

CREATING A CULTURE OF PREPAREDNESS:

One Suburban Middle School's Experiences
with High Stakes Testing



Reforming Teaching/Learning in a High Stakes Testing Environment

Capital Region Science Education Partnership

University at Albany, SUNY



Reforming Teaching/Learning in a High Stakes Testing Environment

Capital Region Science Education Partnership
University at Albany, SUNY

Sandra Mathison, Ph.D.
Project Director
Professor & Head
University of British Columbia
sandra.mathison@ubc.ca
(604) 822 6352

Melissa Freeman, Ph.D.
Project Manager, CRSEP
High Stakes Testing Study
University at Albany, SUNY
crseptst@csc.albany.edu
(518) 591 8544

Kristen Campbell Wilcox
Research Assistant, CRSEP
University at Albany, SUNY
crseptst@csc.albany.edu
(518) 591 8544

© 2004 by Sandra Mathison, Melissa Freeman, & Kristen Campbell Wilcox

Freeman, Melissa & Wilcox, Kristen
with assistance from Ronalyn Wilson
CREATING A CULTURE OF PREPAREDNESS: One Suburban Middle School's Experiences with High Stakes Testing
Albany NY: Capital Region Science Education Partnership,
University at Albany, SUNY

This publication is based on research supported by the National Science Foundation (Grant # ESI-9911868). The findings and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or priorities of the sponsoring agency, the Capital Region Science Education Partnership or the University at Albany, SUNY

Table of Contents

School and Community Culture.....	1
A Shifting Landscape.....	3
Maintaining an Expectation of Excellence.....	5
School as Community.....	6
A Multi-Leveled Organizational Structure.....	7
The effects of grouping.....	10
Placement decisions.....	13
Differentiation.....	14
Communication.....	15
The Good, the Bad, and the Necessary Impacts of High Stakes Tests.....	18
A specter of mystery.....	19
The good.....	19
Curricular alignment.....	20
Instructional diversity.....	22
Identification for academic intervention.....	25
The bad.....	27
Damned if you do.....	27
Dehumanization.....	27
Compression.....	31
Prioritization.....	33
Evaluation.....	35
The necessary.....	38
Damned if you don't.....	39
Test prep.....	40
Accountability.....	42
Protecting What We Have.....	44

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Orchard Central scores on New York State 8th grade tests..... 3

Figure 1: Grouping at Orchard Central..... 10

January 14th, 2003 is the first day of the state mandated 8th grade English language arts (ELA) exam. It is being held in the English classrooms from periods 1- 4. Do Not Disturb signs taped to the doors greet the students and their desks have been rearranged to form rows facing the front of the room. Typically, they are in groupings of four. The students sit quietly at their desks armed only with pencils. They are unusually quiet. The school is also unusually quiet and the 8:00 AM bell does not ring since the bells have been turned off for testing time. The teacher begins to read the test directions: *“There will be 25 questions that you will fill in on an answer sheet. Use only your number 2 pencil, no pens are allowed. Make heavy marks with your pencil when filling in your answers. Erase all mistakes thoroughly; do not make any stray marks...”* She then distributes test booklets to the students. She continues reading the directions. When she is done, she asks: *“Are there any questions?”* A hand goes up. *“Can we go back to the passages?”* a student asks. The teacher responds that yes they can. *“Any others?”* No more hands. She then tells them: *“I will write the time on the board to show you how much time you have left to complete this portion of the test. You may open your booklets and begin.”*

* * *

In a discussion on testing and test preparation, an 8th grade teacher states: *“The state test guides what we cover and spend the most time on. I familiarize the students with the format and I use state tests from prior years for practice to get them ready. I feel I am not serving the kids well if I don't prepare them to walk into that test with some degree of confidence. I teach the curriculum first but the grades on the assessment test more or less take care of themselves. In a suburban school like this they take care of themselves. What we do, is prepare them the best we can for the types of questions that they will see on the test by giving them questions off of previous assessment tests. So, they can walk into that test and say ‘yeah, I know what to expect and I can do this work with some degree of competence and confidence.’”*

School and Community Culture

We're part of a community that values education and high achievement. Parents are actively involved. We have a strong PTA and teachers are involved in extracurricular activities with the kids, whether in athletic or academic clubs. We rank 3rd in the area in terms of our performance on the state assessments, and we're proud of that, but still believe that we could improve. Our school takes pride in its accomplishments; we have bright, college-bound kids. Our school is clean. When you walk into the school you see the kids' work. I think you can feel our values.

- Middle School Teacher

Orchard Central Middle School¹ is nestled in a community with a small-town feel. Built in 1961, it stands unassuming, looking more like an industrial complex of gray and white cement than a school. Its educational purpose is made apparent by the surrounding tennis courts, sports fields, parking lots, and specially marked bus areas. There are a few shops a couple of miles down the road, a library, an elementary school, the high school, and rows of middle class homes. Once inside, student art on many of the walls greets the visitor and students can be seen walking and talking quietly between classes. Faculty and staff members greet each other and visitors as they pass, and there is a calm yet spirited atmosphere about the place. When the class period bell rings, students re-arrange themselves within 3 minutes to get to their next room. Once class time starts, the students quiet themselves ready for instruction.

For the most part, students seem to get along well with each other. Several girls carry designer handbags and can be heard talking about their latest weekend shopping trip. Other students can be heard talking about academic pursuits such as competing for prizes in science competitions at a nearby university, preparing for public access channel quiz shows, or participating in volunteer activities like donating food to the less fortunate. Others talk about playing sports, and participating in musical concerts. Students at Orchard Central are involved and competitive in extracurricular activities and in the classroom. They are quick to correct each other when a classmate provides the wrong answer or take the lead in a science lab when, as one student charged to his collaborative group member, *“you’re doing it wrong.”* This can also be seen when tests are being passed back, and you hear the whisperings of, *“what did you get?”* School, for this largely white, middle class group of students seems to be, for the most part, a positive social experience.

Moreover, Orchard Central offers more than academics. Over 30 extracurricular activities including drama, chess, music and sports are organized by teachers and staff. Many of these activities are accommodated three days a week during after school hours and a late bus is provided to students who need transportation. But even on other days, one wouldn’t know that the end of the day had arrived based on teacher or student presence. At 5:00 many teachers are still working with students on various projects, attending meetings, or busy working at their desks. And parents can also be seen on any given day visiting the school, helping out with fund-raisers, and supervising weekly Friday night activities. Parents and teachers alike feel that the larger community is committed and supportive of Orchard Hill’s² education system. A teacher describes this support: *“This is a community that values education, a community that passes budgets every year. We have a building counsel with representatives from the community. Parents sit on the counsel with teachers and administrators and make decisions that affect our school. We have national education week where parents have the opportunity to come*

¹ Orchard Central Middle School is a pseudonym for the school.

² Orchard Hill is a pseudonym for the district.

into the school and go to classes with their students. So, I think it's a tight community with good relationships with parents and the school."

Orchard Central, as compared to other similar middle schools, consistently performs well on state standardized tests (see Table 1 for test scores on state assessments). Eighth graders take 4 state standardized tests: the ELA and performance section of the science exam in January, the math 8 exam in May, and the social studies and written section of the science exam in June. According to the New York State Education Department's report card, in 2002-03 Orchard Central has an enrollment of 826 sixth to eighth graders. 97.6% of the students are classified as White, 1.2% American Indian, Asian, or Pacific Islander, 0.6% Black, and 0.6% Hispanic. 6% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The average student/teacher ratio is reportedly 17/1. The district expenditure per pupil is \$10,975.

A Shifting Landscape

With two-thirds of the students consistently passing the state assessments, teachers express a certain confidence in their students' ability to pass these tests. The state assessments, however, have changed the nature of instruction at Orchard Central as well as opened up new concerns. In a district that carries a reputation of excellence and prides itself on having a high percentage of parent and community involvement, how the test is understood and the scores get interpreted by the public is a new concern for teachers and administrators. A teacher explains: *"[As a community] we've always valued education and high achievement. Parents have always been involved. Teachers have always been involved. And we had tests – just not the state assessments. Now it's like, when will I teach this? Will I teach this? And it's not just the kids being tested; it's us, it's the district. We've never really had a problem, but we know we have bright kids and we want to make sure that's what is seen."*

Table 1: Orchard Central scores on New York State 8th grade tests

ELA (all students)	Level 1 (not passing)	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4 (passing)
2000 - 2001	4%	35%	42%	20%
2001 - 2002	1%	26%	56%	16%
2002 - 2003	4%	35%	48%	14%
Math (all students)				
2000 - 2001	5%	25%	52%	17%
2001 - 2002	4%	23%	58%	15%
2002 - 2003	4%	24%	55%	16%
Science (all students)				
	below State Designated Level		above State Designated Level	
2002 - 2003	0%	6%	43%	51%
Social Studies (all students)				
2002 - 2003	1%	22%	60%	17%

For the most part, teachers feel that the test results give a false impression of what parents can expect from a school like this. The fact that the scores are generally good does not alleviate teachers' concerns that they do not represent the extent or even the core of what they feel students should be or are learning in school. For example, if the scores are good then there is pressure to keep producing high scores, even if a focus on the tests may not be the best instructional practice in the long term. Also, the scores may not provide adequate information to parents and, in a district where parents seek out this kind of information, may be misrepresentative. A teacher comments: *"The thing I see with the standardized tests is that unfortunately I think it becomes too often in the public eye, for example, this year is the first year that the 8th grade science assessment is going to be published publicly to see how kids have done, and too often I think the public sees that and makes it the sole measure of a school, sole measure of a program; 'wow, our kids are doing great, this must be a great school, must be a great place to be.' That's my one fear. There's so much other stuff that goes on, and a lot of time, that's the sole measure that they get to see."*

Furthermore, most teachers believe that the scores, in and of themselves, provide little information to the parents and the public about how much a student knows or needs to know to do well in 8th grade and beyond. As these teachers share:

"I guess looking at anywhere between 60-70% of the kids passing in English or math, I guess that's fairly good, although I'm sure people looking at that in the public and saying '40% of the kids can't read and write.' I see that. But it's just one particular score. And I'm sure that's going to happen in science too. It's not broken down enough to say anything about the kids' skills, or what their abilities are. It's only a 1, 2, 3, or 4. Do they need only a little bit of work, or just a little extra effort to be able to pass these tests? That number doesn't tell a whole lot about what's going on with how well these kids are doing."

"And there's so much that isn't tested. At this level, you know kids' self-esteem and confidence and all of that I think is a big part. Some of them love to come to school every day; if you looked at attendance rates, you would have a measure of how the kids feel about the school. If you looked at how students do in a local art competition, or on the sports field, there are so many other things that for some of the kids are more important than the academic stuff is."

"These tests are a set-up by the state. They can set the bar wherever they want to. So, what they are arbitrarily setting is a passing grade that is fairly high. Do I think that more than 68% of my students are doing 8th work? Yes, I do by most other standards. If you compare the ELA, math, and science tests, they are all the same kids, but everybody did superbly well on science, and only about 61% of them passed ELA and 68% passed math and they are the same kids. So it depends on where you want to set the bar. They set the bar lower in science and higher in math and English."

“There’s nothing wrong with raising the bar, but I think that as teachers, as professionals, we should be able to raise the bar ourselves. I can’t be anything but suspect about a lot of the reasons for these assessments. Are they to make teachers more accountable to students? I think there are no more sincere conscientious professionals than teachers who have demonstrated time and again that we want to see kids succeed.”

Providing adequate feedback to the public, assessing students’ strengths and weaknesses, and understanding how the state ‘sets the bar,’ as this particular teacher put it, are concerns among teachers of different disciplines. For example in science, a teacher comments that *“even our weak students pass the state assessment.”* Whereas on the ELA and math the cut score for passing and failing is set much higher. This year students needed to score a 39/43 to receive a 4 on the ELA and a 31/43 to pass; in math students needed a 59/69 to receive a 4 and a 38/69 to pass. These cut scores change year to year based on how other New York students do. So while the teachers are pretty confident that their students have the ability to do well on these assessments, there is a certain amount of uncertainty around the state’s overall intent for these assessments, the consequences for students who don’t do well on them, and the kinds of decisions teachers need to make to successfully prepare their students for them when cut scores and specific content of tests change from year to year.

* * *

This is a story about the impact of the state standardized tests on one suburban middle school in upstate New York during the 2002-03 school year. It brings together the voices of teachers, administrators, and parents and their day-to-day experiences in a high stakes testing environment.

