a soft voice,

T: *"It's a test. Just do the best you can."*

The girl stares at the wall for a minute or so then rubs her eyes.

After more than an hour and a half she and two other students are still not done with the test. The teachers say *"multi-step problem solving"* is a challenge for these students because they wonder *"where to begin?"* The last student is finally released after two hours. A teacher comments: *"He is mad. He just wanted out."*

Showing results on the state tests requires delivering divergent messages: The tests are important, but not critical; students are responsible for their scores, but not completely; teachers are accountable for students' test performance, but not entirely either; parents are responsible for students' success, but so is the school; test scores show how well students understand the standards, but not necessarily show how well students perform in the classroom. The school also must try to both satisfy the parents who see the

test scores as not that important while placate those who do, and serve the needs of the neediest students humanely while still demand that they take and finish the tests.

Exceeding the standards

“This test is really a floor not a ceiling.”

“The State can only test to a certain standard, but you as a district are really doing a lot that cannot be measured on this test.”

These are the consoling comments offered to third and fourth grade teachers at a district science in-service intended to, among other things, outline the changes to the fourth grade state science test scheduled for the 2003-04 school year. Teachers at this district-wide meeting are abundantly aware of the demands of the state tests and the district’s goals to keep ahead of changes to the tests, align the curriculum and tests, and thereby show results, but they consistently run up against the challenge of meeting these goals while still meeting the high expectations of the Orchard Hill community.

The outcome of trying to meet the demands of the tests and maintain and improve upon the school’s performance is particularly clear to more seasoned teachers in the school. A veteran teacher in the district asserts: *“What I’ve seen in behavior and being around the schools I think sometimes standards do a disservice to the Orchard Hill district because we had our standards of excellence long before the State implemented standards. We had standards of excellence in our school district.”*

Some teachers say they want to know where they are not meeting the State’s Standards and they see the tests as helping them understand this in some ways. But, teachers don’t always agree with what the State counts as “meeting the standards” on the tests. These points of dissension become overtly confronted at times during test scoring. State test scoring, according to an administrator, provides *“an ideal place for teachers to come to a better understanding of the State’s Standards on the tests.”* Scoring sessions also provide a window into where teachers’, schools’, and the State’s perceptions of what counts for competency diverge. In state math test scoring, for example, a teacher (T1) asks for clarification from the scoring group including the facilitator (F-facilitator) of a question calling for the measurement of an object. For that question, the scoring rubric says that a student can get a full score for a freehand drawing of an object instead of a ruler-measured drawing. She exclaims:

T1: “[A freehand-drawn object] *is not acceptable!*”

F: *“By our standards no. But State Standards, yes.”*

T1: *“That really irritates me!”*

The scoring group discusses how across the State everybody will be using the same scoring rubric and that although what the rubric accepts is less than what Orchard Hill teachers would normally accept, they have to follow the rubric. One teacher reminds

another: *“Don’t make it so hard on our kids when – by our standards [accepting freehand drawn objects] is not OK, but by the State Standards it is. Don’t penalize our babies.”*

“I’m tougher on my own kids”, and *“It’s too lenient”*, are common refrains throughout the scoring session. This kind of disjunction between the district’s and school’s expectations of performance and the State’s expectations, vis-à-vis the State tests, reveals an underlying tension in playing the assessment game by the State’s rules.

What Orchard Hill teachers think is important is not always what the State thinks is important and vice versa. In some cases, the State asks for more than what teachers are accustomed to expecting in the classroom. During the training session before math test scoring a facilitator (F) explains a sample problem and its scoring:

F: *“The State has jumped right out...what the State is saying is you cannot put numbers in and show a check and say it is shown work.”*

T: *“What if your strategy is guess and check?”*

F: *“They have to show three...”*

T2: *“As long as they explain guess and check.”*

T3: *“But they’ll allow $3+3=6$ in another problem.”*

F: *“But that was a number problem.”*

And in another scoring exchange, teachers learn how important it is for their students to show their work in the ways the scoring rubric requires.

T: *“They really do have a hard time with showing proof. It’s a difficult concept for them.”*

T2: *“It is a taught skill. If they aren’t taught it they won’t do it.”*

Whether the tests are a floor, a ceiling, both, or neither confronts parents as well. Some parents question the preparation they see their children doing specifically for tests if it means that they will be working below their own ability level. Parents in a group discussion talk about their discomfort with the test preparation they see going on in Orchard Hill.

P1: *“It’s a waste of a day that could have been spent doing instruction or doing something fun.”*

P2: *“It’s a waste of a year because they’re not learning.”*

P3: *“They have no anxiety over taking the test.”*

P2: *“But they also are being forced to practice every single day.”*

A fourth grade teacher echoes this concern about students’ work preparing for the ELA: *“It’s interesting because I’ve seen some kids take it a step higher and do a better job and take it beyond that little interpretation and really apply the ideas and really pull*

it together, synthesize the information, and give a truly better answer. But I could see somebody with their scoring blinders on not even giving full credit for a better answer. So, sometimes as most things that are standardized they shoot for the middle. They don't shoot for excellence which I think maybe does a disservice for school districts like ours because we shoot for excellence. I don't think standards always shoot for excellence. They can lead to some mediocrity if you're dealing with an upper level population."

Between a rock and a hard place

Although many Orchard Hill administrators, teachers, and parents rally behind the call to align the curriculum to the standards and focus on showing results on the tests, some in the Orchard Hill community wonder if students' learning is really suffering because of it. A fifth grade teacher voices her concerns: *"I do think now our curriculums are being aligned, but we are now seeing children, who at one point, came in with more skills, that they no longer have, because there's no way they can cover curriculum the way they used to and still prepare these kids for the test. So, I mean truthfully, in my opinion, fourth grade teachers are between a rock and a hard place, and I think it's unfair to them, number one, and then also to the children. And I think the upper-grade teachers are seeing this more and more, and our frustration comes in because we're having to teach things, we can't get through all of our curriculum, because the children may not have had something because they're spending a lot time in preparation for a test."*

Neglecting some skills while emphasizing others because of a focus on the state tests is not the only concern of teachers. Some believe that their curriculum planning process is compromised when curriculum decisions are based on test deadlines rather than on what students need, when they need it. A fourth grade teacher explains: *"Because our Math test is given in May our entire curriculum has to be taught and covered by spring break, and you can't get around that. So, when we sit down as a team during the summer, we start at the test date and work backwards, and if you don't feel ready to give a certain test, you have to. It doesn't matter if you feel ready to. If you feel you need a couple more days, you can't because you are very scheduled to cover. And I keep track of the skills that certain students didn't get on the test and I keep track of the objectives. I keep a checklist, but by the time you have time to review that at the end of the year, you can review, but that doesn't mean the child is re-learning that information appropriately."*

Another teacher shares her perception that regardless of when the state tests are given, students will be ready for the tests when they are ready, which will not necessarily be on the state test schedule: *"We, at one time in fifth grade had to give a writing test that has now been taken from us. I think that was actually age appropriate, in my opinion at the fifth grade. I really don't think the children are ready [in fourth grade] because again, there are a lot of skills that are needed for writing that they just don't have. And it would be better to put it back with us, or even move it to the sixth grade."*

In some teachers' views, focusing on the fourth grade tests has meant overlooking some skills needed for fifth grade. One of the results of this perception has been increasing numbers of fifth grade students being referred for support services to catch up. There has been an increase in numbers of referrals to special education over the past several years, but the actual numbers of students qualifying for those services has not gone up in turn. Whether state test preparation is one of the causes for this increase is unclear, but it is clear that administrators and teachers employ a variety of strategies to prepare students for the tests.

