"MAKE IT A GREAT DAY OR NOT. THE CHOICE IS YOURS:"

Teaching and Learning amidst Low Test Scores in an Urban Middle School

Reforming Teaching/Learning in a High Stakes Testing Environment

Capital Region Science Education Partnership

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It is the first day of the 8th grade state mandated math exam. The students are hanging out in their homerooms eating breakfast and talking loudly. A paraprofessional (P) and classroom teacher (T) are proctoring the test in this room. After the morning announcements they begin to organize a pile of tests just delivered from the office. There are 23 students in the room.

T: *"Please quiet down. You are staying in this room for your testing."*

She calls attendance.

P: *"Please raise your hand if you need a pencil. Please don't chew on these. We will be collecting them at the end of testing."*

She passes out pencils as students continue to talk.

P: *"Please stop talking. Please stop talking – raise your hand if you need a ruler* (everybody raises their hand). *I hope I have enough."*

T: *"If you don't have enough, those I do have."*

S1: *"Were we told to bring rulers?"*

S2: *"No."*

P: *"Stop talking please.* (Directly to a boy) *if you hit somebody again with your ruler, you will lose the ruler and you will have no mercy from me about getting a ruler."*

T: *"Please don't break my rulers."*

She helps pass out rulers.

P: *"I'm now going to give you an answer sheet. Please make sure you get the one that has your name on it."*

She passes these out. Some students check these over. Others keep talking with their neighbor.

P: *"If you have books on your desk, please put them underneath your chair."*

T: *"R I'd like you up here please."*

She moves a boy up front.

P: *"Is there anyone who does not have an answer sheet? Please make sure you have your own answer sheet. Make sure there is no writing on it right now. There should be nothing colored in except for the information on the top. Ok, today you are going to take a math test. I am going to give you your booklets, please do not open it. Leave it closed on your desk."*

She starts passing these out.

S3: *"You can refuse to do this?"*

P: *"Pardon me?"*

S3: *"You can refuse to do this?"*

P: *"Beats me. It's probably not a good idea to do that."*

S3: *"It says here refusal in the codes."*

S4: *"I refuse to take this test."*

T: *"The test goes through a computer and there are codes for different conditions."*

P: *"You will be filling the answers on your answer sheet from numbers 1 through 27. Please find those. Make sure you are using the correct spot on your answer sheet. Make heavy black marks on your answer sheet. If you make a mistake please make sure you erase it completely. Make no stray marks on your answer sheet. Do not make any marks on the back of your answer sheet."*

T: *"Please stop talking."*

After a couple more student interruptions – one wanting scrap paper, the other stating his ruler has no centimeters on it - the proctor begins reading the directions.

* * *

This is a story about accountability in an urban middle school in upstate New York. It describes the experiences of teachers, students, administrators, and parents within an urban setting, and the impact of the state tests and their scores on a school system. After five years of state testing in 4th and 8th grade, the scores for Oak Ridge Middle School* show improvement but they are far from successful. In the year 1999-2000, 27% of 8th graders passed the English Language Arts exam (ELA) and 26% passed the math test. In 2001-2002, 32% passed the ELA and 30% passed math, and during the year this story is based on, 2002-2003, those scores did not improve much (see Table 1, p. 28). Furthermore, the first group to take the state tests in 4th grade was this year's 8th graders reducing the hope that exposure over time would make a significant difference.

Test scores in middle school are *"the number one issue at every conference I've gone to,"* a district administrator explains. *"And you look across the state, we have all kinds of models of middle schools, we have all kinds of approaches and frameworks and everyone is still struggling. At some point somebody in Albany has got to say, 'gee you know, a) testing in 8th grade may not be the smartest thing, and b) if we are going to test, the tests that we are giving are simply not doing a good job of measuring what these kids know,' because I don't believe kids got dumb in 8th grade and smart again by 11th grade. That doesn't happen. And if Bethlehem has a dip and Shenendehowa has a dip and Buffalo has a dip and New York City has a dip let's look at what we are doing at grade 8 in terms of testing not in terms of teaching."* Across the district, the response to middle level test scores is the same: *"Something else is happening here, so we need to reevaluate exactly what that is."*