Maintaining an Expectation of Excellence

In a community that already has high expectations for the school district and the performance of its children in all areas, whether it’s academics, music, art, or athletics, the state assessments maintain those expectations and even raise them, which I think is a positive thing. We are blessed with a community that has education of its children as a really high priority. People move here, 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. There is a lot of support for the kinds of requests we have for parents that they might do in the home with their kids to help in the education of them. They’ve been very cooperative and supportive. So, I think some of the results we see and the publishing of those reinforce the high expectations, but

also reinforce the thinking on the part of parents that their kids are receiving a strong education and that they need to continue to support that.

- Orchard Hill District Administrator

School as Community

A unifying belief Orchard Hill School District teachers, administrators and parents share is that, with or without state tests, the district strives for higher standards and educational excellence and, for the most part, that is what people are experiencing and feel the students are receiving. According to district administrators, Orchard Hill works hard to create a collaborative structure involving parents and community members in discussion and decision-making. The Superintendent explains: *“I see my major responsibility as providing a vision for the district, supporting the culture of the district which I think is very positive and hiring great people. We involve a lot of people in that because it's a people business, and we're so people intensive because you need to put great people with kids. I view that as a very important role and I think this district is as strong as it is because we've hired great people and then we tend to them. We do a lot of staff development and a lot of professional growth activities. We emphasize with them the importance of our culture, and this is a culturally rich district with a very supportive community. We have done a lot of work to identify our mission, our values, and our goals. So, I think we are well grounded in those.”*

Beyond providing a vision, there is the sense that the school offers a physical space for various community groups to come together so that in fact, the school in this community plays a large role in the creation and maintenance of a sense of community. As the central location for multiple rural and suburban residential areas, it is one of the few locations that bring people together for a variety of community-related events, forums, and fundraisers. Furthermore, teachers and administrators feel that school should offer cultural opportunities above and beyond academics and so it is not uncommon for students to take time from their classes to attend a play or presentation. For example, one day in the library, students are listening to a presenter who is explaining how he invented the football helmet. The focus of his speech, however, goes beyond the process of invention, to one of attitude. The presenter talks about how at first people laughed at him in his makeshift helmet, but eventually everyone wore one. *“Don't be afraid to be creative. It is the having of ideas that leads to greatness.”* He goes on to discuss other ideas all the while bringing forth the importance of human relationships, honesty and spirit. *“Remember kids it is in the aligning of body; be physically active, mind; have ideas, and spirit; be true to yourself and be honest. Only this will lead to fulfillment.”*

In a community that views education as a stepping stone into a competitive world market, having multiple learning and cultural experiences goes hand in hand with a curriculum of excellence. But not all students have access to the same curriculum and so while for the most part people speak highly of the educational system, there are also

criticisms of its structure. So, even while people talk of a supportive community and one in which communication is valued, there are still tensions around different interests. Parents and teachers do not speak with one voice, nor do all parents or all teachers speak for all other parents or all other teachers.

There are several ways in which school systems strive to create and maintain the expectations inherent in an educational system: district-wide implementation of policies and practices, school-wide policies and practices, and classroom-based decisions and practices. While these are all interrelated and deal with a multiplicity of complex issues, two general themes stand out in the experiences of teachers, administrators and parents at Orchard Central and interact with the issues raised by state testing in particular ways. The first, which will be discussed here, raises questions about the way in which different organizational structures affect the experiences of middle school students in different ways. The second, addressed in the next section, raises questions about the way state testing has impacted curricular and instructional practices at Orchard Central.

A Multi-Levelled Organizational Structure

Like most middle schools around the United States, Orchard Central Middle School routinely considers the positive and negative effects of its organizational structure. For the most part it fits a junior high school model in the sense that students are assigned to particular classes and teachers work independently from each other. The Principal explains: *“I think in practice we are pretty much a middle school, but in organization we are still a junior high school. So, I think we need to move more toward the middle school structure, creating the houses and the small teaching teams, and providing training so teachers learn how to collaborate. The intent of this type of organizational structure is to create smaller learning communities and personalize the educational process for all students.”*

And like other schools, Orchard Central has altered its structure in response to educational theories and budgetary resources so that the concept of small teaching teams would not be something new to this community, but a return to a structure popular in the 1970s. Part of the idea for a house or team structure is to implement a flexible scheduling approach. Flexible scheduling removes the 42 minute classes and period bells and allows teachers to collaborate with other content area teachers within teams to enrich the curricular opportunities for students. The main reasons for team-based, flexible scheduling are to give teachers more choices over the time and content on specific educational tasks and to provide more heterogeneous group opportunities for all students. And as philosophies go, there are differing viewpoints as to their applicability and value. Because the middle school years are important transitional years for student social and academic growth, middle school teachers struggle with the dual demand of preparing students for the academic tasks they will face in high school while also nurturing their social and emotional needs. So while some teachers like the idea of more teaming and interdisciplinary projects because students *“could learn the same material in different*

modes and different ways,” others worry that too much focus on interdisciplinary projects will not prepare students well enough for high school. A teacher explains: “In 7th and 8th grade you should be preparing them for high school and you need to give them an experience that’s more than just clustered teaming projects. You need to give them the preparation to become high school students and work in disciplines, be responsible for their own work, and move on a regular basis.”

While flexible scheduling is going to be piloted at the 6th grade level next year, the idea that it will ever spread to 7th and 8th grade is met with a large degree of skepticism. Many teachers believe that real questions about the value of homogeneous ability-grouping or tracking, the current state accountability agenda, and concern with declining monetary resources hinder this project from the beginning. A teacher explains: *“I don’t know whose idea this was, but the way it’s working out is that the kids will still be tracked and most teachers I’ve talked to do not believe that the collaborative cross-curricular activities will happen. This project would take a lot of money and staff that we don’t have in this budget climate. My point is why bother, when it has already been so compromised that the original benefits won’t occur.”*

The Principal comments on resistance to the idea of the house structure: *“The argument here is that we are a successful school. We are one of the top schools in the region. So that the theory here is why change something that is successful? My contention is yes we are successful, but we can always do better, and some of these middle level concepts that we’re trying to apply would allow us to educate children better. We do not want to change the instructional model in terms of how we teach. You’ve been in our classrooms and you see it’s varied, it’s innovative, it’s creative, there’s a lot of risk-taking going on, so we don’t really want to touch that. But the goal is to provide that organizational structure that will allow us to reach children on a more personal level than we do right now and to do away with a factory approach to education.”*

Organizational restructuring, however, does not simply involve rescheduling but brings to the surface longstanding arguments about other organizational decisions like grouping, which is the process of assigning students to specific ability groups. Like other middle schools around the nation, grouping at Orchard Central Middle School has a long and complex history and is an issue with which people disagree. One feature that makes grouping at Orchard Central unique, however, is the presence of special accelerated classes that belong to a gifted and talented program called PACE (Programs for Achieving Children’s Excellence), which begins in the 4th grade and continues throughout high school and is specifically for English/Humanities and math.

Many parents of PACE children belong to a parent group committed to advocating for gifted education and PACE is supposed to provide an accelerated program to those children considered gifted and talented as evidenced by their performance on

several tests. These include the SCAT, CogAT, Terra Nova, Math 4, ELA 4, and teacher recommendation.

Several teachers explain how PACE came to be:

T1: *“It is 3 years old. Parents started it.”*

T2: *“They petitioned the board.”*

T3: *“In English.”*

T1: *“Actually a number of years ago, we had accelerated English in 8th grade where they were actually taking 9th grade English. Then, we had 8th grade enriched where they did the same basic kinds of English that the regular 8th graders did, but it was enriched with extra stuff. And then through a department decision, it was felt that this is creating a segregated group of students who are starting to feel elitist. The students were segregated and began to have this elitist kind of attitude. Many of the kids were in it because their parents were the most vocal in the community, so, they were placed in this program. So, we said, you know we offer a wide range of choices in our curriculum so we felt as educators we just wanted heterogeneous classes in English. And that went well for a number of years, 4 or 5 years. Then about 3 years ago, a group of parents felt they had special needs children; that they were highly gifted, and yes, according to standardized tests they were. So, they had support from the board. They met for a number of months to come up with a viable program and they presented it to the board, and the board was very conducive to agreeing to it. So, they added it.”*

It is important to note that not all PACE students’ parents belong to the advocacy group, and that parents who advocate for gifted education do not always seek to enroll their students in PACE classes. The two groups overlap significantly, but they are not one and the same. However, the presence of these two programs plays a significant role in the day-to-day discussions about grouping because grouping is not just an academic decision but a political one as well. Furthermore, the decision cannot simply be made on whether to group or not, but under what conditions is grouping versus not grouping considered beneficial. And this varies depending on the needs of the students and of the academic discipline in question. Figure 1 describes grouping at Orchard Central.

The decision to maintain a tracked system or not brings forth a variety of opinions from those involved. Central to this discussion is the effect grouping has on the educational achievement of students, as well as issues around placement decisions, alternative instructional models such as differentiation, and the importance of communication. Each one will be taken up in turn.

Figure 1: Grouping at Orchard Central

<u>English Language Arts & Math Classes</u>
Spec. Ed – Variety of Programs
Core – Below Grade Level
Regular – Grade Level
Enriched (Math only) – Grade Level Enriched
PACE – Above Grade Level
<u>Science</u>
Spec. Ed – Variety of Programs
Regular – Grade Level
Enriched – Grade Level Enriched
<u>Social Studies</u>
Spec. Ed – Variety of Programs
Regular – All Classes Grade Level

The effects of grouping

Grouping alters the nature of the organizational structure and it alters instructional practices as well. And yet, PACE, core classes, and enriched science classes only comprise a small percentage of all classes offered. The majority of students at Orchard Central receive their education in so-called regular classes. So why is its presence such an issue?

The primary issue for teachers and administrators who favor heterogeneous groupings is the way homogeneous groupings isolate students from each other and in so doing alters their relationship to learning. Because of the presence of PACE, several teachers feel that they have in fact a four-tier system. *“We have a four-tier track,”* a teacher comments. *“I think it’s segregation. The lower tiers move at a slower pace and emphasize basic skills more. The thing is, based on the research I’ve read, tracking, or whatever you want to call it, widens the gap and makes kids more different than they really are.”*

Many teachers, parents, and administrators feel that creating special classes for certain students works against opportunities for those students to integrate and socialize

well with others their age. Furthermore, the presence of academic levels alters the way students perceive their own abilities and potentials regardless of how well they perform in particular classes. For example, one teacher comments in response to another teacher's comment about elitism: *"I do see what [other teacher] was talking about pertaining to an elitist attitude. It really surprised me, because I've heard things like 'we're smarter and we're not doing what the regular classes are doing because we're smarter; we're better.' At this age, when they are just developing some of these skills, I don't think 'smart' is a good avenue to get on, especially when you go to high school. At some point they are going to be broken down, or else they are just going to have this elitist attitude keep growing and growing. And I think that's harmful. I'm not saying that all of the kids are like that, but you do see it a lot."*

Furthermore, teachers believe that the perception that enriched or PACE classes offer more of a variety of academic opportunities and projects, not only creates a false perception that regular classes are somehow less 'enriched' and varied, but may actually alter the way resources are distributed among all the classrooms, reducing opportunities for innovative activities in regular classrooms. A teacher comments: *"We as teachers would like to get rid of the tracking, we would like to see it all heterogeneous grouping so all students get similarly enriched programs."* She goes on to state: *"The Principal is in favor and all the teachers would prefer heterogeneous grouping but the community does not want to see it, they want to see that all of the upper level kids have a special program. So it is difficult to sell it to them."*

Segregating students into different groups alters the distribution of students and therefore, the dynamics in each classroom situation in significant ways. This affects all students whether they are in enriched or core classes. A teacher explains: *"I would say there's got to be some ripple effect throughout some of the other classes because they are pulled and are stuck together; they are the high achievers, and they tend to be the high achievers in other classes too. I think it somewhat goes into the schedule and I'm not sure exactly how that works, but I've noticed in my classes, the rest of them... it kind of takes away from that heterogeneous mix that I would look for. It seems like there are not quite the people you would look for answering some of the questions and adding a little spice to the class and adding some knowledge to the class. I can give them that but it's not the same as coming from other kids answering questions that way."*

Administrators and teachers who prefer heterogeneous grouping feel that homogeneous grouping widens the gap between successful and less successful students rather than distributing resources equally. In other words they feel that the experiences of all students, whether core, regular, or enriched are diminished, rather than enhanced. And for the most part, the Principal agrees that this effect is something to be concerned about. He states: *"I think the grouping of students is a perceived weakness in this school district, but you get arguments on both sides – some argue, that we do well because our kids are tracked and we teach kids at their own level. I think there are a lot of other intangibles to be considered when you group; the social intangibles, the cultural intangibles, and all of*

those things that influence student development at this critical age. Every child brings some strength to the classroom, so philosophically I disagree with the whole grouping system, but I understand that research recommends it in some academic subjects. Our grouping system here is pretty comprehensive if that's the right word. We have various levels of special education and we have our core classes which are low level learners. Then we have our regular classes which are supposed to be middle level learners and then we have our Enriched and PACE classes which are, in certain subject areas, our accelerated learners. So, that system has a lot of draw-backs in terms of student-development I believe. It also influences the structure and organization of the school. We lose flexibility with scheduling and things of that nature because of the grouping system, the way it is structured right now. If we re-structured our school, we could probably do some other things that would be more beneficial to students. But, I think you would get an argument from the community that we need grouping. There's a very strong force out there promoting our accelerated, enriched programs. They are implemented differently here because we actually pull our kids out for those kinds of classes instead of utilizing other forms of support and challenge. There are other models out there that I like that integrate those kids into the regular curriculum but still provide for continuous challenges for all kids, while maintaining a structure of equity. I'm a strong proponent of integrated student populations and integrated learning systems, but that is a philosophical piece of the pie in this school district that really needs to be addressed over a long period of time in order to make some reasonable changes."