Strategies

The district level strategy of providing a coherent vision for state test success including aligning to the standards, and gaining insight into any changes to test format and test scoring is paralleled by teachers. Teachers align their preparation activities to what they have seen on past years' tests. They also provide students with insight into the test format and scoring by using past years' tests, rubrics, and review materials, as in this pre-ELA class.

Students huddle around the teacher on the carpet to review their essays from a previous year's ELA test:

T: *"How many times are we going to read the question? Show me with your fingers."*

The students raise two fingers.

T: *"That's right. Two times. That's a good strategy for anything you do in school. Like with schedules. Looking for information. Another thing I think we need to work on- You need to use details! You need to think with your five senses. You get a picture in your brain, what you're smelling, tasting."*

The teacher sifts through a stack of papers on her lap.

T: *"I want to share some examples of what you should do."*

She reads the ELA writing prompt aloud once and then again, emphasizing each part of the directions.

T: *"I've got some good ones and some other ones that are not so good."*

I thought this was a very creative one: 'The escape of the lab toads'. Listen to all the details. Listen to all the dialogue in the story."

The students listen. Some look around and whisper *"Is it yours?"* The student who wrote the story nods her head 'yes' and beams.

T: *"Remember Mrs. T said take a risk like using a big word like 'dissect'. All the dialogue was great. The setting was great. What was the setting?"*

S: *"In the springtime- right after Easter."*

T: *"You're using your imagination here. She used wonderful details. She even gave her toads names. We had a setting. We had a plot. She had a beginning, middle, and an end. And when you're all done you look back at the question. Did she answer the question?"*

Students answer: *"Yes."*

The teacher moves on to another example. She prefaces the story reading, *"The dialogue was good, but she got a little mixed up."* She reads the story aloud. Again the

students sit quietly for the reading and look around for someone to acknowledge it's theirs. The teacher asks, "*Do we have a story problem?*" Students respond hesitantly: "Yes."

The teacher explains that the story was a little bit confusing and tells students that they need to be careful about organizing their detail. She directs the students to plan their story so the pieces fit together. She tells them, "*I don't want to single anyone out, but sometimes we need to hear bad examples so we know what we need to do.*" After several more "good" and "bad" examples, the students are dismissed to their seats to do a unit reading test.

Like the teacher in the previous excerpt, most Cherry Grove teachers feel they need to make clear what the vision of "good" and "bad" on the state tests is: They prepare them through the use of class textbooks and test preparation materials that include questions like the questions on the state tests and try to make these practice sessions instructive. Some also provide guidance on how to avoid what they characterize as "test tricks," follow the test directions, and answer questions according to what the scoring rubric accepts as correct. Although potentially monotonous for some students and stressful for others, these types of class work are justified by some teachers because they believe students will avoid the "*shock*" of being confronted with an unfamiliar test, be able to answer questions the way the rubric wants them to, and therefore, have a fair chance of "*showing what they know*" at test time.

A fourth grade teacher sums up this viewpoint with regard to ELA preparation: "*In order for the kids to do well, they not only have to be good writers, and good listeners and have all of those necessary skills, but they need to be comfortable with the format of the test. And so I found that in December and January there's a lot of not just focusing on the writing, but just teaching them how the State grades tests. And I feel like in order for the kids to do well they need to understand the format and they need to know how the teachers are grading it. So, I just mentioned the tests at the end of last week [Mid-December]. I hadn't even mentioned that they are taking a test until just then and so I did mention the test. I said that when they do take the tests, there are going to be rubrics used. And so I just started to get into, 'this question would be a two point rubric and in order for you to get maximum points you need to make sure that you're following the directions. You need to have an example from the story because they've asked for that here. You need to answer that first part of the question and there are sometimes two part questions.' So you really have to get into the format and how it's graded and then do a lot of examples. I tell them 'this type of answer would get a two. This type of answer would get a one on that question.'*

that information in. So, I'm not just teaching the writing. I'm not just teaching some of the ELA skills. I have to teach format."

As this teacher makes clear, even though she's confident in her students' skills, the test requires students to show these skills in a certain format. In many teachers' views, preparing students to perform well on the tests requires setting aside time to teach the test format. Although some teachers view teaching the format of the tests as rolling over to playing the State's testing game, others view this strategy as a move toward better instruction and a way of supporting the students', schools', and districts' success.

Rolling over

"Every teacher at every grade level has a list of objectives that they have to cover in their class. We have a test for every kid in the district based on those objectives. Our seven strands are not exactly the same as the seven key ideas from the State, but they're pretty close. Teachers have to meet the objectives in the binder. They have to give the strand tests. They have to use the vocabulary out of McGraw-Hill because that's what we've standardized on as far as vocabulary goes. We've keyed all our objectives to the McGraw-Hill book now so they know where to go to find them. It's a little bit uncomfortable in rolling over from doing your own thing to all of the sudden having to use a book, but most people do appreciate it. But, we try to discourage any... if we see it, of teaching to the tests. Does it happen? Of course it happens."

- Math K-12 Department Coordinator

Even though at Orchard Hill, textbooks are adopted with the explicit intention of meeting the standards, not necessarily to prepare students for the format of standardized tests, texts not dominated by test-like formats are hard to find these days according to one teacher: "[Textbook companies] are all developing their basal series to match with the ELA-4....There are sections in the Scott-Foresman series that talk about test preparation, so you're teaching testing

skills. You're doing a lot of the writing. There's always a listening part. You're doing a lot of the compare and contrast and paired passage things when you're doing just your

RE: K-6 Curriculum Alignment and Mapping Project

The NYS mathematics curriculum, as well as ours at Orchard Hill, have undergone significant changes in the past few years. At the elementary level, the State published the new "Core Curriculum Guide" and implemented an assessment at Grade 4. We responded by making adjustments as these new State mandates became effective. Then, during the past two years, we adopted a new textbook series for grades K-6.

- (Letter to elementary teachers, grades K-6 from the K-12 Curriculum Coordinator)

weekly units.” This is also the case in the math curriculum, as a second grade teacher explains: *“We did have a practice book that correlated to the math Terra Nova’s last year in second grade... so I guess it drives your textbook decisions too.”*

The Math District Curriculum Coordinator explains the effort to adopt new textbooks across grade levels and how this effort entails trying to both meet the standards and prepare students for the format of standardized tests: *“We have just, this year in grades K-3, got [new math textbooks]. 4, 5, and 6 last year. So now over the course of two school years we’ve gotten K-6 new textbooks. This next year we’ll bring 7th and 8th in because we have very old textbooks that didn’t meet the standards. There were no open ended, extended questions.”*

Although new textbooks like the Scott-Foresman series for language arts and the McGraw-Hill series for math both meet the standards and provide models of the types of questions students will encounter on the state tests, Orchard Hill also uses supplemental materials specifically intended for state test preparation. These materials include:

Table 5: Test Preparation Materials

Content Area	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade
Language Arts	“Skills Worksheets” from Scott-Foresman basal reader	Previous years’ State tests “The New York State English Language Arts Coach, Grade 4” “Skills Worksheets” from Scott-Foresman basal reader “Mastering New York’s Grade 4 ELA Test”	
Math	“Success on Standardized Tests” from McGraw-Hill	Previous years’ State tests “Success on Standardized Tests” from McGraw-Hill	“Success on Standardized Tests” from McGraw-Hill
Science		“Lifesaver Lesson Science” “Measuring Up to the New York State Learning Standards and Success Strategies for the State Test”	
Social Studies		“The New York State Story”	Previous years’ State tests “Mastering New York’s Grade 5 Social Studies Test”

Even though preparing specifically for state tests through test preparation materials is looked at disparagingly by most teachers and administrators, these materials

are used and new ones continue to be bought. The Science Curriculum Committee Head explains the rationale behind adopting a science review book: *“I know we did order a review book. Some companies came out with different review books for the ESPET (Elementary Science Program Evaluation Test) exam. We only had a certain amount of money... I ordered one copy for each of my 4th grade teachers and for the reading teachers that do the AIS programs, so that they would at least have access to some of the extended answer questions because in the past it’s all been objective questions and now there’s going to be more writing. And I wanted the teachers to be more aware and make the students more aware of extended answer questions.*

He thinks that teachers need help with teaching how to write for the extended questions in science and that this type of review book can allay some of the teachers’ concerns about the new test. So, to assuage fears and ensure success on the tests, test preparation materials are utilized. This strategy is supported by the curriculum committees and the teachers who make choices and recommendations for textbooks and review materials.

Besides attributing the adoption of certain textbooks and review books to the emphasis on teaching the format of the state tests, some teachers also attribute the institution of other tests such as the Terra Nova to preparing for state tests. One teacher feels that, *“The Terra Nova was a direct result [of the state tests].* The Assistant Superintendent says that *“2003 was the district’s fourth year of Terra Nova testing.”* The State started administering the ELA in 1999. He explains, *“We had previously given a different standardized test. When the committee met to evaluate testing we recommended the move to the Terra Nova to have complimentary assessments in alternate years.”* The District Math Coordinator adds that the state mandated tests be given in non-state test grade levels for AIS identification and the Terra Nova was one of several test options.

District benchmark tests are nothing new to Orchard Hill either, but tests such as the newly revamped district “Reading and Writing Assessment” in third grade *“requiring you to do paired and listening passages”* according to a third grade teacher, was designed specifically to mimic the state tests. Benchmark tests are seen as *“instructional tools”* by some teachers rather than tests and have been a part of what some see as Orchard Hill’s effort to take a proactive stance to the state tests.

Besides changes in materials, textbooks, standardized and district benchmark tests, some teachers also see a relationship between the state tests and changes in how the curriculum gets taught. A third grade teacher, for example, sees the emphasis on explanations in writing, word problems in math, mapping and interpreting political cartoons in social studies, attributable to the state tests. She finds that the tests have caused *“stress on being able to explain your answers in writing. I mean a lot of kids can explain to me the process of regrouping or something like that, but explaining how you came to an answer. I mean that’s really hard.”*

This teacher explains how the tests have impacted what she chooses to focus on in her classroom: *“I’m not starting the ELA-4 practice tests now, but I do have to spend*

some time talking about the process as to how we prepare them for the ELA, for the Math, for the Social Studies in fifth because one of the things about the Social Studies in fifth grade is part of the test is on third grade curriculum. So, I have to do an extra good job because they've got to remember it for fourth and fifth grade. So, I've ended up having to revamp a lot of my social studies because I need to hit things. I need to hit political cartoons pretty hard with them because that's something the fifth grade test has and it's something that I never taught the third graders before because they never understood. You know because there's usually a deeper meaning to a political cartoon and it's hard for these guys: They're more literal thinkers right now. So, we do a lot with that."

Teachers such as this one wonder how much "hitting" test format and content is enough to ensure success on the tests and when it is too early to start that practice. Since the district administration, including the curriculum heads, encourage all teachers to take responsibility for teaching what will be expected on the state tests, some skills that in the past were reserved for later grades are being introduced earlier and earlier. A member of the special education staff talks about the readiness of children to do the tasks they're being asked to do in preparation for the state tests: *"First grade, expecting a child to put together a paragraph- developmentally is their brain ready to handle all that information? There's so much multi-tasking involved, short term memory. You know being able to sound spell effectively so that they can read back and understand what they just wrote and finish the context and finish the sentence."*

For some teachers, however, being ready to do what the state tests require is simply a matter of preparation. A third grade teacher says, *"You have to get them in the habit [of writing to prompts]."* She queries, *"Are they really ready?"* And responds, *"You have to be exposed to know how to do it."* While it's difficult to know whether the work being required of students in the grades leading up to fourth grade is developmentally appropriate or not, many classroom teachers, special education teachers and other support service personnel at the school voice concerns over trying to get all students ready for the tests in time.

The state test timetable leaves the Math Curriculum Coordinator and the Curriculum Committee trying to decide where certain skills should best be introduced and how those skills would be taught across grade levels. *"One of the things that still keeps being moved around is Properties of Numbers. Developmentally, kids aren't ready for the commutative property per se in third grade even though it's in the curriculum down there. So, we have to massage how it's delivered across all the grade levels."*

In terms of readiness to learn, parents also notice changes in what gets included in the curriculum. Some parents see their young children being asked to perform tasks they don't remember having to do when they were their children's ages. A parent comments: *"I do know that they're teaching Earth Science now in sixth grade because the ninth graders were getting poor grades when they had to take the Regents. So they introduce it now in sixth grade."*

They wonder if their children are being asked to perform at a level that they're just not ready for and that parents aren't ready to help them reach. *"I think my oldest was in fourth grade when they started [the state test] and the math homework he came home with was much different. It was a huge amount of word problems. And the parents were writing notes to the teachers saying 'I can't do these, don't send these home, this isn't fair.' And it was kind of funny but it was that they weren't ready. It was a complete change in the type of homework that got sent home- just because they had to pass that kind of format now."*

For parents of children who qualify for the PACE program (gifted and talented), test practice seems inappropriate. Parents of children in the gifted and talented program (Parent Advocates of High Ability Learners- PAHAL), for example, voice their concerns that teaching the test format is a waste of their children's time:

P1: *"That's all I've heard from everybody who's gone through fourth grade is all they did all year is write practice essays."*

P2: *"Until the day of the test and then he never wrote another one."*

P3: *"And my son told me in fifth grade we were practicing for the eighth grade. I heard about it all through fifth grade practicing for the eighth grade test."*

P1: *"Yeah they do that. They justify what you have to do this year in preparation for a test next year. Well they have to learn this method this way because that's how it's going to be tested. Can't do it another way- cannot."*

Whether, or how much, test format should be taught, and whether the tasks required on the tests are developmentally appropriate for some children or not, are issues that strain some parents', teachers', and administrators' commitments to preparing students for the state tests. Also as the district aligns its vision to the State's, these issues, in turn, strain some parents', teachers' and administrators' commitments to the district's vision.

Is teaching the test format "rolling over" to playing the State's testing game or is it just good teaching? Is preparing students for the tests as early as kindergarten, first, or second grade appropriate or not? Regardless of the answers, the game must go on.... Cherry Grove teachers, just like the CCR's, Curriculum heads, and other district level administrators employ many creative strategies for making sure Cherry Grove students will exceed expectations on the state tests even if it means teaching them tricks.