While progress for Oak Ridge Middle School has been deemed "satisfactory, not subject to No Child Left Behind Federal Education Act of 2001 [NCLB] intervention" according to its state report card, a sense of satisfaction, when considered in regards to state testing and the test scores, is generally not what people are experiencing. Living and working in an urban middle school involves measuring far more than student performance on state tests. The Principal of Oak Ridge Middle School explains what it is like to work in an urban district like Park City†: *"Working in Park City long term allows you to see the benefits, the progress that you make. If you're at the 95 percentile your progress is going to be incrementally very small, you are not going to see the giant gains. Obviously there are advantages to that and I wish I could be speaking to you from that vantage point on certain days. But when you are dealing with the kind of issues that we are dealing with, you can make a huge difference in the lives of kids. And you see it, you live it, you see those differences on a daily basis, you see it with teachers, you see it when there's been a break through and it's intellectually and educationally challenging. And you can't be complacent, you can't rest on the status quo, you have always got to be*

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* School Pseudonym
† District Pseudonym

working with people to move things forward, to try something different, to deal with the frustrations, to help people. But when you land on something that has a positive impact it's remarkably rewarding professionally and intellectually."

When test scores become the only measure by which a school's success is rated, they overshadow other gains, impact an entire system in more ways than one, and alter the relationships between people. The issues discussed in this account center around the impact the state standardized tests have on the activities and decisions surrounding teaching and learning of 8th grade students at Oak Ridge Middle School and the teachers and administrators who guide them. Eighth graders take 5 state standardized tests: the ELA and performance section of the science exam in January, the math 8 exam in May, the social studies and written section of the science exam in June, and technology given in both January and June depending on which semester students take technology.

While schools have always been sites of multiple social and political struggles, these struggles have been exacerbated by the state's accountability system. This story is an attempt to unpack the nature of these new struggles and give them a human face. Much like a series of Russian nesting dolls, the accountability of students, teachers, parents, and district and state administrators, lies nested within each other. Based on expectations of personal and professional responsibility the glue that holds the system together seems to be the belief that if any one group does not do its part, all the other parts will topple. As this story reveals, the linear representation of such a structure does not begin to reveal the complex human relationships that push people to strive to make a difference in a system that may itself be responsible for their failure.

Oak Ridge Middle School

Oak Ridge Middle School stands solid atop a hill, majestically overlooking several blocks of small, one and two family dwellings. While most of these homes are well kept with small tidy lawns, several of the side streets are host to more neglected homes and multi-family rentals revealing the working class condition of the neighborhood. Not far, a public park, home to swimming and other recreational facilities increases the feeling of space that surrounds the school. One of three middle schools in the district, it is comprised of students from four feeder elementary schools and serves approximately 720 sixth through eighth grade students. The population is 6.2% American Indian, Asian, or Pacific Islander, 32.8% Black, 8.2% Hispanic, and 52.8% white and has a free and reduced lunch rate of 51.3%. Park City district as a whole serves over 8,700 students in grades Pre-K through 12 in its 11 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 1 high school and 1 alternative site. The district student population is 4.2% American Indian, Asian, or Pacific Islander, 28.2% Black, 8.7% Hispanic, and 58.9% white. However these numbers do not fairly represent the diversity of the population as many students also come from mixed ethnic backgrounds and the 289 English as a Second Language students served by the district speak a total of 24 different languages with Spanish, Pashto, and Farsi the most common.

From the outside Oak Ridge appears to be in good repair. It is a large brick structure with three usable floor levels. Built in 1922, a 'new' wing was added in the 70s. A field on the side of the building surrounded by a rusty, bent fence provides a space for outside activities but cannot be considered a sports field. As you get closer you might notice a boarded up broken window or some other damage to the building. While fairly frequent, these occurrences are not always the products of Oak Ridge students. Being in a residential section, the school also has to contend with groups of young people walking by while school is in session distracting the students inside, sometimes purposefully, or hanging around on weekends and in the evenings. Inside, the hallways and classrooms show a variety of wear depending on where they are located in the building. On one end of the building, old leaks have resulted in tiles frequently falling out of ceilings and warped wood floors. While the 'new' wing is home to several science rooms equipped with long tables and workable science stations, a second gym, and the cafeteria. Classrooms hold an assortment of tables and chairs as broken ones get replaced with whatever model is available, old or new. And with class sizes typically over 25, there is little extra space for bookcases and cabinets. Piles of books, papers, packets, and videos cover whatever surface is available beyond the students' desks. There are few computers in the classrooms. However, a district-wide investment in technology has resulted in having four well-stocked computer rooms available to teachers and students, and everyone is provided with an email account and access to the internet.