Teachers and administrators who support homogeneous grouping, however, feel strongly that learning in certain academic disciplines is enhanced by grouping students. For example, there are ample studies on the effects of grouping that point to real differences in structural needs across subjects with math favoring homogeneity in grouping while social studies thrives on heterogeneity. Most proponents of grouping are not talking about widespread grouping, but favor flexible grouping, which involves grouping students for only part of the day and for only certain academic disciplines such as math and/or English. In their view, a completely tracked or detracked system may not be the most beneficial for promoting student achievement. For the most part, Orchard Central's unique grouping system is an attempt to reflect this literature.

Many parents who favor homogeneous grouping believe that to achieve the best quality education, students should find themselves in classrooms that provide the best fit for their specific level of achievement, so that parents of lower-track students worry that their children might not be able to keep up, while parents of higher-track students worry that their children might be held back academically or bored. These parents feel that typically what happens in heterogeneous classes is that teachers end up teaching to the middle range of students overlooking the high and low ends. Providing students with a structure that is geared to their individual academic needs reassures them that their children's academic needs are not being overlooked.

When administrators and teachers talk about the resistance they face to detracking, they often mention parents who are members of the advocacy group for gifted children and/or parents of PACE children. The reality, however, is that depending on the discipline involved, many teachers and administrators, as well as other parents are in favor of some form of grouping. The reason the parent advocates are often mentioned in conversations with teachers is probably because they are particularly vocal about the needs of their children and created their advocacy group to provide support and information to other parents of gifted students as well as a platform from which to discuss and challenge the district on particular issues.

According to the parent advocates, most educational systems have comprehensive programs for special education students, but few accommodations for gifted and talented students. Orchard Hill is no different. The problem for these parents is that in their view, gifted and talented students require the same individualized program as special education students, so their priority is not so much to advocate for advanced or enriched classes, although they do feel that most of their children benefit from enrolling in these, their concern is finding an appropriate fit between their child and his or her educational and social environment. Many of the parent advocates share stories of their child zoning out in the classroom, or worse getting picked on or bullied because they are different. And while they believe that they have accomplished a lot in getting district support and through the creation of PACE classes, they still find that most school personnel “*tend to run circles around us.*” For parents advocating for gifted education, grouping is one way to assure a certain amount of program choices for their children. Furthermore, they do not believe that the district would be able to implement a detracked system that keeps individual students’ needs in the forefront. As discussed in the section on communication, they believe that the effects the state tests have had on instruction at Orchard Central make this unlikely.

Placement decisions

Part of the tension around grouping, however, results from issues that go beyond the individual needs of students and includes the way that social status and power are perceived to play out in this community. So it is difficult to separate out disagreement with the role politics plays in the placement of students in advanced classes from disagreements around instruction. Both play a role in how teachers evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a tracked system. A teacher explains how she sees students getting into PACE: “*These are kids who have been taken out of what I guess you would call regular classrooms and there are tests that they have to take between certain grades...in order to be in the accelerated program. But it’s not necessarily a faster pace. I think that’s what most people think – it’s a faster pace, and that might be true. In some instances they may be able to grasp something quicker and you can move on to a higher level, you know you always talk about higher-level thinking skills, and that’s kind of where you start with them, where you have to take two days to explain the foundation of your lesson with your regular kids, maybe you can just breeze through that in ten minutes*

with your PACE class and then move on to the meatier stuff, more in depth sometimes. I don't want to generalize that this is true because there are some kids in my regular classes who have better abilities than the kids in my PACE class in certain things. I have kids in my regular classes who can write a heck of a lot better than my kids in PACE classes, so there's a lot of, it's a paradox."

In fact several teachers go on to talk about how social status ends up being the primary criterion for selection, not achievement and so there is a certain level of resentment that is developed when children who did not make the cut-off level suddenly find themselves in the PACE or enriched classes because of their parents' status or community position. The teachers explain that while there is little difference between regular and PACE classes in instructional quality, there ends up being a large difference in the make-up of the class populations, and these differences are based on social class. A teacher comments on science: *"The enriched 8 is basically just 8th grade stuff supposedly some topics go in more depth; it depends on who is teaching it and their decision on how to go with that. We don't have any specific mandate that you must do this, you must do that, although it's been a tradition here that the enriched group in 8th grade goes on to the Science Fair. There's usually some kind of special projects that teachers do with their kids; for example they may ask more detailed questions involving higher-level thinking maybe more writing.... It's different depending on who teaches it, and part of it is that there's a social aspect; there's a status aspect. You know, the kids have the advantage of being with the cream of the crop, and so that's an issue."*

Teachers and administrators worry about the effect this separation has on the overall learning of all students. What happens, they feel, is that students who end up in the core classes are often students who come from lower-income households and may not have had the same kind of educational experiences as other students, or they are students who have behavioral or emotional issues. So the effect of separating them into one class is that it actually reduces their opportunity to catch up to the students in regular classes or to learn from exposure with more advanced learners. While core classes offer a more individualized environment where students get increased individual attention because they tend to have fewer students in them, it is difficult for teachers and administrators to assess the effect being isolated from experiences with regular and advanced students may have on the learning opportunities of these students. This issue forms the basis of the district's discussions about differentiation.

Differentiation

District and school administrators are well aware of the complex issues around grouping. So, while many of them believe that detracking is the right way to go to provide the best educational experience to the majority of students, they also understand the need to provide a comprehensive alternative model of instruction and thorough training of teachers to implement it. This alternative model is called 'differentiation' and is an integrated program that seeks to provide individualized instructional opportunities

to students in classrooms made up of mixed-ability students. A teacher explains: *“Differentiation is the buzz word so basically if we can learn how to do that effectively then we can offer a better program for everybody.”* She goes on to say that this may be hard for some teachers especially in terms of accommodating special education students because it is a whole learning style they aren’t familiar with, while advanced students’ needs are more easily addressed. However, she explains that many special education students are already integrated in core and regular classrooms and so with adequate training, most classrooms would require little restructuring.

While many teachers feel that they already provide differentiated opportunities in their classrooms and would welcome such an emphasis, other teachers have mixed feelings about their abilities to meet the needs of all their students in a diverse setting, or whether a diverse setting is the best way to meet those needs. A teacher comments: *“I’ve had the experience of teaching both non-accelerated and accelerated classes. It’s an experience because just to see how they are different and how you need to meet their needs..., I constantly ask myself if I could meet their needs if it was a heterogeneous classroom. In a regular classroom how would I teach that class? I think their needs are being met, but I’m not sure it’s for the best.”*

Communication

On back to school night, the Principal states: *“Middle school is a trying time and shared responsibility is necessary for success.”* A pamphlet is handed out entitled: *Moving Right Along: Ways Parents Can Help Children Succeed in the Middle Grades.* This pamphlet included the following advice:

- Go to the school when you’re invited
- Join the parent organization
- Learn who can help
- Read the newsletter
- Learn how to get in touch
- Make sure the school knows

Central to any issue affecting education, is the issue of communication. Built into the district organization is a network of committees with built-in processes for cross-communication and sharing. The Superintendent explains: *“I think one of the strengths [of this district] is in our organization because it promotes large conversations about instruction and program assessment and student needs; it’s a system that is not just a pyramid. There’s a lot of cross-talking, and I think the education council provides a larger forum, where people who sit on all of these committees come together 2 times a month ... and several times during the year we ask each of the K-12 people to share what’s going on in their department.... Regular communication allows a lot of voices to be part of the process and also provides a communication vehicle back to all the stakeholders. So that’s been an important part of this.”*

An interesting question to consider here is how a tradition of communication and collaboration is created by the activities of parents, teachers and administrators as well as strengthened or weakened by them. What is at stake it seems is how a small group of vocal parents can impact the activities and responses of a community. It seems that this relationship would be quite complex. For example, most parents consider their role to be one of supporting the school system as well as their children. Keeping the communication open is seen as more of a mutually supportive role than one that seeks instructional or structural changes to a system. Several parents comment on this relationship:

“If there’s not communication, if there’s not responsibility on both parts, both the parent and the teacher, if there’s not communication between them, if there’s not what I mean by responsibility is responsibility of the parent to make sure that the child is doing their homework, is getting their homework done, and has their homework in and stuff. On the teachers’ part is to be teaching so that this child can go home and do the homework and hand it in. Just in that working together system, I think if it’s not there, then it’s going to be harder on that student.”

“I know the teachers want it to be as open as possible. They encourage that. If you have a problem, go bring it up immediately to the teacher. But I’ve always felt like my job is to reinforce whatever they learn in school, which is why I try to pay attention to homework.”

“They want the parents to know what is going on. I think that teachers have to do more than they used to do and expect less from the parents.”

When asked if they feel they can share concerns that they have about the curriculum, in this case, the curriculum specifically geared towards the state tests, a parent responds: *“We can share them but they’re going to tell me it’s necessary. They’re going to tell me that in 9th grade she’s got to take that Regents, that science test and you know kids are not doing well on it so they need to introduce it earlier, and here it is.”*

On the other hand, the actions of the parent advocates or parents of PACE children, while provoking criticisms for attempting to get what they want and even possibly getting what they want for their children, impact the district in others ways as well. By engaging in a critical discussion around their interests, they push the district into deeper discussions around these issues. While the school board and district administrators still go about making decisions and implementing them, the presence of a vocal group of parents can foster deeper articulation of these decisions as well as push teachers, administrators and parents into more critical conversations around them. It is partly because these parents do not feel that adequate information is being provided to them about district decisions that they are critical of the district. So while it is true that the parents who advocate for gifted education may disagree with Orchard Central’s decision to detrack the system, their disagreement stems in part from dissatisfaction with

information around the impact of detracking and the implementation of a differentiated model for instruction. Several parents discuss these concerns:

P1: *“There's a very strong fear here from at least one individual that I think has a lot of influence that if there's homogeneous grouping you're going to have children with an elitist attitude who think that they are better than anybody else.”*

P2: *“I mean something like that might happen if you have these five kids spread out.... I don't know we'll see. I'd like the chance to hear that they've thought about these questions. I'd like to hear that they've thought about it and if they haven't thought about it I'd like us to have a chance to ask them. I'd like to give them credit for having thought this through.”*

P1: *“But do we get a forum to say yeah, but, yeah, but, yeah, but? Or is it one of these things where we get it delivered to us and then they say, ‘what are you bitching about, we already decided?’”*

P3: *“Well they have already decided.”*

P2: *“Or you get canned answers. I get very frustrated with the canned answers.”*

P1: *“So the questions I have here [about differentiation]. Training - who, what, how many hours, the content, the assessment of the teacher learning, and the assessment of the training? How the teachers are being selected? Will they be reading the same selections, at the same pace, with the same assignments? Will there be grouping? How will differentiation be graded, applied, etc.? How will efficacy be measured? How will this change the tenth grade curriculum? How will class sizes change?”*

They go on to suggest drafting a letter to several people, including the PACE committee, and outline some specific things they are interested in knowing more about. The core of their concerns with degrouping and differentiated instruction, however, has been exacerbated by what they see happening in the classroom as a result of the state standardized tests. Many of these parents feel that the issue raised above about the tendency for teachers to teach to the middle in heterogeneously mixed classes is being encouraged rather than discouraged in the way teachers are responding to the demands of the state tests. They are finding that more and more teachers are standardizing, not differentiating their instruction. A parent advocate comments: *“They do [teach to the test]. They justify what you have to do this year in preparation for a test next year. They have to learn this method this year because that's how it's going to be tested. Can't do it any other way, cannot.”* Another parent agrees: *“[The students] are being forced to practice every single day information that they already have and that they had before they even started that class.”* For these parents, the tests have not only lowered the bar on what counts as a quality education, they threaten any chance at successfully implementing the district's vision for differentiation.