Learning the tricks

About two months before the ELA test:

T: *"If you are reading a question what did we learn to do to the question to make sure we are answering all of it?"*

S: "Number it."

T: "Yes, when we are reading the question we need to underline and number the things we do in the question. What do we need to do with the answer?"

S2: "Pull words from the question first."

T: "Yes. We do this in all our comprehension work. Don't we always pull the words from the question and as she said, pull detail? What I heard a lot of on Friday is a lot of opinions. Is it wrong to put your opinions?"

S: "No."

T: "So are you allowed to underline the heck out of this thing? I haven't seen you underline the things from the question. If she underlines...", The teacher gives an example of a student needing to go back to the passage and is not able to find words and continues, "She will be able to find it easier. You pull the words, use details and move on."

The teacher repeats this directive with respect to each part of the question and makes a final plea:

T: "I need to see you doing what you're telling me you know how to do. So tonight for homework I have a question for you."

The teacher in the previous excerpt says that pulling the exact words from a question is "always" what students should do – regardless of what's required on the ELA test. Most teachers would agree that practicing for the ELA, as in this case, is really giving students good practice in writing an essay. But, other teachers find it's not enough to teach the content and format of the tests: Getting into the heads of the test makers is also part of preparing students to do well on the tests. So, they speculate on what might be on the next test and teach students how to avoid what they characterize as test tricks.

According to the Principal, Cherry Grove Elementary volunteered to be a science field test participant, even though in the month of May they already had scheduled three days of math tests, three days of science tests, and one field test day for math.

Table 6: State Tests Given in May

Mon.	Tues.	Weds.	Thurs.	Fri.
X	X	X		
	Math Test	Math Test	Math Test	Math Field Test
Science Objective Test	Science Objective Test		Science Performance Test	
			Science Field Test	

He says that the Math and Science tests must be given in May: They have no choice about that. But, the school chose to give the Science Field Test because it will give the Cherry Grove teachers a "heads up" for the changes coming in the 2003-04 Science test.

Many teachers and the Principal at Cherry Grove feel they must keep abreast of test changes and test makers' intents. They believe that field tests help them do this.

Teachers use field tests and their stockpiles of previous years' state tests to inform their students on what the State may have in store for them on the tests. For example, a fourth grade teacher explains that she has found certain patterns in the tests. She finds a pattern in the listening: *"It's typically about change,"* and *"the writing piece is usually about a personal story."* This teacher guesses that there will be a poetry reading on the 2003 test because *"they haven't had one of those for a few years."* Another teacher comments that she feels the ELA *"tries every year to find a general theme."*

A fifth grade teacher talks about the Social Studies test: *"Like this year I think [the social studies test theme] was more government. Last year I think it was more Indian based."* She goes on to explain that she feels pressure in trying to figure out what might be on the next test and prepare students for everything. She wonders if the state tests are purposely made to *"catch"* teachers and students not having covered something: *"I just think [the state test] is almost out there to try and catch kids and catch teachers. Wanting everyone to be so well-rounded, but it's just human interest that there are going to be certain things that some people are going to like better than others. And even as adults there are certain things that catch our interest more."*

To many teachers, it is unclear whether the State is intentionally making the content of the tests ambiguous or tricky, but when students are given problem-solving manipulatives, such as rulers, without needing them in the State Science Performance Test, a teacher can't help expressing annoyance: *"[the ruler] had no purpose at that station – it was just a trick!"*

Discussion about test tricks and how to grasp what the questions are really asking for is also part of in-class test practice work, as in this pre-ELA fourth grade session:

T: *"[The State test makers] are going to put ridiculous pictures that have nothing to do with the essay. When I corrected the tests, some of the kids wrote about the picture. Completely ignore any picture or illustration unless the question is asking you about the picture. At the end of the test there's a thing the teachers can fill out about the test. There's no reason to put that picture there."*

S: *"And it makes it hard because you can't really see the picture and it takes up room for you to write."*

T: *"If they give you this many lines does it mean you have to stop there?"*

S: *"No."*

T: *"Right. If you have more to say go ahead."*

S: *"What's the final test?"*

T: *"I don't know it's all secure."*

S: *"What's it called?"*

T: *"Fourth grade ELA."*

S: *"Is that the one that our tests go to different schools and different teachers read them?"*

T: *"Yes."*

Students are taught that knowing the content and format of the tests is not enough and that their teachers aren't even sure exactly what content will be on the tests. The state tests, unlike teacher created tests, leave both students and teachers guessing and sometimes turning to test preparation strategies that even the students wonder about.

In review of a State Math test graphing question for example-
T: *"These are the things that I do and I hope you do on the test."*

The teacher shows the students how to put lines on the faces of different geometric objects in the exercise, so they don't forget which sides they counted.

T: *"This is the reason why I wanted to show you this. This question you will get guaranteed. In all the years since they've been giving these tests they have always had a graphing problem. Watch this year there won't be one. They will give you information on one page and a problem on the other."*

The teacher reads the question, marks the items X'd in a column and writes the sum of those on the bottom of the column on her overhead. She moves on to Part B where students are asked to label the graph.

T: *"They are asking you – remember in the ELA on the last day when they asked you the question with the bullets?"* Some students nod. *"These bullets you better have- if you don't have them you won't get it right. Don't be a genius- be a thief. What should you title it? Be simple. Steal it from here."* She points to the question.

S: *"You're teaching us to steal?"*

S2: *"You could go to jail!"*

When teachers, like the one in the previous excerpt have scored state tests, and know the kinds of things students should do to get full credit, they feel they should teach this to their students. Is it *"stealing"* as one student says, to take a title for a graph from the question when the math scoring rubric gives credit for *"complete and correct"* titles including those from the test question itself? To many teachers it makes sense to instruct students to use what's in the test question to answer questions when you can because they know that more creative answers might be scored wrong on the state test.

Teachers also warn students about what to ignore on, what some teachers characterize as, trick questions. A week before the State Math test, a teacher begins review:

T: *"In session two, each problem is going to be a multiple step problem where you need to do one thing to do another or there's going to be two parts to it. We've done a great deal of practice on these this year. Again, I reinforce to you- you have nothing to worry about. I'm not going to say to you that this is the easiest test that you're going to whiz through this. It's going to challenge you. You're going to have to think. You're going to have to remember. You're going to have to reach back in your memory. Questions about anything about the test?"*

S: *"Is this the test that we get to have a break?"*

T: *"Yes."* She pauses, *"What I want to do is walk through this. If you don't know how to do this- make an effort. When I look at this it will help me – this afternoon we will go over the test. I want to give you exposure, so that when you come to it you know what to do. I try to give you as many test taking strategies as I can."*

She then turns to a test question that includes several names. The teacher warns,
T: *“They are going to give you names like Ramirez, Shameel, I don’t care what the name is. Do not get hung up on names – ever - ever. Don’t raise your hand during the test asking questions about the names. How would I read this (referring to a name in the test question)?”*

S: *“B.”*

T: *“Exactly. I never say a name when I read a word problem to you. All I say is B will spin this spinner. Why don’t I worry about names?”*

S: *“If you can’t pronounce it you might waste time.”*

T: *“Exactly. Because if you get caught up on names- I’m telling you they’re not going to use Tim, and Rob and Bob. For some reason New York State uses these crazy names which I sometimes have trouble pronouncing.”*

For some Cherry Grove teachers, preparing students for the state tests does not simply involve teaching the curriculum and the format of the tests, but providing precautions and tricks for answering questions for the maximum score. Answering questions to gain the highest possible score also requires knowledge of the rubrics and knowledge of the time allowed for each section of the test.