When you walk down the hallways, however, it is not the condition of the equipment that you notice, but the multicultural nature of the student body. The cultural diversity is one of the aspects of this school that teachers say appeals to them and makes their jobs both interesting and rewarding. And parents comment that one of the reasons for keeping their children in the Park City district is the diversity that they experience. One Oak Ridge parent relates: *"I feel that our children have not only academic opportunities but they have opportunities to be with a lot of different kinds of people."* But while diversity as a general characteristic of the school is easily talked about, issues about race and ethnicity such as relationships between different cultural groups and differences in achievement between different racial groups are less talked about, at least not openly among the adults.

More common is for students themselves to bring up racial issues such as when a Hispanic boy comments to an African-American boy that the reason he thinks he was given a detention and not a white girl who did the exact same thing was because of his race, or when a white boy working with a tutor in the library suddenly asks out of the blue: *"how come in this school, the black kids hang out with the black kids and the white kids hang out with the white kids?"* The tutor does not answer, focusing the student instead on the worksheet in front of him. But when given the chance, students do tend to fall naturally into homogeneous groups based on their gender and ethnicity so even while students from a variety of cultural backgrounds intermingle in ways that enrich the school, they also bring about a variety of challenges. Talking about race, racial differences and racial relationships is challenging because it involves discussing and accounting for broader societal issues. For example, inner city schools need to consider how to address concerns with gangs in the area; gangs which are often racially organized.

This year, the war in Iraq brought additional worries that hostile relationships might develop between students from Arab descent and students whose parents were deployed to Iraq. Issues such as these bring staff and teachers together, in this case for an emergency meeting, to share and discuss ways to prevent and handle any incidents that might arise.

Middle School Students

Tight or baggy jeans, hooded sweatshirts, no hats (they are not allowed), loose shirts or tight tanks, whatever they are wearing, middle school students glisten social awareness. During the three-minute passing time the hallways are excursions into orderly chaos. Students seem to be moving from class to locker, locker to class, but it is more like a ride on the bumper cars, being pushed here and there, stopping suddenly only to be shoved hard from behind. And these are the non-intentional pushes. Add in the intentional slaps on the back, tripping, shoving and not always so kind verbal exchanges and you are simply happy to make it to class. Smaller and younger students walk quickly, hunched over their notebooks, like football players hugging the ball. Others walk in groups. The emotional roller coaster of this age range is most evident during these transitions as well. By the stairs you have three girls hugging each other and squealing with delight over some shared story. Next to a locker a boy laughs loudly with a teacher over some joke while another shares the latest score of a recent sports event. Down the hall three boys not so playfully push another back into his locker, a quick kick and then just as quickly they pull the boy back out and all four walk loudly towards class. By the bathroom a student helps the custodian with a bucket while another holds the door open. Then down the midst of it all a girl comes storming down the hall yelling loudly *"I hate school. I hate teachers. I hate everything that has to do with education."*

And teachers vary in their comfort level with this crowd, some joking with students as they walk past, throwing a praise here and there, others holding tight to their classroom doors as if they might somehow be swept away. But even when the crowds are gone, walking through the hallways between class seems to be viewed by students as a potential stage, an act for others, anyone. Girls, walking to and from the bathroom, clutch big red paper passes whispering quietly to each other, all the while shooting glances behind them, looking as if they still fear some sort of incomprehensible punishment. Or a boy might bounce from class to locker and upon seeing an adult or another student can't help trying to be noticed and so does a little dance step, or kicks a locker, or mutters something cool or obnoxious.

In class, these behaviors are more subdued but they are there. The students seem socially engaged and academically disengaged. They express their social awareness and presence with their whole bodies – their boisterousness, their quietness, their glances, the way they lean away or into each other, the way they smile or frown at the teacher. Their sense of self is heightened. Their academic interest is fleeting, arrives in bursts of focus, moments of remembrances about what they are really supposed to be there for. These passing states of disinterest into interest mean that they can also be incessantly frustrating, asking a stream of seemingly repetitive, basic questions: *'Do you want this*

written?' 'What are we doing?' 'Do we need a pencil?' 'Is this homework?' And again teachers vary in their responses, some ignoring and cutting them off, others patiently repeating directions, explaining later on that students get caught up in their own worlds, only hearing and reading through their own lens, not understanding that directions or comments provided to another student might actually be relevant information for them all. *"That's why I answer questions loud enough so they can all hear,"* a teacher comments. The idea of potentiality or that something might potentially be useful seems to be foreign to these middle school students who see their activities in terms of what is due today. But it is also that idea of potentiality that keeps teachers doing what they do every day and hoping that somewhere, somehow their words or actions will make an impact.