Moreover, what this parent conversation suggests is that district-wide communication may not always include the kind of critical conversations these parents are looking for, and that discussions that address real structural changes may require more substantive types of conversations. Several people have commented that this may be exactly what the Principal is trying to establish through his monthly morning breakfasts. The Principal describes these meetings: *"We have instituted Principal's Tea here in the mornings once a month. We call it Tea and Tour and that's been very successful. I've had great dialogue with the parents.... For me as a principal it is essential to communicate with the community and I think a lot of people like the idea of seeing the school in it's working mode, see their kids in action, and come in and talk about educational issues in a non-threatening environment."*

It would seem that providing a forum for conversations is a step in the right direction since it provides a physical space for parents to get together, learn from each other, and discuss issues. A parent comments about the importance of voicing one's thoughts: *"I would have an influence because I would show up. You can disagree at home, and never go to the school, and it wouldn't really matter would it? If you showed up a meeting with other parents, then you can get a group that contested what was going on and it'd be a healthy thing."*

To achieve change is difficult. To achieve change when the local locus of control is being threatened by the state mandates and testing may seem impossible. For some, the need to prepare students for state tests that are perceived to be increasingly rigorous and difficult means that students must receive an education tailored to their particular needs, and this is achieved only through tracking. For others, it is precisely because standardized tests must be passed by all students that they feel that the kinds of messages and expectations embedded in a hierarchical structure need to be eliminated and replaced with an alternative message of success for all. This conversation is occurring in the midst of a larger conversation about the impact of the state tests on the learning and instruction that is occurring at Orchard Central.

The Good, the Bad, and the Necessary Impacts of High Stakes Tests

"I am Oz, the Great and Terrible. Why do you seek me?"

*They looked again in every part of the room, and then, seeing no one, Dorothy asked,
"Where are you?"*

"I am everywhere," answered the Voice, "but to the eyes of common mortals I am invisible. I will now seat myself upon my throne that you may converse with me."

Indeed, the Voice seemed just then to come straight from the throne itself; so they walked toward it and stood in a row while Dorothy said:

"We have come to claim our promise, O Oz."

(From The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, L. Frank Baum,
<http://www2.cs.cmu.edu/People/rgs/wizoz10.html>)

A specter of mystery

Just like the voice behind the curtain, state tests pose a specter of mystery and dread among both teachers and students at Orchard Central. A teacher explains: *"It's almost like the students feel like they're being tricked, or it's working against them, the standardized test. It's like the Wizard of Oz with the standardized tests. You don't want to be a paranoid person, that everything's out there to trick you, but I think a lot of kids feel that way automatically."*

Another teacher agrees: *"With the teachers' tests they know that they are going to be tested on what they were taught. With the standardized test, it can be anything."*

And as the tests draw nearer it is clear that regardless of how prepared they are or feel, uncertainty around the state expectations and requirements increases as students ask worriedly whether the state test *"is going to be hard,"* and teachers can only half reassure them that they are well-prepared. They know from experience that preparedness and performance don't always correlate in expected ways together, and that the state tests always manage to throw the students some sort of unexpected twist.

In the face of this specter, some administrators, teachers, parents, and students wonder what the state will throw at them on the next test and how they can best prepare for it, but they also question what the state's real intentions are. If it is to assist with the assessment of individual students then the teachers feel that state testing is good. If on the other hand, it is to impose some form of lock-step curriculum or public scrutiny, then they are bad. A teacher comments: *"If the sole purpose of the 8th grade assessment test was to identify those kids that are in danger of not passing the Regents in high school, I would have no problem with it. I don't see why it's necessary to publish those test results in the newspaper if that's what its purpose is."*

The good

The curriculum in grades 7 and 8 at Orchard Central is organized into units and largely builds on the content and concepts already introduced in elementary school. Many teachers and administrators feel this is a good thing because it offers a more comprehensive program for the students and it helps guarantee that teachers will cover necessary grade level content. The result, teachers and administrators feel, is that students should then be more likely to come prepared when they walk into the next grade level in September. Orchard Hill as a district may be unique in the sense that it already has in place a K-12 curriculum committee and its own set of standards which they have not

altered, viewing state standards as a gauge of their own standards, not as a replacement. What this has meant is that the organizational components were already in place to absorb the impact of the state tests without needing to alter the district's general organizational structure. Instead what they have addressed because of the state tests is the overall alignment and mapping of the K-12 curriculum.

There are three ways in which the state assessment system is seen to have had a general positive effect on the school district: First, it provides a state-wide framework from which to evaluate and reorganize the local curriculum; second, it has reinforced Orchard Hill's image as a successful district and so in many ways supports the kind of instruction that has been going on; and third, it has pushed the district to pay more attention to the processes they have in place for students who are not meeting the standards.

Curriculum alignment

I think the good thing about the state assessments is that everything is in alignment from the 4th grade to the 8th grade, and then your high-stakes assessments, those Regents in the high school. So the same types of skills are tested, at least in the ELA throughout 4th, 8th, and 11th.

- Middle School Teacher

Even before the advent of state testing and state standards, Orchard Hill administrators prided themselves on developing a comprehensive set of educational standards. However, when the state standards and tests were implemented, Orchard Hill department committees worked on curriculum mapping and alignment with state standards across all content areas. Department administrators attended workshops on curriculum mapping then went back to their departments and had conversations in whatever way they thought best suited the needs of that department. A teacher remembers this process: *"I believe memos went out from the state asking for the alignment. The curriculum mapping was the department's strategy after going to workshops about aligning with the state's curriculum - taking a close look at what we have, the state standards, curriculum, and in some cases moving things around in terms of grade levels and maybe emphasizing those concepts again later on."*

In the 2002-03 school year, different departments are in varying places in their curriculum mapping, standards and state test alignment efforts. The K-12 Math Department Head explains: *"We've redone our curriculum. We've taken a look at the core curriculum from the state and we've done a mapping project. We're in a mapping project right now which focuses on K-6 and we've got new textbooks. So the textbooks for 7th and 8th are coming in this summer and so we're going to begin the mapping of that curriculum after the textbooks come in. But we've revised our curriculum and we have given extra classes for review for the 8th grade assessments."*

She goes on to summarize the process of alignment in math: *“This year we drew the line in saying ok, now we have all the ammunition we need: We've got the core curriculum. They haven't changed that on us in the last few years. We've got the state assessments. They've finally settled down to where we're pretty comfortable knowing how they're going to be. We've got a brand new textbook series. We never had a textbook series to my knowledge. We took a look at the state objectives first, our objectives second - made sure that we were in alignment with them and if not then, we said let's get in alignment.”*

We view the standards as the organizing principles of the State assessments, and the State assessments as the accountability mechanism of the standards. In between the two, curriculum development and classroom instruction, aligned to the standards, bring the standards to life and provide the mechanisms for student learning. These four elements, the standards, curriculum development, classroom instruction, and assessment, are essential components of our education reform effort.

- New York State Education Department:
http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/osa/inform/inform_arch/stoamemo901.pdf

According to the K-12 Science Department Head, the district core science curriculum is also *“based on the state's core curriculum.”* He recounts efforts to align curriculum in science: *“We have the core curriculum guide that we go by. What we are trying to do is to look at that and make sure which parts get covered in 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. It's all based on the state's core curriculum and we just try to modify it to make sure it all gets covered.”* He states: *“The core guide identifies broad concepts and performance indicators of what students need to know. This is supposed to give teachers more flexibility.”* The teachers would then take these broad concepts and develop lesson plans or a course syllabus. But with everything teachers have to do, district administrators worry about teachers finding the time to do this well. A teacher explains: *“I use it, except for the classroom activities. I have found that time is a big consideration with the amount of content that we cover. The explorative exercises take away from much needed time. The core curriculum the state developed is our curriculum. The order may not be exactly the same, but I do everything that's on there, time permitting.”*

Whether the state tests are needed to assure curricular alignment is an issue with which people disagree however. Two parents discuss this question:

P1: *“You've got three elementaries that go into one middle school, and one middle school going into one high school and in that loop you can't guarantee the teachers are teaching basically the same curriculum and everything.”*

P2: *“You're assuming they don't talk within themselves.”*

P1: *“In that sense, but with the state testing it’s basically said, OK this is what you teach them. Where without that, the guidelines for teaching are much wider.”*

P2: *“I have a family member who is teaching. Who is one of the teachers in Orchard Hill and what I see is the different schools talk to each other. They work together and in Orchard Hill it might be better without standardized testing with the way they work together from what I see.”*

Instructional diversity

How the core curriculum and the state tests affect individual teachers’ instruction is as varied as the teachers are. Some teachers teach lecture style, while others create small group collaborative activities regardless of the impact of the tests: it is just their style they argue. Teachers state being blessed with multiple resources including a mobile computer lab, students who behave and can be counted on not to destroy these resources, and an administration that trusts their professional judgment and supports creative teaching in any way they can. Many of the activities teachers have developed and use were implemented before the state tests and standards and many teachers explains that besides changes in the order of the topics or needing to fit more in (as discussed in the next section), they have changed little of their instructional style. As a group, they employ question and answer approaches, do multiple hands-on projects, use a variety of multi-media, and feel that students learn best when actively engaged in their learning.

For example, an 8th grade English teacher explains how English is a literature-based program and there is no textbook. Students read a variety of genres from September to June. They have library day where they talk about a book that they read in its entirety and write up reviews of the book on index cards instead of book reports. Once or twice a week they get a chance to read in the classroom. Other days they can sign up for class book talks or work on projects. The teacher explains that the ELA has not necessarily altered the curriculum that much. What they have done is embed ELA type skills in the curriculum beginning in elementary school and continuing throughout 6th, 7th and 8th grade English, so that it becomes a natural function of what they do. One area the ELA has changed the curriculum is that they did not include a lot of non-fiction in the readings. To address this, they developed a civil rights project where small groups of students research and read books around civil rights issues such as the rights of children. They also do a 1930s radio show and they integrate a lot of technology into the projects. The teacher explains that all the projects are aligned to the standards. She states: *“This district has always supported teacher initiatives and ideas. There is a curriculum but you have a lot of latitude with what to cover and how to cover it. It has a lot to do with having a leadership that has confidence in the teachers to deliver a curriculum that is rich and has a lot of strength. The assumption is that you will integrate the standards.”*

On top of reading, students do a lot of writing and listening activities, PowerPoint presentations, and arts-based projects. For example, a teacher directs students in a PowerPoint assignment:

Students are in groups of 4; each group has a laptop in the middle of their formed table. The teacher states: *"American culture is like a quilt, with the pieces being the contributions of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Your task is to research and present information in a PowerPoint presentation about one African American contributor to the Arts, Literature, and History. Your group can choose whomever you would like as long as you include: 1) when this person lived, 2) what this person did to make a difference, 3) their achievements, 4) what effects they had on the culture of our country, and 5) what are the admirable qualities this person possessed?"* A list of websites is on the board for their reference, and the students get to work.

* * *

Similarly, in science, a teacher explains: *"The textbook does not drive what we do. We use certain sections of the text as they apply to the concepts and ideas we are currently studying. We use and develop whatever labs we like. We know the concepts we need to cover and so we work these in to what we do. We usually give notes by PowerPoint."* She goes on to state that they use very few packets in science. Instead, science *"is project-driven and lab-driven. The types of projects we do usually take anywhere from 2 to 8 days."* Science in 8th grade is divided into 6 sections: Chemistry, Matter, Electricity and Magnetism, Work and Energy, Sound and Light, and Motion Forces and Energy. In order to get students engaged with the key ideas of these units, they do several projects, such as: building a rocket and launching it, building a boat, researching one of the elements and creating a model of it. A teacher explains why they focus so much on labs: *"I think it's the best way for them to learn – to be able to discover on their own instead of reading what it might be like in a textbook."*

Science labs often take the students out of the classroom, either into the many fields around the school or into the hallway. On one such day, a class of 8th graders are scattered throughout the hallway in small groups. Each group is gathered around a 5 foot long Slinky. A student explains: *"We're using these Slinkies to examine frequency and wavelength."* The students also have stop watches, measuring tapes, and lab sheets. Repeatedly, someone from the group shakes the Slinky causing waves or ripples to flow through it. Then the students measure and record their results on their lab sheet.