Keeping track of the score

In a fourth grade math class:

T: *“This is what makes me nervous because so many of you- here is the question, here’s the directions. So many of you will skip this like it’s not even on there (referring to the directions). Do not skip it. You have plenty of time. Read the directions. Session Two and Session Three are going to give explicit directions. Take a look at 34.”* The teacher reads the question aloud. *“Did this tell you the question yet?”*

Students respond: *“No.”*

T: *“Right,”* she pauses, *“I hate when I grade a test where a kid has shown their work. He or she did not put the answer down here (she points to the answer blank). I can’t give the credit. If it says answer it what do you do?”*

Students in chorus reply: *“Answer it.”*

T: *“If it says show work what do you do?”*

Students exclaim: *“Show work!”*

T: *“Nothing is more heartbreaking than when a kid has all the work and did not put the answer where they were supposed to.”*

Teachers emphasize the importance of “showing work” in math test practice because they know that “shown work” can account for much of a student’s score. How to satisfy the rubric, especially when it changes from year to year, is something many teachers learn about in test scoring. The 2003 math test scoring group, for example, consisted of teachers across the district and a facilitator. During the scoring, the group tries to make sense of what the rubric tells them to do. The facilitator explains that *“if a*

student finds the perimeter, but they were supposed to find the area you may be able to give partial credit. If a question says show your work and there's no work it is a 1." A teacher responds, "That hurts." The facilitator continues, "if the test question doesn't say show work and they show their work it's noise. Don't even look at it," and "You have to give a 0 if the answer is correct, but they used the wrong, or no procedure," which is responded to with raised eyebrows from several scorers.

This kind of detailed information about the rubric can make a big difference in students' scores. A fourth grade teacher expresses her efforts to teach students how to write to the ELA rubric: *"One of the big things is showing an example, and students like to answer the question, and then they feel like, if they've answered it they're fine. But the state expects you to go one step further and to give an explanation and bring in details from the story, and that's hard for kids. So, we spent a lot of time teaching them how to go back, how to get phrases that are important, and how to implement them into their essays so that they can get full credit because a lot of them would just get 1 point out of a 2 point total because they would forget to put the example in. So, we do that."*

In addition to knowing the requirements of the rubric, students also learn how much time they have to complete different sections of the tests. In a language arts class students listened to a previous years' ELA listening passage and were given specific directions as to how much time they would have to do the test:

T: *"During the day of the test in the thirty minutes after you listen and take notes you're not allowed to sharpen your pencil, get a drink, go to the bathroom. For a half hour you need to not get out of your seat. Also during the day of the test you will have all your desks separated. Next week we will take the 2002 test and take the test exactly the way you need to. Everything off your desk and we will take 2002 three days in a row and we will carbon copy it. That will help us see what 30 minutes is like. Now you have an idea of how long 30 minutes is and for some people who finished in fifteen minutes – when they give you thirty minutes they know that a fourth grader needs that amount of time. Make use of the time if you're ahead of schedule. All I'm allowed to do is tell you about how much time you have left. So if you are flying through this you need to slow down."*

S: *"What can we do after we finish the test?"*

T: *"Check it over. Maybe after the first time you read it over you'll find problems with punctuation. Answer me honestly, how many of you didn't look at what you wrote?"*

About seven students reluctantly raise their hands.

T: *"It's called proofing. You have to read it. The day of the test I can't remind you. But that's what we're going to do next week. Make sure you read over your work. Other things?"*

S: *"Can we have a water bottle?"*

T: *"No. You can't have anything on your desk."*

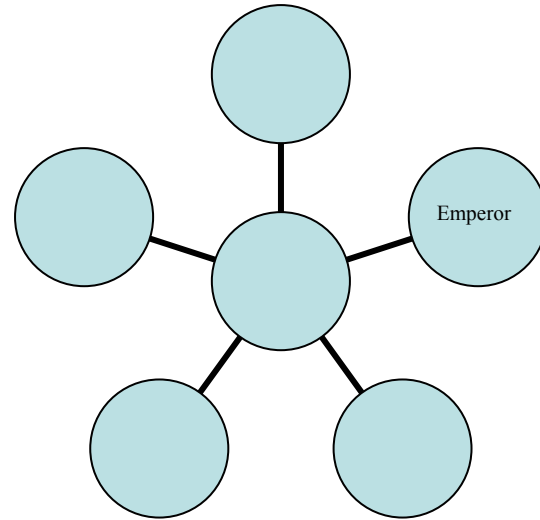
S: *"What if you die of thirst?"*

T: *"We'll remember you."*

The teacher's last words bring a chuckle from several students then they're back to review of the first section of a previous years' Session 2: Part 1- the story web.

T: *“What if you wrote emperor again?”* (referring to the web provided on the test booklet)
S: *“It would be wrong.”*
T: *“Right! Because they already put it there.”*

After discussing how the web should be filled out, the class moves on to the next practice test question. The question asks: *“Using details from the story, explain why Toshiyuki wants to change each time.”*



This question was assigned homework and the teacher starts in to review:

T: *“This is where I noticed a lot of people spent a lot of time. Where should this question have been?”*

S: *“In the garbage?”*

T: *“Well I thought it should have been in the essay.”*

S: *“They should stop using that question.”*

T: *“Yes, it’s more than a paragraph. Does somebody want to share what they wrote?”*

One student reads her paragraph aloud. The teacher responds,

T: *“I like the fact that she put everything in there that the main character had to change into, but she also explained why.”*

The teacher recognizes students doing the kind of work that is scored well on the tests such as when the student explains why she does certain things in her paragraph. Recognition of following the directions is tempered by recognition that the test questions are not always what the teacher thinks are good test questions. Despite students’ and teachers’ doubts about how well the test questions are constructed, teachers know that they will be scored based upon a rubric and students have limited time to complete the test. So, they had better know what to do and just do it.

Practicing test questions, understanding the directions, learning the way the test questions are scored is time consuming. For the ELA, teachers have devised a schedule of activities to make sure that their students are ready in time for the test. These activities are spread throughout the months before the ELA and cover all of the test parts: comprehension, paired passage, listening, and writing. Some of these activities are from the test preparation review books, others from past years’ tests.

Table 7: ELA Preparation Activities and Schedule

September	October	November	December	January	June	Homework & no assigned time
Androcles/Lion	Uncle Sam	Hare/Tortoise	No More Growls	Friend Test – 00*	Benchmark	Bus Laughter – homework
Page 52 (ELA practice book)	Bluebird	Dancing Squirrel	Toad Test – 99*	Animal Test – 01*	Time Travel	Frightened Boy-homework
How to Popcorn	Practice/ Perfect Robby	Country/City Bird Earth, Sky, Water Page 162	Kindness- 99* – 12/13	New Friend – 02*		Buried Box – homework
	Special Weekend			Spaghetti – 00* – 1/3		Julie/Fountain – 99*
				Toshiyuki – 01* – 1/8		Language/Art – 00*
				Waldo – 02* – 1/15		
				Whale Tale – 01* – 1/17		
				Brainy Birds – 02* – 1/24		

*- Previous years' ELA test

For the week leading up to the ELA test, every fourth grade classroom follows a rigorous agenda of practice tests like this one:

- Wednesday- ELA Listening practice
- Thursday- Paired passage practice during Language Block time and a second period to review it
- Friday – Review a paired passage
- Monday – Break from test preparation
- Tuesday- ELA test
- Wednesday- ELA test
- Thursday- ELA test

Test preparation followed by actual testing affects both teachers' and students' morale and motivation. Some teachers, for example, would like to “*tie*” their test preparation activities more closely to the content they and their students have been studying. One class, for example, was reading the novel “*Farmer Boy*”, but was writing to the ELA preparation material prompts instead of about the novel. A teacher laments: “*This way the test prep is completely separate from the content.*” Several teachers assert that they need to make more connections between what they’re doing in class and test preparation. That will mean changing the ELA practice content and schedule the fourth grade teachers had been diligently following since the first years of the ELA.