Two Competing but Interrelated Narratives

Within this context and with the state tests and standards that frame it, are two competing but interrelated narratives of accountability: one a narrative of individual responsibility and choice and the other a narrative of programming and diagnosis, and both, although they need not be, are most often imparted as narratives of deficiency. The first tells of students who just don't seem to care about their learning, families that don't value education or supervise their children well enough, teachers who don't make the extra effort to reach out to all students, administrators who don't understand the daily experiences of teachers, and a state that does not care enough to consider the real issues behind student failure. The second talks of students who lack basic skills, read below grade level, and don't have the right content, knowledge, or test taking experience to do well on the state tests, teachers who don't use the best instructional strategies to reach out to students, families that can't keep up with the educational level of their children, administrators who don't provide the right kind of resources to teachers, and a state that shuts teachers and administrators out of the designing process but holds them 100% accountable for the results of that design.

The first narrative promotes a response that strives to connect with students, reach out to families, and support teachers. In this narrative, good test results can only be achieved if students are willing to make the effort to learn what they need to know and so this narrative finds itself encroached in a variety of motivational and relational strategies meant to foster social and individual responsibility. The second narrative strives for a continuous, standardized approach. In this narrative, raising test scores is a programmatic concern and so the focus is on developing necessary test strategies, identifying curricular gaps through data analysis, and aligning instruction to focus on the areas students lack prowess in. These narratives do not exist alone and are in fact clearly integrated in the lives and minds of teachers and administrators. However, there is evidence to suggest that the efforts to deal with one may jeopardize strategies for dealing with the other and that a new relationship between the two might need to emerge to support a more focused and intensive program of teaching and learning, as well as the social, emotional, and academic needs of a diverse group of students.

A Narrative of Individual Responsibility

A slender African-American girl with hair in corn rows walks briskly down a hallway. A teacher calls out to her by name but cannot leave her classroom. The girl does not answer, stiffens and picks up her pace. As she passes a hall monitor she blurts out how much she hates this school. The hall monitor asks her: *"Where do you belong?"* She gets no answer from the girl except a quick and quiet *"I don't care."* The hall monitor quickly radios the central office and asks for assistance. The girl enters a classroom, collects her things, walks briskly out and back down the hall past the hall monitor who follows her while listening for a response on her walkie talkie. Shortly after, an announcement is broadcast over the PA system, calling out to the girl and telling her to go directly to the assistant principal's office. When the hall monitor turns the corner still thinking she is behind the girl, the girl is gone. She asks a student, who is standing by his locker where she went. He shrugs his shoulders and says he doesn't know. She repeats that a girl just turned the corner and must have walked right by him. The boy points to a door leading outside and says she went that way.

Relationships between adults and students are built on care and they are also built on fear and depending on the situation one or the other can get the upper hand. Why didn't the hall monitor simply stop the student in the hallway? It would be simple to just look at this one incident and find fault somewhere, but the behaviors and practices that occur in schools are built on past experiences, on social norms, on fears and on expectations. Even with 3 hallway monitors and a female officer who regularly patrol the school grounds, disciplining students in a public setting is a complex and often multi-faceted endeavor. Confronting students directly is fraught with tension, and fights are sources of great fear because they can escalate in unpredictable ways. When a fight breaks out, several individuals will run to help. On one such occasion, the hall monitor calls for the assistance of at least 3 adults. She is running down the hallway behind another woman and yells to the other in a commanding but protective voice to wait until everyone arrives before entering the classroom. Luckily this time everything is already "under control." Another time, however, a verbal fight between a female teacher and a male student is taken out into the hallway:
S: *"You're yelling at me. I didn't do nothing,"*
T: *"I'm the teacher here and you need to do what I say and leave."*
The yelling escalates and the teacher threatens to call the police. The student defiantly retorts *"why don't you, maybe they'll get to the bottom of this."* The fear, the stress is evident in both of their voices as the encounter ends when the hallway guard assists and removes the student from the school.

The reality of this kind of incident is that even when rare, extreme behavioral issues impact the entire system and alter the policies and relations for all students and teachers. They impact the more common student infractions and they impact the kinds of relations teachers are able to have with students who do behave. They also impact what gets taught and how it gets taught, and what kind of reward and punishment systems are put into place. In this urban setting, managing student behavior cannot be separated from the daily routine and is central to this story of teaching, learning and accountability.