* * *

While the state tests have altered the overall educational experiences of students, some of the emphases brought forth by the state were already widely used by teachers in the classroom. An example of this is the Document-Based Question in social studies. A social studies teacher explains that they have used documents in social studies for

decades, that at least at Orchard Central the use of primary documents has always been a basis of the curriculum. For example in a social studies class, the teacher is beginning a unit on the Cold War. In preparation for the students, he has placed a pile of documents at the corner of each desk. In each desk, students also have access to a textbook and an historical atlas. After the students arrive, they dive right into the lesson:

After some introductory comments, the teacher has the students open up their textbooks to a map of Europe and the Soviet Union with a lot of little red arrows on it. He has them focus on the map and then turn their attention to the first document on their desk which is of soldiers. He explains that the little red arrows are the soldiers, the human beings. Through a mixture of factual statements and stories that contextualize and bring these to life he takes the students through the beginning of the events that shaped the Cold War. They discuss the next document which is about soldiers shaking hands. Through these documents, the teacher engages the students in a purposeful question and answer session over the different events that led up to the cold war. He has them listen to part of a speech given by Churchill where he talks about the Iron Curtain. They then move on the next document which is a cartoon. It is a man standing on some caskets with country names on them.

T: *"Who is that?"*

S1: *"Stalin."*

T: *"What is he standing on?"*

S2: *"A stage."*

T: *"Yes, but what is he physically standing on?"*

S3: *"Countries."*

T: *"Yes, but what are they?"*

S4: *"Coffins."*

T: *"Yes and what do they represent?"*

He tells the student who answered before that he can give his answer now.

S3: *"All the countries."*

T: *"Yes, all the countries whose freedom he has killed."*

The teacher then raises a map and reveals a diagram he drew on the blackboard. It shows the word TRUMAN and the word DOCTRINE under it forming a sort of circle with the word COMMUNISM in the middle. He has the students write their answers and then asks for a few.

S5: *"To surround communism."*

S2: *"To kill communism, to like trap it."*

The teacher is satisfied with trap it. He goes on to explain that's the answer he's looking for, the idea of containment. There are a couple of groans as several students obviously wanted to share their own answer. A boy shares his anyway: *"To isolate it."*

T: *"Yes, isolate is a good idea [the boy is obviously pleased]. Yes, the idea is to contain communism. On Monday I am going to give you an assignment where you are going to create your own cartoon to represent communism being contained. So you can start thinking about that. If you understand the idea of containing communism, you understand the whole Truman Doctrine. This becomes the lens through which the next 40 years*

looked at foreign policy. We always looked at foreign policy through the Truman Doctrine. Everything I see, everything I do is to make sure communism does not spread.”

He puts on a large pair of yellow sunglasses to represent how that lens has shaded US decision making, how the Vietnam War and the Korean War were all about not letting communism spread. How this affected policy in good and bad ways, like U.S. support of Saddam Hussein because he would help contain communism. They turn to more documents and cartoons as they continue the lesson.

* * *

While teachers comment that administrators do not pressure them to change the way they teach, they acknowledge that the state tests have added pressure in many ways. This is evident in other changes that are occurring throughout the school around instruction and will be discussed in the sections on ‘the bad’ and ‘the necessary,’ and it is evident in teachers’ renewed focus on students who perform below the state standards. A teacher comments: *“I think the curriculum is pretty much the same: things have moved around a bit. Things I would’ve done earlier in the year have been pushed back. We have weekly tests, we got review books, I hold review sessions after school to go over rules and stuff, but I still teach in the same way. But with the kids who are struggling [with the tests and test preparation] I do make sure they are getting down the basic facts and procedures and we practice and practice more.”*

Identification for academic intervention

[The state assessments] reflect what I teach, because I teach the curriculum that is sent out by the state. It's just to see whether kids need special intervention services, which ones just have no idea and need extra help. That's the idea anyway - what it's intended for.

- Middle School Teacher

Teachers at Orchard Central voice support for the high stakes testing system when they see the tests as a means to identify students for Academic Intervention Services (AIS) which if implemented correctly should help students pass the Regents when they get to high school. A teacher explains her understanding of the connection between the state assessments and AIS: *“Ninety percent [of the students] pass the social studies and science exams. The kids do seem to perform weaker on the math and ELA. Do I think more kids can do math, read, and write? Yes, but for whatever reason, whether it's the way the state sets the pass rates in math and ELA, or maybe the kids panicked.... So, what happens is AIS, Academic Intervention Services tries to locate what those students struggled with and work with them. I mean the intention of these assessments was supposedly to catch kids early so they can pass the Regents later on.”*

A teacher comments about the importance of AIS: *“Well, I think some students might benefit through the extra programs that they'd be given in terms of meeting basic minimum competencies in ELA or Math. We're still not reaching the total population. The kids in the upper 20%, will succeed regardless of us. It's the 20% on the bottom, with the special education population, I don't know if they are still included with this special high school degree, but the 60% in the middle, especially the lower part of the middle, those are the kids I worry will drop out of school out of frustration and lack of self-esteem from constant failure on these tests.”*

AIS entail direct instruction, practice and memorization sessions to ostensibly help students improve their academic performance and pass the state assessments. However, as one teacher argues, approaches toward teaching and learning, such as more *“drill and practice”* that teachers generally try to avoid in the classroom are employed in AIS. She notes the dilemma: *“More drill and practice might be considered teaching to the test which is a no-no, but you want your kids to look good. It's a catch 22.”*

Whether the approaches employed to assist students to do better on the state assessments in AIS or in the classroom are considered good or bad matters less when the greater goal is seen as helping students achieve a high school diploma. A teacher argues: *“The good thing about the assessments is that there's a period after the 4th grade ELA where there's a safety net for those kids that didn't perform well. So, they have a chance with AIS to hone in on those skills that they're deficient in to perhaps do better in 8th grade. And then of course, the safety net after 8th grade is to prepare for the 11th grade Regents, to make sure they pass it, so they can graduate.”*

The state tests, in this view, provide a “safety net” for those students who are not meeting the standards and provide them with the services they need to graduate. Alignment of the Orchard Central curriculum to the state’s core curriculum and tests, although requiring flexibility and effort on the part of teachers and administrators, is viewed by many as one of the ways the school and district can prepare students for the challenges ahead of them. This effort is seen by some as a relatively seamless one since the district has a long-standing commitment to rigorous review of assessment data to ensure students are prepared for any assessments they might take. A teacher asserts: *“I don't believe we prepare our middle school students for the test in isolation what-so-ever. We have created a culture of preparedness for our students. For English, for every novel that we read, there are specific writing assignments that are directly related to each of the tasks on the 8th grade ELA. So, students are not necessarily preparing for the test in isolation, it's become part of the culture of our English curriculum. These writing assignments are not just off the top our head assignments, but rather well-thought out, well-planned assignments that are in direct relation to the listening, writing, reading tasks of the ELA 8.”*

Although Orchard Central promotes a “culture of preparedness,” differing views of what to be prepared for and for what reasons complicate how the Orchard Central community responds to the demands of the state tests.

The bad

How can you have a state test that does take into consideration the child's individuality? There's the problem. I understand the need for testing: on one side you need a scale, then again, you can't have a catch-all test. If you don't have the same test, and you change the system, and gear it towards individual students, then it's not standardized testing at all. It's kind of, you're damned if you do, damned if you don't kind of predicament.

- Orchard Central Parent

Damned if you do

While most teachers and administrators see the tests as a way to identify students in need of extra help, to align curriculum across grade levels to standardized outcomes, and prepare students to ultimately graduate from high school, they are also finding that focusing on the state tests as a way to achieve these things is not standing up to their own expectations or standards. They are finding instead that these assessments are dehumanizing to students, promote undesirable instructional practices, and provide inadequate measures to evaluate how well students are learning the standards.

Dehumanization

Many teachers, parents, and administrators at Orchard Central feel that district goals are much wider than what is measured on the state tests, and that placing such an emphasis on a few narrow objectives not only distorts the message provided to students but may also have negative consequences to their personal well-being. Education should prepare students for more than just knowledge in the content areas, and include a multitude of other skills and knowledge, such as life skills, wellness, civic values, critical thinking, scientific inquiry, interpersonal skills, and cultural and environmental awareness. The issue for teachers, administrators and parents, is that assessment in one area impacts students' self-perception in all areas, and that these other objectives have been compromised because of the state assessments. A teacher states: “*There are so many things I want the students to be able to do – and the state tests do not reflect any of that in my opinion.*”

Several teachers discuss other ways in which they assess not only students' growth, but also their own impact on students:

“A school can be measured by the extracurricular activities that they offer. As an educator, I'm concerned about the whole child, not just the child's score on the 8th grade ELA test. You know in life, let's face it, no one's going to say how did you do on the English Regents? That's not it, there's a lot more that goes into a successful adult, from elementary through middle school is pretty critical. The path the kid takes in high school and things like self-esteem, what does a school offer, what services to help kids through difficult times? The extracurricular activities, are there after-school programs to keep kids safe, and not home alone? So, there are a lot of other things.”

“Even a connection with a teacher, with the way home lives are now, sometimes they can make a difference with how children deal with the rest of their career in school if they make some type of connection, if they really enjoy a class or something that can motivate them to keep going, and it's something that you can't measure. I've had kids come back and say, I used to hate math, but you made it fun, or I enjoyed it, so I kept taking it, and now I love it.”

“You notice what the kids write in your yearbook at the end of the year and those are the things that measure, like the kid who says I used to hate math, and now I like it, or the kid who says thank you for helping me through this tough time, I don't know how I could have made it without you. Those are the things that make it all worthwhile.”

“The standardized tests hurt the kids who are not academically gifted, the ones that are working their hearts out, giving all they can give, and are still failing the assessment tests, whether in 4th grade, 8th grade, or taking the Regents over and over at the high school and they just can not do it. Those kids the state is saying to them 'you are a failure.' These kids are going to give up, drop out, or worse.”

And many parents agree, as this mother does: *“I think some students can only do, well we can put it as, there's the students that are A average, the students that are B average, the students that are C average. And there's students that struggle to be that C average that on this test they have to do a B to A average to get to where they want to be and if that's where they can get, if that's the best they can do is that C average and that's pushing it all the way. Yet, this test is saying, no, no, no, no, no you have to be this A, B average then you're going to see kids saying why should I? Why should I? Why should I do this? I know I can't because this is my average. This is where I'm at. So you're going to see a lot more drop-outs.... You're going to see a lot of that. And with the teachers it's going to be, 'they're not putting in the effort so why should I?' Because they're going to get those same students in there. And there are going to be teachers that say, 'OK let's try, let's try a different way and stuff,' but there's going to be other teachers that give up also because of the standardized testing.”*

Parents struggle with trying to understand the impact high-stakes standardized tests may have on children. One of the ways parents make sense of this impact is through comparing their children's school experience to their own. They talk about having taken a

standardized test or two throughout their K-12 education, but, besides the Regents, they don't remember those tests being central to their overall academic success or failure. A parent recalls her experience with standardized tests as she looks over questions from an 8th grade Social Studies test: *"Compared to the exams I took ten years ago, mainly the Regents exams, looking through these examples here, what I took was considerably different. [The tests I took] were pretty basic. They didn't have as much detail; the essay questions seem to be a little more difficult in here. These are for 8th graders?"*

Besides noticing what seems to some parents as a higher level of difficulty and complexity to the state tests their children are taking, some parents notice how tests questions, no matter how well written, seem to privilege some children's knowledge over others. A parent comments: *"Actually looking through some of these questions, I know it's a standardized test, but I would think regional issues might be a problem. If this exam is given to everybody I think it would be a problem. Some of these questions are specifically geared toward upstate NY people. I think some others may have problems with this."*

And while some parents feel that the tests bias some knowledge over others, they also realize that Orchard Central has the right demographics to do well on the tests. A parent explains: *"They say that demographics have nothing to do with [test score performance], but it has a lot to do with it. We are a typical suburban school, very narrow in cultural diversity and very economically advantaged in terms of our family structure."*

Although Orchard Central has favorable demographics for performing well on standardized assessments, it is not without students in need of extra help. Questions about test bias raise concerns for parents who see how state test scores are used to identify their children for special services such as AIS, which in turn raises a specter of uncertainty as to whether their children will eventually be able to graduate from high school. A parent remarks: *"We don't know what the consequences, especially if they finish low [on the ELA]. I'm concerned about the students who can't get past the Regents. There are just some who don't test well, and if the mind-set is the test, the test, the test, that's a lot of stress. And if you fail then you don't have a high school diploma; your child is definitely going to be limited as far as options for the future. You know, the army can only take so many people. Actually, you know what the army can't take them either. From what I understand, McDonald's isn't doing that well, so they're not going to want all of these kids either."*

This comment is countered with a view from another parent who shares that *"you're always going to have some fall through the cracks."*

Balancing between providing a standard by which children's learning can be measured and delineating a bar that all must jump to have access to opportunities only a high school diploma and higher education can offer, challenges Orchard Central parents,

teachers, and administrators in how they treat children as developing human beings with complex emotional worlds. Where is the line drawn between marking a child as in need of “Academic Intervention” because they don’t cross that bar, and being sensitive to the child’s sense of what he or she can do academically and in life? A parent voices her worry about the emphasis on state test scores from this perspective: *“I can’t say that I know too much at all about the state tests. I don’t understand how to create a test. I know in order to be a system of gauging people, it needs to be unbiased, one set test; then again, a one set catch-all test really would be geared toward some, and you know better for some, and be detrimental to others. It bothers me that kids are being judged by a number; I mean you’re a 1, you’re a 2, you’re a 4. If you’re a 4, you’re going to feel pretty good. Your confidence is going to be great, but if you’re a 1 or a 2? I think the main message is that it’s a very stressful situation for the kids to be judged by a number. I see some serious problems. And what kind of safeguards are there for kids that score low? What do you do with them, and why did they score low? So there’s a message there, we’re categorizing kids I think. It’s kind of dehumanizing in that way I think.”*

In this parent’s view, “categorizing” students can ultimately damage children’s emotional development and possibly their academic development too. But how do you take into account the whole child while comparing him or her to others?