The motivation for changing the content and amount of state test preparation is high especially right before the tests. Most teachers are quite blunt about getting sick of test preparation. At the end of May, teachers and students have been through the ELA, the Science, and the State Math test. In this math class, students take a short break from working on practice tests after several days of “double math.”

T: “Stand up and take a stretch. We’ve been kind of cooped up and inside.”

S: “Is this the last day of math practice?”

T: “Yep. It’s been a long week hasn’t it? No more double math after today. All right, let’s have a seat.”

T: “Session one page three.”

S: “Which question?”

S2: “Can we do work on the board?”

T: “No. I want everything else put away. I want a pencil and Session One on your desks. Can we go through this quickly? Number one.”

A student reads the problem aloud.

T: “These are kind of tricky. These are logic.”

By Math test time, in-classroom and out-of-classroom behavior takes a dip. “[Student behavior] has been just horrible,” a fourth grade teacher says. Mother’s Day fell at the end of the math test week so this left teachers having “difficulty fitting in the Mom’s projects with all the tests.” A teacher provides the details: “[Students] actually missed part of recess today so they could work on their [Mother’s Day] projects. The students are tired. Their behavior is distracted and they are having difficulty focusing. My usually very mild-mannered class is very testy, tattling and short tempered. Even a simple Mother’s Day project has them befuddled.”

Preparing students for the state tests as these excerpts suggest, involves teaching students much more than the standards or format of the tests. Rolling over to adopting textbooks and review books aligned to the tests, teaching students test taking tricks and how to keep track of their scores, and foregoing or rushing holiday projects for the sake of test practice, is not what the district level vision was meant to promote, as the Assistant Superintendent explains: “When I say I don’t want [teachers] teaching to the test what I’m talking about is lavish attention to the format of the test. If we are talking about the content that is in these tests, then of course that is a piece that has already been folded into our curriculum map.”

Playing the Testing Game- What For?

The Cherry Grove Charge

- 1. I will be respectful of myself and others***
- 2. I will be responsible for my behavior***
- 3. I will actively participate in learning***
- 4. I will follow adult directions and good manners***

In one of Cherry Grove's fifth grade classrooms, a plain white poster displays the "Cherry Grove Charge" in bright red lettering – the school's color. It hangs near another poster outlining the Bill of Rights. "*Our rights: unalienable, seizure, counsel, destruct, infringe, militia*" has been written on the white board at the front of the classroom. The twenty-two students that make up one of three Cherry Grove fifth grade classrooms jot these words down in their social studies notebooks.

The fifth grade teacher tells me that the district identifies "*Constitutional Rights as what should be covered in the beginning of 5th grade*", so that is what she's been teaching for the weeks leading up to the New York State Social Studies test. Based on her experience with the District Social Studies Committee and scoring the previous year's social studies test, she estimates that about 60% of the fifth grade social studies test is based on 4th grade materials, and about 40% on third grade materials, so she says she doesn't re-teach everything that's been taught for the past 4 years in the first 3 months of class. She says she teaches the fifth grade curriculum- not the test.

One week before the state social studies test the teacher asks if any students have questions before the class begins a Document Based Question (DBQ) exercise based upon the prior year's Social Studies test. A girl whispers to a classmate, "*We've done more than 3 DBQ's.*" Another whispers, "*It's going to be our fifth tomorrow.*" "*It's going to be six,*" another argues.

The teacher interrupts, "*How did you feel when we did the practice test?*"

Several students shoot their arms in the air and respond when called on by the teacher, S: "*It was really easy.*"

S2: "*I think we had too much time.*"

S3: "*I think one and a half [hours] is a lot of time- It's a lot more time than everyone needs.*"

The classroom lights are off on a dim November morning. The teacher crosses the room and flips on the lights. She begins, "*When you get the paper I'm passing out please put your name at the top.*" After a few moments she observes, "*I see some of you have done it and I see some of you haven't.*" As she meanders around the students' desks she checks that students are writing their names on their quiz papers. The teacher breaks the silence, "*Just to clear up some confusion- tomorrow and Thursday is the New York State Social Studies test,*" she pauses and begins again, "*this is another way I can learn what things we need to work on.*" A boy asks with a tone of exasperation in his voice, "*So every day this week we have a test?*" The teacher responds, "*Today we have a little quiz.*" Another student asserts, "*We have a test every day this week...today we have a quiz, tomorrow and Thursday we have the social studies test, and Friday – spelling! A third student implores, "Can we not do that?"*"

The teacher explains to me that she's giving a quiz on Constitutional Rights because that's what the curriculum proscribes. Unfortunately, for the students, the unit just happens to end right before the State Social Studies test.

As students listen to the Weather Channel on T.V. and sharpen their pencils readying for the first of two days of testing, I ask the teacher if the students are ready for the test. She shrugs, *"it's hard to tell...it's one test-one day."*

Like this social studies teacher, many Cherry Grove teachers are not particularly confident that what they teach their students in preparation for the state tests is what will be assessed on the state tests. And, even if the state tests are a good measure of what students know and should know of the curriculum, some parents, administrators, and teachers doubt that any one assessment could provide an accurate picture of how well students have learned the standards. So why teach the format, tricks, and scoring of the tests?

A fourth grade teacher elucidates a rationale: *"I think the tests are very good. I think they're probably designed to make the kids be more high level thinkers. There's a lot of problem solving on the tests. There are some more life skills that the kids are sort of being asked to do such as being good listeners, taking notes."*

Critical thinking the standardized way

A common claim among teachers and in the district developed curriculum binders alike is that the New York State tests promote and assess critical thinking. For example, in the Orchard Hill fifth grade social studies binder DBQ's are characterized as:

- *Keyed to learning standards*
- *Provide students with a common base from which they demonstrate what they know and are able to do.*
- *Focus upon critical thinking and social science research skills*
- *Require students to look at issues through the lens of multiple perspectives*
- *Use evidence beyond recall, ask students to take stands and support their judgments*
- *Asks students to make comparisons and draw analogies*
- *Asks students to apply knowledge to the given data*
- *Are reflective of social science practices*
- *Are reflective of skills that students will use as adults*
- *Build upon multiple entry points/intelligences*
- *Focus upon 'big picture' not 'picayune detail'."*

Immediately following the State Social Studies test administration a fifth grade teacher reflects on whether the DBQ really does assess critical thinking. She comments:

“What I think was the weakest part is that last year on the test if the kids took all their short answers from all the documents and basically rewrote those into an essay, they would pass and do OK. And I think that doesn’t show any critical thinking whatsoever. I mean that’s just piece-meal.”