Teachers at Oak Ridge can not and do not take students' emotional selves for granted and so there are manifold amounts of evidence of teachers, administrators and staff reaching out to students. Teachers can be seen working with students over lunch and during planning periods. As students walk in and out of class, there are quick queries, pats on the back, or verbal reminders of opportunities for extra help. For example, teachers often remind students of their availability, such as this teacher before a chapter test: *"Chapter 30, don't forget to study. I will be in the after school program if you want extra help with the chapter. I will be in the gym."* Teachers, administrators, hall monitors and aides play essential roles in the social, emotional lives of the students. Students can routinely be seen hanging around with an adult in the hallway, the library, or the cafeteria just to touch base, share some aspect of their lives, or ask for help with something. On one such occasion, an African-American girl is greeted by the Assistant Principal in the hallway. She challenges him in a friendly way to a basketball 'match.' He teases, *"did you see what I did to your brother?"* She retorts confidently, "*we're two different people."* They set up the meeting for the match, right after school.

It is not that they can't learn…

Teachers report coming to school everyday filled with hope and expectations for themselves and their students. They have good days and they have bad days. Discipline issues, however, often play a role in how such a day is determined, and can alter teachers' expectations and perceptions of what they can accomplish in the classroom. On any given day, teachers face a multitude of behaviors. While for the most part students sit quietly, maintaining discipline is a daily and ongoing challenge. Sometimes a whole classroom can be out of order and filled with restless students making little noises like dogs howling, whistling, and banging their feet against desk legs. Other times, one or two individuals seem to be having a bad day and are either dealt with swiftly or cause frequent outbursts. Sometimes a student is simply too eager asking questions or talking out of turn. Students can be silly and excited about a weekend or an event, or insolent and sarcastic as in this exchange:

The teacher passes out a blank piece of paper for an open-notebook quiz.
T: *"Take out your notebooks please."*
S1: *"We have notebooks? I never had a notebook."*

There is a lot of noise and hardly anyone has gotten anything out.
T: *"Guys, open up your notebooks."*
S1: *"What are we doing? What do you mean?"*
S2: *"I don't know where I put it, oh well."*
S3: *"I don't think we can answer these questions"* (looking at blank paper that was passed out)
T: *"Ok I'm going to put up 3 problems on the board"*
S1: *"Really?"*

But sometimes it is the teacher who drones sending the students into catatonic states. While the teacher talks, any teacher, if the subject or manner of delivery is not appealing to the students, you can feel it. Depending on the classroom it results in constant talking among the students who ignore the teacher's pleas for quiet. If somehow

the teacher has managed to instill a certain fear or respect, the silence is itself an 'attitude.' In this case, there is a fatigue among the students; a boredom that hovers over them like a distraction waiting to be found. Zippers on binders take on a new fascination. Doodling engrosses even the worst artist. A pencil or finger becomes the subject of intense inquiry. Any event out of the routine is welcomed with outbursts of laughter or outrage. Teachers walk back and forth through this invisible cloud that keeps their goals and expectations out of reach. Occasionally the teacher will lean over this chasm and focus in on a misbehavior and for a moment the student and teacher connect over unwanted gum or obvious inattention but as soon as they walk away the student fogs over again.

Behavior affects other school practices as well. The reality of teaching in classrooms with over 25 students with a wide range of strengths, needs, attitudes and aspirations, means that every disciplinary comment whether a reprimand, an argument, or an encouragement, is taking away from teaching the overall lesson. Teachers talk about being most upset when disruptions interfere with the education of children who actually want to attend and learn. Behavior becomes an issue not only for the child who is being reprimanded but for all the other students as well and everyone knows this. In fact, the primary reason parents give for wanting their children in accelerated classes is to make sure their child gets a solid exposure to learning. And behavior is a primary criterion used to determine a child's eligibility for such classes. A teacher comments: *"Grades, attitude, behavior. Sometimes you have some kids who can be bright but distractible and it is difficult to justify putting them in an advanced class because they don't have the ability to focus and it would be more of a disruption to put them in that group."*