* * *

To what extent and in what ways Orchard Central teachers and administrators work to prepare students specifically for the state tests becomes a point of dissension. Some teachers, parents, and administrators do not believe that paying a great deal of attention to the state tests is worth the sacrifices they must make. The Orchard Central Principal asserts: *“Personally, I’m afraid of what the state assessments are going to do to our children. I think the one size fits all concept does not work. America has been successful because one size does not fit all. I think high quality standards are important, but I also think the concentration of our efforts towards the assessments drag us down. If you look at the states that are involved in high-stakes testing the performance of their students is not improving. The drop-out rates are going up; the frustration rates of the kids are changing for the worse and we are not providing those well-rounded kids that make America what America is. You know, creative, free-thinking students that can go out there and tackle challenges and manipulate their skills according to those challenges. When you provide a one size fits all education, students will not be able to successfully meet life’s challenges because they won’t have the skills to think and create outside of the box. Middle school students, in particular, need an educational program that fosters the development of skills over a diverse learning spectrum, while enabling them to explore many aspects of life. By doing this, we help them to recognize their aptitude and ability, while strengthening their ability to achieve.”*

Compression

I don't think we've changed our curriculum within 8th grade math to meet the testing requirements, but a lot of the extra things we used to do have fallen to the wayside.

– 8th Grade Math Teacher

While many teachers and administrators agree that paying too much attention to the state tests may be harmful to district goals and objectives, they find themselves caught despite themselves in their grip. This is due to the fact that the state tests cover the entire 8th grade curriculum on top of the curriculum covered in previous years. For subject matters that have a lot of content like social studies, science and math, making sure students have been exposed to and hopefully mastered all of the necessary content for the state tests has altered the way teachers make instructional decisions in the classroom. For teachers, covering the curriculum they think will be on the tests, and preparing students for the format of the tests, requires sacrifices elsewhere. A math teacher explains: *“We compress the curriculum to get through it, to make sure all parts of it have been covered by May. After the assessment test, what we do is pre-algebra to prepare students for 9th grade. We teach algebra at the very beginning of the year, use it through-out the year, and then we go more deeply into algebra after the test.”*

Depending on when the state assessments are given in the course of a school year can make a huge difference. A teacher comments: *“This next year coming up, they are moving the state test up a few more weeks; I was thinking ‘great, now I’ll have even less time to get through all of the material.’ In the beginning I told myself that I would do all kinds of creative activities, but now that has all gone out the window.”*

In science, for example, there are some activities and topics teachers say they want to do but feel they no longer have enough time to do them due to the demands of the state tests. Furthermore, some teachers mention that they have an expertise in an area, and/or certain equipment available, but are not fully utilizing these resources because of the focus on the tests. Some teachers also assert that since the state assessments became high stakes, some content area units such as the Forensics unit in 7th grade, have been cut completely, while others have been emphasized because they will be on the test. A teacher remembers the Forensics unit: *“We had a nice Forensics unit, so that took pretty close to three and a half weeks to complete, and there’s just no way to get that in and get all of the other things in. I don’t know, it’s kind of a toss up, as far as doing good science with the kids. The Forensics unit was far superior to what replaced it. It was so much more hands-on, and really had the kids thinking, and a lot of the stuff for the state assessment is not that kind of stuff at all really, when you really get down to, it’s not really doing science as such.”*

Similarly, 8th grade social studies covers everything after The Reconstruction. In order to make sure students know enough about everything that might appear on the state tests, social studies teachers find themselves needing to drop important projects such as fish bowl discussions, mock trials, and group projects in order to skim over decades of American History superficially. A teacher explains: *“I try to sprinkle activities in there but I’ve also eliminated some activities. It also forces the kids who are having trouble with the material to keep moving on because I have to at least expose them to all of it.”* But even this strategy is ineffective and leaves too many periods uncovered; there is simply too much content. A teacher comments: *“I don’t know what the kids will do if the state test asks about the 90s and 80s, they are not going to know a thing. I doubt we will get anywhere near there. I don’t mind having some kind of test but come and talk to us. There has to be some flexibility.”*

What frustrates teachers is that the state acts as if every minute detail in history is essential instead of working with teachers to prioritize content areas and important skills such as conducting mock trials or research, which are activities that teachers do but in the end do not get reported to the public. A teacher comments: *“If we do mock trials, fishbowls, and other activities, these don’t get reported to the public. What get reported are the test scores and that only covers a small amount of what we do. At least give some weight to what is going on in the classroom. Add criteria that take into account these critical thinking activities.”* Furthermore, he goes on: *“There is the war on Iraq that is occurring and I should spend time on that but I have to give lip service to it, and I do. But I should spend more time on it and I can’t.”*

Furthermore, compression occurs because of the amount of review teachers need to fit in to prepare students for the state tests. A science teacher explains: *“I know one of the things that’s really affected science is that we spend 3 weeks before the exam trying to review things the kids have learned in grades five through seven, and whatever they’ve done in 8th grade too, just a quick review on that. And that’s taking away from the curriculum and other things that we could be doing instead of that. I’d say that’s one of the negative aspects that I’ve run into.”*

Needing to fit everything in over a short period of time affects the quality of the delivery as well as the quality of the educational experience for students. Parents and teachers worry about this effect. Two parents comment:

“I think that it limits the teachers on what they can do. Maybe there would be other things that they’d want to do that might be more exciting or more fun and just as educational but they have these test scores to worry about so they need to make sure all that is covered and there’s not a whole lot of room left for other things.”

“I think it takes away all the other things that the teacher might do in the classroom that are fun and exciting and wonderful. I mean learning should be really fun when they’re small. It should be fun. My daughter is in 6th grade and she’s learning

about nuclear power, fission, fusion. I didn't learn about nuclear power when I was in 6th grade. And she's ten you know I just, I don't know."

On top of the issue of instructional quality is the related one of choice over educational topics. The need to compress leaves many teachers wondering what they should or could cut out and frustrated with the lack of guidelines for making these choices. Teachers feel that they can't actually pick and choose the amount of focus to give on different units in their curriculum. They are told to cut, but since they cannot cut out entire units, they are left with choosing particular sections of units. A social studies teacher talks about this dilemma in a unit such as the Cold War: *"Well what do I cut out? The Marshall Plan? The Truman Doctrine? The Iron Curtain? They are all part of the story. For example, I end up covering the Korean War in 15 minutes, and considering all the people who died in that war it really is an unethical thing to do. It really does a disservice to history."*

Prioritization

We change the order in which we teach things.
– 8th Grade Teacher

In addition to compressing the curriculum, some teachers notice changes in what is prioritized in the curriculum throughout the school year. A science teacher notes the role the test deadlines play in how teachers prioritize what components of the curriculum get covered and when: *"To a degree the test does alter the curriculum. This is because the lab test [performance portion of the science state test] is in January and we have to get all those skills in."* She explains that the golf ball activity is a physics experiment and so it forces teachers to cover physics earlier than they would normally: *"If you want to start with chemistry you can't because the ramp experiment is physics and so you have to start with physics,"* which she says does not create a coherent program because you start with some physics, do chemistry and then go back to physics.

Similar to the work done with curriculum mapping, this kind of issue pushes departments to reorganize the curriculum in ways that allow teachers to embed important skills, while staying true to grade level curriculum. For example, since the 8th grade science performance exam asks students to use a microscope but using the microscope is taught in a previous grade level, the science department in Orchard Hill is trying to develop an activity that would provide a review session on microscope use to 8th graders, but within a curricular topic appropriate for 8th graders, thus minimizing the amount of content time lost in review.

Prioritizing affects the order, as well as the coherence and depth of the 8th grade curriculum. A math teacher explains: *"We do, at least in 8th grade, daily or weekly tests for math similar to the formal assessment test we give them. We practice writing answers in words or showing work that they're supposed to show on the assessment test. We have*

to prepare them for the assessment test in May; we'll do the things that are more likely to be on the assessment test before May, and then after May, near the end of the year, we'll teach things that are less likely to be on it, so in the end we cover the same curriculum, just in a different order.... An example would be trigonometry. Certainly we teach trig before May based on what's on most of the other assessment tests. It isn't something that I'd say well we can do that when we feel like it, or when the kids might be a little more ready for it."

Another math teacher agrees: *"I want to make sure the kids are confident with the material that will be on the state assessment, so I make sure I cover that first."*

In a math class, compressing and prioritizing ends up looking like a fast paced, question and answer review session:

As students file into class, they take out worksheets. The bell rings and the teacher walks around checking to see if everyone has completed the assignment.

T: *"Today we are reviewing probability. It will be on the state assessment in a few weeks, so let's see how much you remember. Does anyone have any questions about the homework?"*

A few hands go up, and someone is called on.

S1: *"I couldn't remember how to figure out how many possible outcomes there are in questions nine and ten."*

T: *"Can anyone help her out?"*

A couple of students raise their hands.

S2: *"You take the number of options like win, lose, tie by the number of teams or players; I mean like in question 9 there's 2 teams and they have 3 options, so it's, can I go to the board?"*

T: *"Go ahead."*

S2: *"Okay, so it's 2×3 : 2 lines because there's 2 teams and it's 3×3 because there's 3 options win, lose, and tie; so it's 9 possible outcomes."*

T: *"Is she right?"* He asks the girl with the original question.

She answers: *"Yeah."*

T: *"Why don't you try #10. There's still 3 options, win, lose, tie, and there's 3 teams ...So how many lines?"*

S1: *"3 Okay... $3 \times 3 \times 3$: $3 \times 3 \times 3$."*

T: *"What's another way of thinking of that?"*

S1: *"I don't know."*

T: *"Help her out."*

S2: *"3 to the third power."*

T: *"Do you want to try another one?"*

S1: *"No I think I got it."*

T: *"Okay let's move on then, any other questions?"*

A few more students raise their hands and ask questions.

S3: *"I don't understand what the range, mode, and mean have to do with probability."*

T: *"Which question?"*

S3: *“Like in #12, we have to calculate the mean, mode, and range, and then it asks us what our best guess for an outcome is.”*

T: *“Can someone help her out?”*

A student offers an answer. The teacher clarifies. The student with the original question responds: *“That still doesn't make sense, I know how to do it, but I'm not sure why is one guess any better than another?”*

T: *“Some answers are more informed. Well we're running out of time, but let me pass out the next review sheet, it's on functions... save any questions you have left for next time.”*

Compressing months and years worth of review into 8th grade can appear to overwhelm teachers and students, but can also be seen as a way of evaluating what students' weaknesses are before they show up on the state tests.

Evaluation

We have more tests and I think this has added another form of pressure to perform. I know I check the state website at least once a week just to see what they have on there. It's another level of accountability. We need to make sure we're teaching the state's curriculum, and that the kids are prepared for the assessments. I mean we do well, and we haven't had a problem, but say we didn't perform, then things around here would really change, it would be all about those tests, but that's not where we are.

- Middle School Teacher

Evaluating how well students are prepared for the state tests, while also taking stock of the quality of the education offered, is based on criteria other than how well they know the material. Unfortunately, it often creates a loop back to the style and form of the state assessments themselves. For example, a math teacher says that when looking at how students perform on practice tests and review materials, she looks at how well students *“write answers in words or show work that they're supposed to show on the assessment test.”* So, while teachers disagree as to whether the skills and knowledge emphasized by the state tests are appropriate or even valuable, they find themselves focusing on these nonetheless. Doing so, however, provides teachers with a platform from which to understand, support, and/or criticize the state's educational plan.