In language arts, critical thinking comes in the form of constructing an essay with a clear beginning, middle with supporting details, and an end based on what are called “paired passages”: Paired passages are two texts from which students need to draw comparisons and contrasts to answer a question.

In an ELA review class:

T: *“Today we are going to do ELA practice. When you take your ELA test you will see this box (referring to the test question on their handout).”* The teacher asks a student to read the directions. A student reads the question aloud,

S: *“Do you think that a fishing boat should be allowed in waters where whales swim? Why or why not? Use details from BOTH the article and the poem to support your answer.”*

After a few minutes some students had written titles for their essays, others raise their hands to ask the teacher questions. A student complains,

S: *“I can’t think of anything.”* The teacher responds,

T: *“They’re taking the whole thinking out of it when they tell you exactly what to write.”*

Another fourth grade teacher observes that in reviewing for the ELA, *“Sometimes if you get too creative with your answers the kids get off task and they don’t answer the questions directly.”*

In math, showing work and explaining processes for solving problems are a couple of the ways the test attempts to assess critical thinking. Like in social studies, however, teachers have doubts that the ways students are encouraged to show critical thinking on the tests really assesses critical thinking.

In a fourth grade math class the teacher puts an overhead on the board. She talks students through how to read a picture of a spinner with the names of different colors on each of the spinner wedges.

T: *“Why did I mark each one of the [spinner wedges marked black]?”*

S: *“So you know which ones you counted.”*

T: *“Right.”*

The teacher then asks students to explain their answers to the question: *“What is the probability the arrow will land on black?”*

S: *“I did it in fractions.”*

T: *“You did what in fractions?”*

The student explains that he put the number of the black wedges over the number of other colored wedges.

T: *"Your answer is unacceptable. How you came up with the fraction has to be explained."*

S: *"They don't assume that a fourth grader can count?"*

Some students challenge the test requirement that they explain how they do what they consider simple mathematical operations. Even though open-ended questions meant to assess critical thinking, such as the spinner one, are part of the reason some teachers like the state tests, as the student in the previous excerpt makes clear, this kind of work can seem tedious and unnecessary. Students, such as the one in the following excerpt, want to know why they have to show their work when they have already learned a certain problem solving process and can do that process in their heads.

As the teacher works through a long division problem on the board,

T: *"I just want you to get exposure to [DMS- Divide, Multiply, Subtract] if you remember anything today remember DMS. What does it stand for?"*

Students in chorus respond: *"Divide, multiply, subtract."*

S1: *"Why do we have to do all the DMS?"*

T: *"I want you to just go in the motion. Do you think about it when you breathe?"*

S1: *"No."*

T: *"Same thing with this."*

S2: *"What if we don't need it?"*

S1: *"How would you know if you need it?"*

T: *"What I'm getting at today is the start of what you're going to need. There's a step to everything."*

Besides encouraging students to use strategies because they are a "step" in their learning, teachers also make clear that the State needs to see their thinking on the tests or they won't get full credit for their answers.

T: *"If you get to a problem where it says explain your reasoning, my advice to you is think back in your head- what were the steps you went through to solve the problem? If I had 10-2, I can't write 'I just knew it'. They want to know 'What was my mental process?' Here's how I would explain, 'I knew that I would use subtraction. I used my counters- I put 10 counters out and I took 2 away'. It may sound redundant, but I just showed them how I did it."*

S: *"Do kids really do that?"*

T: *"I just did it."*

When teachers talk to students about explaining their reasoning, they know that these explanations seem redundant. The teacher explains, however, that even though some students may be able to do a problem in their heads, they must show their work in order to get credit for their answers on the state tests. She explains to the students,

T: *"Even though all of you could probably do that in your head. Do not! Because it says show your work. If you put an answer that's correct down here, they can't give you credit because it says show your work. So please."*

Even with all the pleading some students don't explain their processes when it comes time for the tests. On a state math test question asking students to explain their problem solving process, a student answered: *"I just kept adding till I found the right answer."* Another student answered a number pattern question asking for her to explain her problem solving process with, *"he is going up by numbers each time."* These answers gain few to no points during scoring. Does this mean that these students do not use critical thinking skills or have not learned them? Should the school district or teachers be held accountable for students' performance on these types of test questions? Some parents in the Orchard Hill community believe they should.

A couple of parents discussing the purpose of the state tests say:

P1: *"I just think that the state tests are a measurement tool. You need a measurement tool. It may not be the best one. I'm sure it has shortcomings. I'm sure there's ways to improve it, but you know, good people have done the best they can to put together these state tests in general and you have to have a way to. You can't go without some method to measure performance."*

P2: *"Right."*

P1: *"If you do that you run the risk of teachers going off on their own little tangents teaching and you have no way to realize what's going on until the kid's into the next year and he hasn't learned what he needed to learn the year before. So I don't have a faith in the tests. I'm just saying you need to have a measurement tool. That's the tool. Hopefully it continues to get better. In the end without it you have no control in the situation."*

Tests as control

Cherry Grove Parents:

"So, high stakes is not for kids. It's for the teachers?"

"Or the school district?"

"Well that comes down to the kids because the teachers are so- I mean all your kid does in fourth grade is practice for that ELA!"

"That stupid writing test!"

"Two essays a week!"

Cherry Grove Teachers:

"I mean we talk so much about differentiated teaching right? Where we teach to the level of the kids, but then you give a test, that's one level, how fair is that?"

“I would like to see the test back. I think as far as looking at the results without seeing what they are and we don’t get that back- I think it needs to be a little bit clearer as to what [the state tests] are for. Why are we doing these things? Because I don’t think everyone is clear as to why.”

Cherry Grove Student:

After a reading of the book, *“Testing Ms. Malarkey”* in a fourth grade classroom. A student asks, “[The principal in the story] *said the test wasn’t really that important.... It isn’t?*”

These types of questions suggest that some parents, teachers, and students are wondering what and who the New York State tests are meant to control. The district Staff Development Coordinator explains that when a state assessment drives instruction, teachers stop asking, *“Why am I doing this science unit? Why am I choosing this book? How will I know students know this?”* She says that the test is becoming the object rather than learning. She says she sees this in the teachers’ questions about placement of students. She relates this to a tension between special education and mainstream teachers. A special education teacher, for example, says the tests have caused changes in the way they are teaching. She thinks that they still teach the standards, but the difference is in how they teach the standards. Now they have *“packets”* that include ELA preparation activities like paired passages. She says this has changed instruction from when they would introduce a concept, teach the strategies to work through an exercise and then do a final activity. Now they move right into a packet. She argues that the presentation of concepts seems to be more directly related to the state tests and the packets seem to be more aligned to the form of the test.

The District Staff Development Coordinator is concerned that teachers are less and less relying upon their own observations and knowledge of their students’ learning and becoming more reliant upon what is required by the test. She warns that the test requirements can supplant teachers’ reflection upon students’ learning to in turn inform their teaching. So, for some teachers, the tests control how and what they teach.