Despite these challenges, teachers identify the students as the main reason for why they love their work and look forward to doing it each day. And teachers feel good about the way the school personnel in general relate and treat the students. A teacher explains: *"I find the staff in general is willingly involved in a lot of things, willingly, they are not forced, they are not coerced; they are treated as professionals, and they choose to try a lot of things. I like the way the kids are treated... I find in this building that the kids are treated as people and you would think that would be an automatic, but it isn't, you have a lot of pomposity where people talk down to kids, who are not really communicating with them at all. I don't like when people talk down to kids. They're people. It's a mutual respect and I find that here. Like* [the Assistant Principal] *he deals with those kids in such a professional way; he's not trying to frighten them into good behavior, but he's very firm. There are so many good things here. And I think that a good proportion of the teachers in this building are trying to do the best they can for what they feel is the right thing."*

Student accountability: Making them care

Discipline issues are not simply about misbehaviors. For the most part, students sit quietly, do not talk back to teachers, and refrain from inappropriate behavior and language. This does not mean, however, that they are either engaged, paying attention, or doing their work. Teachers spend considerable time confronting students directly for

inattention, with mixed results. For example, in the following excerpt from an English class, students are turning the details of a chapter into questions:
S: *"So we're writing questions based on the chapters?"*
T: *"Yes, which will later be turned into a quiz; so the better the questions, the better the quiz."*

The students begin to work.
T: *"N stop playing."*
N: "*I'm not playing. I was closing my eyes because they were a blur."*
T: *"How about opening your book."*
N: *"How many questions is that?"*
T: *"Fifteen."*

The student opens his book and begins to work.

In another classroom, students are checking answers on a math quiz. A boy sits sideways in his chair leaning away from his desk, poking repeatedly at his knuckles with his pencil. The teacher asks him, *"how can you be checking your paper if you are staring at your arm?"* He glances at his paper and goes back to writing on his arm.

The Principal wants teachers to be proactive in their dealings with students who aren't doing their work. While she knows teachers nag, follow through with students, and call parents, what she would like to see is more direct intervention and supervision from teachers. Just handing out zeros she feels is not sufficient or effective intervention. For example, she would like teachers to tell students: *"You are either going to do it in class with me right now or you are going to do it after school or you are going to do it at home with your parents but there's no way out of what you have to do, this is your responsibility and you have to do it."* She says some teachers do this already, but many don't.

Teachers understand that they are expected to hold students accountable for their work, attendance, behavior, and performance. They talk of the pressure of keeping the students up to par, covering the curriculum, and getting the students ready for the next year. They share their frustration about needing to come up with strategies to motivate unmotivated students on top of all these things. But the pressure they talk about the most is their own lack of power and choice when it comes to their ability to hold students accountable. A teacher comments: *"You can't fail students because it makes the school look bad. You can't punish students because parents complain. And you can't make them do the work because there are no consequences."* And other teachers agree stating that many of the students and their parents are disrespectful and defiant of the system and that more administrative and structural support and planning are needed if teachers are to have the desired impact. Furthermore, teachers talk about the contradictions between district policies and the directions they hear from administrators and colleagues. On the one hand, they are expected to hold students accountable and follow the district's retention policy but on the other hand must adhere to an unwritten policy of curbing the failure rate. So teachers find themselves simultaneously telling students they won't accept late work and telling them to bring in anything they can, even late.

A teacher comments on the dilemma of letting students go to their lockers to get the materials they should have brought to class to begin with: *"Do I think that they should be responsible for their own assignments? Yes. Should I have to let them go to their locker to get their notebooks? No. The fact is if you don't let them go to their locker to get their notebook then they are going to sit there for 40 minutes and do nothing. They could be disruptive. I feel like you're caught between a rock and a hard place with trying to get them to realize that when you do get to high school there is no hand holding, teachers are not going to focus on you and help you and push you and encourage you at every step. You have to be responsible for yourself. So are we setting them up for failure because we say this is what it is going to be like? And yet, yes I will accept back homework, yes go to your locker get your notebook, yes I'll let you make test corrections. The biggest thing I do try and stress, will I accept things? Yes I'll accept it at half credit. There has to be some type of a penalty.*"

Moreover, even when they do fail students, teachers feel that such a procedure is often pointless since it rarely has a positive impact on those students who don't care or have given up on the possibility of succeeding in school. For those students, teachers state that a *"failure notice has as much value as a tissue we throw away*," while other students seem to have *"parents who will get them through somehow."* So teachers feel that the accountability connection is lost on most students and may only succeed as a benchmark for student's self-assessment. This is evident in the way behavior issues seem more prevalent during the last month of school as students who are failing and looking at retention or summer school act as if there is little point in trying.