Using and correcting practice tests from previous years' tests, participating in the scoring of state tests, and evaluating students' overall performance on the state tests provide teachers with the experience and basis to evaluate the quality and form of these state assessments, and for the most part, teachers at Orchard Central are disappointed with what they see. Several math teachers discuss their perceptions of the state assessments:

“I think they are important. You need some type of standard to see where kids are. I don't like how we have to take points off for some of the writing with the math, that's my biggest thing.”

“A lot of times when they are asking math questions, they are asking them also to write, and I understand a lot of times they do go hand-in-hand, but when we're grading it we're taking off points because it's not written correctly, but the math is done correctly; so, what are we testing? Are we testing that they can write it correctly, or that they can actually do the math? Because I remember a specific question where we were taking off points where they did the math correctly and they knew what the words meant in math, but wrote it wrong, and we had to take a point off; so, I think for math, it's like what are we testing? What do we want them to know?”

“And some of the questions are worded, even for us are confusing or could be interpreted in different ways or we understand why a student would do things a certain way, whatever they did, because of the way it was worded.”

“Yeah, and again, what are we testing? What's the goal of the questions? I also don't like the 'if you show too much work you can get penalized,' because we enforce put everything down, show everything; how you got every number in every problem. Then, on the state assessment we end up having to take off points because they did this right, but they did this also, so they get penalized.”

“We don't know how they go from the 69 points on the math test to that scale that they publish; I don't know where those numbers come from. They don't share that; I guess that's a secret, or the dividing lines between the levels. How they do it, I have no idea. I wish they'd share that.”

Similarly, other subject matter teachers have issues with the purpose of the state assessments and what is actually being evaluated by them. An English teacher explains: *“What do we do with the kid who performs magnificently in class and on weekly tests and quizzes, and then they are taking a timed-test and freeze-up, they're terrible test-takers? That is not a good indicator of a child's intellectual performance. And another thing I really have difficulty with is this timed ELA 8. I'm a real proponent of the writing process and I advocate that with my students. There is never a time I say you have an essay to write overnight, because they need time to process the task, they need time to think about the task, and then they need to pre-write and generate ideas, edit, first draft, peer-editing, conversations, conferences with me and work towards a final draft. Now, invariably the students say to me when I say '90 minutes after I read the 2nd reading of this listening part write an essay,' 'but you tell us you shouldn't sit down and write a whole essay at one sitting'. I'm at a loss for what to say. You know I carry this conversation on within my department, or whenever there's professional conversations with other English teachers at meetings, and recently someone said 'you know there is such a thing as on demand writing' and that's what this is all about. But I can't see any adult application at all.*

When I have to write a paper for a class, I'm not given 90 minutes to write a paper that has such severe consequences to it."

While, the New York State test scores are viewed as only one indicator of students' success at learning the standards, they are important scores not only to students who have graduating from high school some day in mind, but also because the scores are reported to the public in ways that compare schools and thereby compare teachers and communities. So, teachers and administrators are cognizant of the fact that these test scores are reported to the public as good measures of how well students are learning the standards, even while they are finding more and more reasons for thinking otherwise.

Through the process of test scoring and past years' test reviewing, teachers become aware of inconsistencies in the quality of test questions and levels of difficulty in different subject areas. Both teachers and administrators voice concerns about the adequacy of the tests in carrying so much weight in evaluating student learning with these weaknesses in mind. A teacher asserts: *"The 8th grade science test is not rigorous enough. Too many of our kids are passing. Kids we feel need remediation, according to this [state test score report] they are passing through, but when we correlate them to math, math has a much higher number. I don't think it's because [the students] are doing so much better in science but because of the way [the state test developers] are assessing it. Living Environments and Earth Science have lax standards, so a great number of kids pass. Chemistry and Physics are going in the opposite direction [being made more difficult]. So there are some inconsistencies. I personally wonder if some of that is because of graduation requirements. If we have to make sure enough kids pass Earth Science and Biology, then they are trying to have higher standards in [them]... so somehow the whole picture is inconsistent."*

A teacher comments that when she asked her students about what they thought of the science test, they said it was *"easy."* The teacher says, *"it basically tested their ability to measure."* So, in addition to a lack of consistency in the level of difficulty, teachers also point out the difficulty of assessing science when math skills, for example, are also part of the assessment. A science teacher notes: *"Overall, it doesn't test that much about the concepts. Some of it does, little parts of it, but a lot of it has to do with how well does this kid measure and do some math, or 'what's that vocabulary word that I needed to know' and some of it, there's a certain vocabulary with science that you need to know, but in terms of concepts there's a big picture and sometimes I don't think it tests the big picture, the overall concept. What were they supposed to have learned about this? Instead of whether they know the actual vocabulary for it. They are important parts of science, but I would tend to try to make something that's a little more quote 'real world.' That would be performance or authentic assessment; I don't think it's the greatest test."*

Another refrain among teachers is that part of their jobs in 8th grade is to prepare students for 9th grade, but preparing them for the state tests may not help them do this. A teacher explains his dilemma: *"If our purpose in 8th grade is to prepare them for 9th*

grade, the assessment tests don't really test pre-algebra skills. If the purpose is to teach them enough to survive, make it in life and be able to deal with everyday mathematical problem-solving, I would say they test that well, at least to an extent; although, their problems tend to be terribly contrived. For example (he gets out an old test) they get telephone poles; they get the diagonal difference between the poles and the kids are told to find the distance between the 2 poles. This question was printed in the newspapers as an example of their good every day, real-world problems. Yet, this question is difficult for kids to relate to a real-world situation. Really, you would use a direct measure of distance.”

This teacher, as several others, alludes to how tests and test scores have become popular topics in newspapers and other media. The Orchard Central community expects good test scores and making them public only reinforces their importance. The Principal notes this problem: *“When you look at the media portrayal of scores, not having all of the data available to assess the meaning of those scores, a false picture of a school’s service to students can be given. The test scores do not measure in total a child’s success or failure in the educational setting. To publish those scores without providing the supporting data can be perceived as an injustice to schools and children. The standards are the same, but the districts and children are different. We wouldn’t evaluate a child on one piece of assessment, wouldn’t promote them, wouldn’t deny them graduation, or put them in a job based on one evaluative tool. So why should we do that with these test scores? It’s not a true picture of what a school district is really all about, nor what the children are capable of or have accomplished.”*

Compression, prioritization, and on-going evaluations of the curriculum help some Orchard Central teachers feel they are doing what they need to do to prepare students for the state tests. Whether these activities are making students more prepared or shortchanging them in some way is unclear, but the frustration and tension of teachers in trying to do these things is palpable among many. What seems more and more clear to Orchard Central teachers is that they are damned if they do focus on the tests, in the sense that the tests and the instruction geared toward them may be seen as encouraging dehumanization of students, compression and prioritization of the curriculum, which takes time away from instruction. But, teachers are damned if they don’t focus on the tests, since these scores represent, for some community members, the success of the school and its staff.

The necessary

We are situated in a testing society. In order to get anywhere you need to pass tests. I know I had to, and so does everyone else right? Doctors, lawyers, it’s you need to know this and show me that you do.

- Middle School Teacher

Most parents and teachers see preparing students to take tests as a necessary part of the educational process because test taking is part of American culture. When asked about complying with state assessments, a teacher states: *“I never thought to not comply. I would really have to be against these tests along with some really good reasons. I don’t know. If I didn’t give the kids the tests, I’m sure someone else would.”*

Teaching students to take tests is necessary because teachers believe that their job is to help students master the skills and requirements that determine students’ success in school. A teacher comments: *“The tests could use some work in terms of question writing, sometimes the scoring rubrics are poorly phrased ... but I’m a teacher who wants to see my kids succeed and doing well on these tests is important for their futures.”*

And another agrees: *“I would be doing the kids an injustice if I didn’t familiarize them with the test and its format. It’s always on my mind. All we do are those damn DBQs!”*

Damned if you don’t

With the core curriculum guides being quite comprehensive, four state tests to get ready for, and preparation for the next grade level in mind, teachers’ frustration becomes clear. One teacher complains, *“There’s a lot to cover.”* Another agrees, *“We have a lot to do.”* Still another adds: *“You know there’s the need and then there’s the want. The desire to try to make sure each child is successful in whatever they need to do. I would say there’s some nervousness, ‘Will I have to spend more time or less time on trying to get this concept down?’ I have all-of-this curriculum to cover. There’s pressure from both sides. It’s a tough balance.”*

Several teachers agree that aligning the curriculum to the state’s core curriculum and tests, has in turn encouraged aligning instruction to the types of on-demand tasks students are asked to do on the state tests. They feel their instruction can’t help but be shaped by the specific outcomes defined by the tests and test deadlines that force covering that content at a stressful pace and sometimes in a non-sensical order. Two teachers wonder how they would teach differently if there were no high stakes tests:

“We’d have more freedom to teach the way we want to teach. I think we’d be more willing to take risks with our teaching methods. The curriculum would be the same, the end results would be the same, but our delivery may be a little more varied.”

“Obviously, there would still be some sort of test that would assess the kid. I’m a believer more in authentic assessment, you know performance assessment.”

The sentiment of most teachers is that the state tests and test preparation is necessary regardless of whether their intents or impacts are good or bad. In their view, teachers have always needed to be accountable for the performance of their students and

the current emphasis on testing is something they need to endure. Since students are required to take the state mandated tests, teachers are responsible for ensuring that students will get the preparation they need for them.

Test prep

We will absolutely be doing review. Doesn't everyone? So, yes we're going to be reviewing. We'll spend at least 2 weeks, if not longer, depending on how much time I have to spend on it. But I'll be spending some time on what they learned in fifth grade, sixth grade, and the whole thing. I definitely will be doing some review. In fact, we're buying a review book that we will be covering in class to go over some of those concepts and the big ideas.

- Middle School Teacher

Over the past school year, both the science and the math departments decided to invest in review books. These new books are intended both to familiarize students with the format of the state tests, but also to refresh students' memories of material from prior years that may be tested. Review activities also function as a way to evaluate the preparedness of students for the tests and have become a more frequent part of students' work. A teacher sums up this point with regard to math: *"There is a big change in the way we do testing. We now do it on a weekly basis. It's more focused towards the [state] assessment."*

Because of the way the state test questions are written and the kinds of responses they seek, previous state tests become the basis for test preparation and review. For example, in preparation for the 8th grade math assessment, students have been working on a set of worksheets with questions from previous years' exams. Students complete the worksheet for homework and then they go over the answers in class:

Once the students are settled, the teacher begins to go over the worksheet students are expected to have completed. He reads a question and explains: *"This is a trigonometry problem. Every test that I've seen has a trigonometry problem. They also have a question dealing with the Pythagorean Theorem. On the assessment test you will be given a table."* He shows them the page from the test with the information they will be given. He goes on: *"What they do not give you is which side is which in trigonometry. The long side of a triangle is always the hypotenuse. So you need to figure out the opposite and adjacent sides. You will be given an angle; the side across from the angle is always the opposite side."*

He goes over several more problems. For example: *"Number 32, teachers did not like this problem."* In this question students are given a small triangle that they need to measure and redraw 1.5 times bigger. *"To measure that you get one of these cardboard*

rulers.” He holds up the punch out ruler students get with the test. He explains how you need to measure accurately and then times each side by 1.5. *“The trick is getting them to meet at the top. Essentially, you are doing a construction of a triangle without the use of a compass. As long as you were close they gave it to you. In practice they gave a lot of leeway as to how to grade that.”*

He goes on. One question is about a tree and whether it would fall on a house that is nearby. After working out the problem, the teacher tells the students about a common mistake. He works out the problem and then puts the height of the tree in the answer box. The teacher asks a student to explain why he wouldn’t get full credit for that answer. The student explains that he wouldn’t get credit for that answer because the question was asking for a yes or no answer, whether the tree would hit the building. The teacher says that is correct: *“Before you answer the question go back and read the question and find out what they want you to answer. The answer is not 54 feet, the answer is ‘no, the tree would not’ That really hurt, people knew what they were doing, they got it all right, but they answered the question wrong. That’s one of the things I don’t like about this assessment. But we are stuck with it, so we have to do the best with it.”* He tells them they will go over some Words of Wisdom about taking the math 8 assessment before the test next week.