The Assistant Superintendent also notices how fourth grade teachers’ perceptions of themselves are negatively impacted by perceived test pressure: *“The internalization of those pressures from parents, from press, from the State seem to reside in fourth grade. That is the first major assessment. So, for the first time we are looking for a team approach that K-5 is responsible for moving kids forward toward the standards. I’ve seen an incredible effort on the part of our building administrators to free fourth grade teachers from that responsibility; yet, what we see is that they have internalized [test pressure]. That is a significant part of how they perceive themselves.”*

Some teachers feel a struggle between doing what they think is best for their students and what they think they should do to prepare them for the tests. This is especially difficult when test preparation activities take the place of other activities more

closely related to the topic they are discussing in class. A fourth grade teacher comments: *“First of all I’m thinking well the kids really need to know this [type of test question] if they’re going to do their very best. If they’re going to achieve to the best of their abilities I need to do that so that they understand. On the other hand, I’m thinking, I wish I could do some other things where I wasn’t teaching the format of the test.”*

Another teacher grapples with a similar issue right before the ELA: *“I’m doing [an ELA review exercise] instead of writer’s workshop maybe where they could be writing more on free topics or things that are more purposeful. You’ve got to do some [test practice] before the test. A little bit, but not all that I think we’re doing and it hasn’t even ratcheted up yet. I think it gets worse this month because we’ve got so much to do. We’ve got like another month and then the test and so they practice ad nauseum.”*

Tests as real life

In early May, a student notes that the teachers and class have forgotten to take down the paper sign warning *“Test in Progress”* on the outside of the door. The teacher thanks the student for noticing, but asks him to leave the sign because they’ll need it for next week’s science test.

At Cherry Grove, like many schools across the country, assessments are an increasingly important and central part of a child’s school reality. Weeks go by where test preparation is an integral part of every student’s every day. This reality has an up-side and a down-side in teachers’ views. Some see the tests and the test preparation that go into them as an opportunity for students to become test savvy in a culture where taking tests is part of gaining access to opportunities: It’s a *“life skill”* some say. A fifth grade teacher talks about how the DBQ has real life applications: *“Really application is what I think is one of the great things about the DBQ testing. It’s taking these documents and having to glean information from them and apply it because that’s real life studying. That’s real life schooling. That’s real life when you’re on the job. If you don’t know something you look to get the information and you take it from there. There’s no way that you can carry every piece of content that’s given to you along the way.”*

Parents debate on the same theme. They wonder how much test preparation actually benefits their child:

P1: *“It’s all about jumping through the hoops and that’s what school’s about.”*

P2: *“I also know that it is a life skill to show all work because otherwise people won’t believe you.”*

P3: *“And it’s also a building block. It’s important to have the building blocks.”*

P1: *“I’m not disagreeing with you on that.”*

P2: *“We argue frequently with my son that you have to know how to do it that way because later on when you get to higher math you’re going to need that. But, once you’ve proven you know how to do it you should be able to use intuitive leaps because that is also an important skill.”*

P3: *“Right.”*

In a district with a reputation for high standards, teaching for test success, is full of controversy. The tendency to move toward focusing on fewer ideas, but in more depth, developing basic skills and understandings through proscribed activities rather than teacher-developed ones are all part of the game. The high stakes accountability system in New York State necessitates Orchard Hill playing the State’s game by the State’s rules. In so doing they must give up some control. To some teachers, the freedom to develop their own materials, decide how much time to spend on them, and how to assess their own students’ learning has been compromised because of the increasing pressure from the State via the state tests. Others see aligning their curriculum to the state tests and standards as an improvement. For the Assistant Superintendent the tests must be looked at as merely a “*snapshot*” of performance: *“As we take a look at [the state tests], I think they are assessing legitimate information. I think what we do with them and how this plays out, how we make them high stakes testing, is a problem. It’s not a measure of all their science knowledge, or English language arts. It’s simply a snapshot of what they can do with a few of the skills.”*

The Results We Want?

“[Preparation for tests] should be somehow connected to the skills that a student could hone to be a successful student on any test. I mean ELA, and math and science and social studies truly do have defined types of questions that we could teach to. The writing process or the reading process is inherent in all those tests. How do we teach kids to take a look at a question wherever it may be and use strategies to break it down because the answer is usually embedded in the question? How do we teach kids to do that? How do we teach kids to communicate what they know from research or from data that’s available to them? How do we teach them to communicate that back in their own way to answer a question rather than just say there is a response to a question on this test and here’s how you do it?” – Cherry Grove Principal

The Cherry Grove Principal’s desire to make state test preparation efforts also opportunities for substantive learning is clear and one that resonates with many Orchard Hill administrators and teachers: This is the Orchard Hill vision. Ultimately, however, the state tests promote a particular view of not only what content should be taught, but how knowledge of that content should be shown and assessed. It is a vision that converges with Orchard Hill’s at times, but also diverges and eclipses the district’s vision at other times.

Does a passing score on the Social Studies, ELA, Math, or Science test provide proof that a student has achieved an acceptable understanding of the standards? Is a passing score proof that the teacher has taught a concept? Does a state test report prove that a school is successful? Moreover, is the dedication of time, resources- financial and human, in a whole school and whole district effort to show results on the state tests really worth it for a district like Orchard Hill and a school like Cherry Grove?

When preparing students to do the best on the tests fails to help students learn the standards, fails to help students score better on the tests, fails to engage teachers in reflective teaching, you can't help but wonder what it's all for.

In a fourth grade classroom, several days before the State Science Objective Test, students are scattered on the carpet holding papers with pictures of flowers on them. Descriptions of the different flower parts are taped to a similar picture on the bulletin board.

T: *"Ok. You should all be looking at your flower chart. On Thursday we did part of a flower. What do the roots do?"*

A student reads a description aloud from her paper.

The teacher continues with questions and students read answers off their papers.

T: *"Give me two ways seeds travel?"*

S: *"Wind."*

S2: *"By water."*

S3: *"You could just plant them."*

T: *"Right. People. Any other questions about flowers?"* After a pause, she continues, *"Part of your State test is this Thursday, everybody keep your flowers because this information is probably going to be found in your Science test. Remember your testing strategies."*

On testing day, as students hand in their tests, the teacher keeps track of what questions they answered incorrectly. She says plant growth was the topic most missed out of all of the questions on the fourth grade test. She had just reviewed plant growth a few days earlier, and rolls her eyes.... When all the tests are handed in and carried off to the principal's office, she queries:

T: *"Let's get your opinion about your Science test- anything really hard?"*

S: *"It wasn't hard, but I just didn't know how to do it. It was about measurement."*

T: *"What did they want you to measure? Which logically would you use?"* They talk about kilograms, kilometers, liters, and when they are used. Students talk through another measurement question,

S: *"So the answer was centimeters."*

T: *"An interesting question of something that we might have seen in Math. Any other questions?"*

S: *"I didn't actually have a question about it, but they asked about plant parts and we didn't really study that."*

S2: *"And there was other stuff like about the stem and it had different words."*

T: *"How many of you had a lot of questions about the plant stuff?"* Approximately half of the students raise their hands.

S: *"What's a tuber?"*

T: *"Have you ever seen a potato that sprouts?"*

They say *"Yes."*

T: *"Do you remember studying that last year?"*

The students unanimously respond *"No."*

T: *"You have to remember this is a K-4 test."*

S: *"What was the answer to the one that was tuber and bulb?"*

T: *"I don't know I didn't keep the test."*

As the students exhaust their questions about the test, the teacher announces the schedule for the rest of the year: *"We are done with units. We have no other STC kits. We have a couple of scavenger hunts- a couple of fun activities that we have to do. Keep in mind that we still have about four weeks of school left. You may go to social studies."*