Teachers also disagree on whether accountability should be based on performance alone. There are plenty of students who try hard, really care to succeed but do poorly in school. A teacher talks about kids and caring: *"I have many kids who care and many more who don't. Do they not care because they are frustrated? Maybe. Do they not care because I say the wrong things to them? Maybe. Do they not care because they don't think it matters or nobody at home cares? I don't know. But I also have kids who care. They come and ask. 'I need help, I don't understand.' And maybe if they're not embarrassed to ask, they'll say to me 'you know what, I'll hand it in tomorrow because I need to retype it.' It was hard for them to get this thing to look this certain way but they did it regardless. They knew it wasn't going to be any extra for them but they did it, because. I offer extra credit, watch a certain movie, bring me the receipt to prove that you got it and sit down and talk to me for two minutes about what the movie was about. You know how many kids did it? Five out of 150 students. I offer other extra credit. Do you know how many of my kids could benefit greatly from having a 30 turned into a hundred? Caring means they did the quiz corrections. If you do the corrections, you get half your credit back. You have a 50, gives you a 75, you have an 80 gives you a 90, and I have so many kids who don't do it. The kids who care they do it. The kids who care will have the 95 and they'll do the corrections.... I have kids who are super bright and couldn't care less. They just breeze through. They're not giving me quality work but their breezing through gets them an A. Then I have kids who are having a really hard time, struggling, who do care and their struggling is a C. So if I could grade them against*

themselves, the table would be turned. Those really smart kids would be getting Cs and the struggling kids would be getting As."

In a system where it is difficult to determine the impact, good or bad, of retention and grading policies, schools are always looking for other sources of influence on the behaviors of students. Underneath most school programs is the desire to reach students so that they will listen and/or participate in socially desirable ways. Two that are apparent at Oak Ridge are character programs and incentives.

Character counts

It is the 5th of May, 2003, the first day of the 8th grade math test. The 8th graders are eating breakfast in their homerooms when the principal's announcements are broadcast. After the pledge there are a series of announcements: *"As we've announced, all of our students will be testing this morning periods one through four. 6th and 7th graders you will be taking the TONYSS the test of NYS standards, the math portion, and 8th graders you have the big one, the 8th grade NYS math assessment. I hope you are enjoying your breakfast, complements of the PTO. As I've announced before, research shows that you need breakfast 30 minutes before testing. All of you are striving for a level 3 or 4. Do your very best, and please take your time. There will be no interruptions or bells during period one through four and we will announce when it is time for students to move to your testing location. Right now you are to remain in your homeroom. And our Words of Wisdom today are about contributing. What do you think a resource is? Money, real estate, gold? American author Peter S. Drucker doesn't believe that all resources are material things. Listen to what he says: 'The individual is the most precious capital resource in our society. In other words each individual human being is more valuable and more precious than anything else in the world.' That's an interesting thing to think about. Mr. Drucker was right; the individual is more valuable than anything money can buy. So believe that you are a resource, you are an important and unique part of our society and if you choose to do your best, you can contribute more than your weight in gold. Something to think about this testing morning. This is* (Principal)*, make it a great day or not, the choice is yours. Again remain in your current location. We will be notifying you shortly when you will be moving to your testing location. Thank you."*

Teaching social skills has been central to most middle school curricula since the 1960s when the importance of schools as social settings was at its highest. This school is no different. Besides other programs such as Turnabout, a truancy prevention program, and Second Step, a violence prevention, anti-bullying program, Oak Ridge has also been using the Character Counts program, a program that among other things reminds students and staff about pillars of character such as respect, responsibility, caring, citizenship, trustworthiness, fairness, honesty, integrity, and perseverance. This year Oak Ridge has also implemented a program called Project Wisdom. In the October 2002 newsletter, Project Wisdom is described:

> "Each day, we read a brief story, quote, and anecdote about an aspect of good character. Our hope is that our school community reflects on

> the brief words of wisdom and that they will serve as inspiration and a reminder of appropriate choices that reflect good character. The daily words of wisdom end with the statement, 'make it a great day…or not. The choice is yours.' ...That is the message we give Oak Ridge students in every aspect of their education. It's all about choices – every day. Does your child choose to copy assignments in his/her agenda planner, choose to bring home the appropriate books and material, choose to do homework or study for a test, choose to sit and follow bus rules for a safe ride home, choose to treat others with respect, etc.? Teachers, administrators, and parents cannot control the choices of our students/children. We can model, discuss, support, and encourage, but we can't make the choice for our students…. Ask your student about the morning announcements and about the 'words of wisdom' and the daily challenge regarding 'choice.'"