* * *

In a social studies classroom where students have a test once a week, a social studies teacher passes back last week’s test and asserts: *“Get down law, the definition of law (written on the board) and these other terms; you will need these for the next exam.”* The students take out their organization sheets, and the teacher reminds them: *“Part A sets the stage: historical content, part B is the thesis idea, the third section is the body, and the last restates your topic sentence, so go back to part A for this.”* He goes on to mention that tomorrow’s test will be a DBQ. He draws a line on the board with dots on it like a number line with dots representing integers. He explains that dot one is the topic sentence, dot 2 represents the documents chosen, and the third dot is for outside information, or the ending. He tells the students to prepare for the test, but they cannot pre-write their essays, because, he reminds them, *“I want you to get used to the tick tock of the clock as you’re trying to work through these.”*

* * *

In an 8th grade English class students work on a timed essay for review. The teacher says to me, *“They’ll have the class period to complete an essay prompt.”* And adds, *“I really don’t like these timed essays, but the kids need to get used to them.”* The prompt reads: *Write an essay about a person in history or someone you know who has overcome obstacles to fulfill a dream or ambition. Include who the person is, what he or she did, the challenges he/she faced, how he/she overcame the challenges; remember an*

intro, body, and a conclusion. The teacher directs the students to, “Go ahead and get started.” Students reply with muffled sighs and begin the assignment.

Similarly, in another English class, the teacher hands out an exam and gives students the class time to complete it. She says that the exam is, “*standard test prep,*” and continues, “*we usually spend about 3 weeks preparing for the state assessment. They're doing a part 1 today for a regular test grade and we'll go over the answers tomorrow, and then move on to part 2 and 3.*” Although, as some argue, the state tests help prepare students to perform on-demand tasks under high stakes conditions, as one teacher admits, even for adults, these situations are more difficult for some to handle than others: “*I'll tell you, as someone who doesn't enjoy writing, if I were to sit down, and you said 'here's the topic and write', I would sit there against the clock as each hour ticked away.*”

Even in other activities, such as group projects, teachers are well aware of the kinds of questions students will be facing on the state assessments and integrate these into these activities. So even in collaborative and creative activities, the influence of the state assessments is evident. For example in this assignment: *In ‘The Giver’ [a novel] a utopian society was created, but things went very wrong. Now, you guys will get the opportunity to create your own Utopia. Make sure you address: 1) what kind of government would exist, 2) what the educational system would look like, 3) how the community members would receive medical care, 4) what kind of money would be used, and how it would be distributed, and 5) what kinds of recreation would be available, and how would they participate.* A number of websites are listed on the board with the title: *Utopian Philosophy.*

The state tests pose quandaries to teachers: Do they teach so that they and the students know they are prepared for the tests or do they teach so that students can reach a wider variety of educational goals, not emphasized in test preparation activities? Can they do both in ways that meet all students’ needs? Ultimately they know that preparation for the tests is necessary to assure the public that they are doing the right thing for their students.

Accountability

Parents are well aware of the instructional changes they have seen over the years as a result of the state tests. Two parents discuss the changes they’ve seen:

“I think it is a tremendous effect on what is taught in the classroom. I think that the teachers have to teach to the test and the kids practice the test. They do practice ELA and even like 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.”

“It was a huge change of course because I think my oldest was in 4th grade when they started this 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.”

And while some parents question the impact test preparation is having on the education of their children, others feel that regardless of the consequences of an emphasis on state test preparation, the tests are seen as necessary because they don’t trust that teachers will be preparing their children as they should. Several parents express their views:

“Standardized tests show the community how well the school district is doing. They show the parents how well the school district and how well the children are doing. They help the students see where they are and how well they are doing. They help the teachers see how well they are teaching and where they can improve and everything. And they show the school how well they are doing, where they need improvement and where they’re doing good and everything and all that.”

“You need some type of standard to see where kids are.”

“I think that if you have standardized curriculum you’re going to need standardized testing to make sure that the curriculum is being followed properly. Otherwise how do you know that the curriculum is being taught properly if you don’t have the testing?”

But others aren’t so sure that the test results really provide them with any meaningful information from which to judge the kind of instruction their children are getting. A mother explains: *“I think that parents have a lot to do with their children’s success in school. Monitoring homework, helping with homework, making sure assignments get done. And even for me, sometime that’s hard, sometimes things slip. 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. And even within the districts they are going to have varying, really varied scores.”*

* * *

The good, the bad, and the necessary are how teachers, parents, and administrators talk about the impact of the 8th grade ELA, math, social studies, and science state tests on the teaching and learning at Orchard Central. All of these judgments are rooted in an environment of uncertainty and to some degree trepidation. Trepidation

over what the state may emphasize on this year's tests or what they may change on next year's. What the State Education Department has set forth in the core guide and the state tests has, for many teachers, provided a vision of key concepts on which to focus and an assessment that identifies students' weaknesses with regard to those key concepts. But, in a school like Orchard Central, that vision has the effect of blurring an already tried and true vision of academic preparedness, high achievement, and teacher creativity and motivation.

* * *

"Can't you give me brains?" asked the Scarecrow.

"You don't need them. You are learning something every day. A baby has brains, but it doesn't know much. Experience is the only thing that brings knowledge, and the longer you are on earth the more experience you are sure to get."

"That may all be true," said the Scarecrow, "but I shall be very unhappy unless you give me brains."

The false Wizard looked at him carefully.

"Well," he said with a sigh, "I'm not much of a magician, as I said; but if you will come to me tomorrow morning, I will stuff your head with brains. I cannot tell you how to use them, however; you must find that out for yourself."

"Oh, thank you--thank you!" cried the Scarecrow. "I'll find a way to use them, never fear!"

(From The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, L. Frank Baum,
<http://www2.cs.cmu.edu/People/rgs/wizoz10.html>)

Protecting What We Have

*I don't think the students are any different, or any better;
they are just better at taking the test, better prepared.*

- Middle School Teacher

In a successful district like Orchard Hill, is state testing akin to stuffing the scarecrow's head with the brains he already has? While the effect of state standards and testing is significant, it is difficult to determine from these effects whether the outcome will prove beneficial, harmful, or lie somewhere in between. What is clear is that underneath the story of a successful district, is a growing concern that adhering to someone else's vision of success, in this case New York State Education Department's,

may actually undermine the very activities that have made the district successful to begin with. The Principal comments: *“When you are teaching to the test, and as much as we say that we don't want to do that and as much as we try to not do that, when everything in education relies on test outcomes it is almost impossible to avoid it. I don't think we do that here consciously. We probably do it unconsciously. When you teach to a test, you narrow the thinking of children; you narrow the scope of their learning process. When you look at the number of Nobel prize winners in the world, if you look at the business industry, if you look at all of these factors, America leads the way, and there's a reason why we lead the way; the diversity of the American educational system fosters that success. We have the most Nobel Prize winners in part because of the way the American system is structured. I believe that by narrowing the scope of what and how we teach, we will eventually erode that system.”*

Furthermore, the high stakes accountability system created by the state is seen to be causing other ripple effects that threaten the characteristics that make up a successful district. Some of these are brought about by the outside, for example, through the state report card, while others are brought about from the inside, for example, with the changes occurring with regard to instruction. These issues are further confounded by the mixed messages floating around about state testing and standards.

For example, it is difficult to determine what impact reporting the test scores will have on how well people work together in maintaining a quality educational system. A teacher comments: *“I think the public deserves to know how the kids are doing, but my one fear is that people are only going to see that one day of tests. And I hope that they include the fact that this test covers 4 years worth of knowledge for these kids. How often have adults gone through a test that tests 4 years of knowledge? So, I hope there's a preface to the scores, explaining what the tests cover. Traditionally, this school has done very well on the tests. So, I hope it's the same this year.”*

The concern many teachers and administrators have with how the state test scores get reported is how these numbers will play out in the larger educational discussions within the community. Will parents and community members be more inclined to support activities that raise test scores, even if this may mean a lessening of activities, academic or otherwise, that do not have achievement on state tests as a goal? Will the publishing of state test scores create other changes, either to the educational structure, or to the larger demographics of the area?

Many parents in Orchard Hill explain how they had looked around at various other school districts before they felt they found the one they wanted, even if it meant waiting until a house came up for sale. Test scores, however, are not the primary reason given for why they felt this district matched their values. For example, a parent comments: *“It had to have a really low drop-out rate. That was something I noticed right away. I said this is an incredibly low drop-out rate. This is a community that cares about education.”*

Another parent adds: *“We could have afforded a house in any district. The school report cards or whatever you call them, when we were looking they looked pretty much equivalent. We chose this one because we thought with a smaller school district in a more rural setting it was going to be better.”*

While parent involvement is usually seen as a tremendous asset in districts such as Orchard Hill, it also presents challenges. One of these is responding to the multiple demands made by parents who are used to making direct requests or lobbying the board on issues that they feel strongly about. As districts have had to tighten their belt so to speak while also increasing services to comply with NCLB mandates, how to distribute the resources becomes a source of concern. For example, in a conversation about resources, several parents comment on the good reputation Orchard Hill is receiving for how it services special education students. And while they are proud of the quality of these services and would not change them at all, they are also concerned with how reporting the quality of such services draws people with special education children into the district and can impact the way resources are allocated. Two parents comment:

“In this district we're spending the money serving [special education students] and our reward is we get more of them. And the state does give some support, but not as much as they are supposed to.”

“It is something we're proud of, but then sometimes we look at our kids and say they should be getting some special services too. They're just as different. If you look at a bell curve, they are just as different. And it doesn't have to be much, just attention. There needs to be some attention given.”

It is difficult to determine the impact publicizing success might have on the population of a school district. It is obvious that one of the concerns parents and teachers have voiced in regards to the effect of the state tests is a concern that reporting success may create an influx of students causing an increase in the population, which may also cause a change in the population. A father explains his concern: *“I think maybe the community might be harmed.... You know they publicize the grades and stuff in the papers and this school district, you know, did well and you're going to get a lot of people just flocking to the community too. I like to keep the community small around here.”*

And parents worry that a strategy the state might institute would involve a redistribution of resources and funds. For parents who feel they have worked hard to get to where they are and get their children into good schools, such a solution is met with skepticism. A father comments: *“You know we obviously are very, very fortunate here. You have a nice school, nice neighborhood, kids grow up in a dream-come-true type of area and yet plenty of kids in the inner cities don't have anything near to this... But when you think about it, high-income neighborhoods the school's generally look better, and there's more money just because there's more local taxes, these schools are better off. The low-income areas, on one end, it's not fair to say, okay, you have these high-income*

areas, let's take more tax money from them and give it to the low-income areas. I don't think it adds more to their resources, it's just that it's the attitude; there's a pre-determined perception of what their lives are going to be like, and what they seek. So, their perceived self-concept in themselves are lower in low-income areas than in affluent areas. So, the only way to bridge that gap, to change that is not so much the school. They haven't been able to do that and I don't think you can ask them to do it. You need to change the parent.”

It may be because of the natural inclination of people to protect their own and the desire of parents and teachers to defend against the perceived threats they feel are arising as a consequence of changing mandates that a potential backlash to the state’s agenda will occur. A teacher comments: *“They [state administrators] didn't listen to us when they were implementing this. They did not listen to us about problems with individual tests. They don't listen to us even with problems with the answer key to the test when it's incorrect. They don't listen when we say questions are mis-worded. They don't listen to us when we say it's an unnecessary program at the very least, and harmful at the worst, and I don't see our voices being listened to in the future. The only hope we have that anything will change is when parents realize their hard-working kids won't graduate from high school because they were not able to pass the assessment tests. First time we give kids who are hard-working, good kids, middle-class parents, that are not allowed to walk across that stage because they didn't pass these tests, then that will be the beginning of the revolt. The politicians will be running for cover.”*

The issue, however, for parents, teachers, and administrators is whether the demands inherent to meeting the requirements of the state tests and standards won’t somehow shift the discussion away from the essential concerns of educating Orchard Hill students well for the 21st Century. Will shifts in instruction that are already occurring tilt the field away from essential methods and content? Can suggested changes in the organizational structure meet the needs of all children? Can teachers, administrators, and parents successfully sift through the state requirements and their impact and provide guidance for future district decisions in a way that maintains in place the strengths of the district while focusing on ways to improve on its weaknesses?

In Orchard Hill School District, the questions and uncertainty that are occurring as a result of New York State’s accountability system are not about whether their students will be successful, but whether their students will be successful on the right tasks and for the right reasons. Depending on the path taken, the state’s or one developed by the Orchard Hill community, what will Orchard Central students actually be prepared for? Will succeeding on the state tests prepare students to succeed in high school, college, and beyond? Or will succeeding on the state tests simply prepare students to succeed on other standardized tests? For the parents, teachers and administrators of Orchard Hill the answer to this question lies at the core of this story about the impact of the state tests on a community.