The Principal discusses the role of character education in the school: Character education *"is becoming more of a focus nationally in terms of NCLB and I think the spot-light is on middle school because of the test scores. It's also part of politicians wanting the schools to do more and character is something that people can wrap their arms around so to speak.... It's something that we can use as a tool to be more creative with our instructional program. You hope to get kids to just think, because you never know where that connection is going to come, where that light bulb is going to go on and somebody is going to say 'oh, you know I really haven't been a very nice person to my friends.' I don't know if it's the morning announcements. I don't know if it's the second step violence prevention program that we've been running at the 6th grade. I don't know that it's a particular relationship with a teacher or students seeing hall monitors in the hallway or knowing that there's security, that 'well I'd better not try to steal something from somebody's locker because I might get caught,' you don't know so you keep looking for different ways to kind of attack the problem.*"

And it is not uncommon to hear teachers talk about choice, for example giving students project or seating options, or using choice to point out students' irresponsibility in regards to their work: *"I see a number of people not doing their work. You are making a poor choice. I can't force you to learn. If you choose not to listen, that's your choice. But you need to stay quiet so I can teach, that's not your choice."*

Again, it is this idea of potential, of potentially reaching some student through repetition, through the sheer magnitude of having something like words of wisdom every day; one message might seep through and make a difference. No one can claim that this is not so. But in a system where choice is less and less the reality, where the idea of making the right choice ultimately means to comply with the activities that are being imposed, including administering and taking the state tests, it is difficult to believe that the choices students, teachers, and administrators are encouraged to make will alter the sense of futility that seems to hover over school personnel. Most teachers and administrators at Oak Ridge do not lack desire and hope, but it seems that what is lacking is a concerted effort to critically assess the overall communication structure of a system that seems to be failing to reach the majority of its students.

Incentives

When the nesting dolls have completely opened, you find the students in the center. In this accountability system, their performance drives the success of the rest, and yet their performance is dependent on the practices and policies of all the rest making it difficult to determine which doll might cause the collapse of the others. With so much at stake, it comes as no surprise for teachers to be seen pleading, threatening and bribing students to focus and get their work done. This kind of approach with students ultimately transforms an entire system and so juxtaposed to the message that responsibility is ultimately a personal choice is the contradictory message given to students to perform or participate for a small prize or reward.

The general perception of teachers and staff is that 8th graders are at a particularly self-absorbed developmental stage and that academic performance is not one of their primary concerns. Furthermore, teachers believe that most of their students are not getting the pressure or support at home to do well in school, so most teachers feel that without additional incentives there is little expectation that these students will push themselves to perform beyond their usual level of performance. When the stakes are raised such that this year's 8th graders must achieve at higher levels than last year's 8th graders, teachers use whatever means they have to motivate students to work harder. Most provide multiple opportunities for extra credit, essay revisions, or test corrections. Many can be seen throwing candy to students for an answer well given in class or organizing pizza parties in an attempt to promote appropriate student behaviors. And administrators contribute to these efforts in their own way. They use pizza, prizes, food and goodies to promote and reward good attendance, attending test review sessions, or positive behavior. The rationale is that by making it fun, by offering incentives and prizes, students will participate and/or tell other students about it and encourage them to attend the next time around. One has to wonder, however, whether all the prizes, food, photos, and pep talk does not turn what are meant to be regular academic expectations into spectacles whose primary purpose is symbolic; a way to show off to the community at large that despite reports of failing scores, there are plenty of students who are participating appropriately in school events. Furthermore, administrators post announcements for desirable and undesirable behaviors within the school as well; on the one hand announcing awardees or winners of events, while on the other calling out names of students receiving detention. These public announcements are one way the school's expectations are taught and strengthened.

The need to raise student achievement has reinforced the need for schools and districts to make this message clear to students. One district-wide strategy has been to make the state tests count for all or most of the final exam grade. Because the ELA is given in January, the district coordinator can't justify making it count towards the final grade. However, the social studies and science state tests count for the entire final exam grade, and in math, section two of the state tests counts for 25% of the that grade. A district administrator explains: *"We try to give it some reality for the kids of why they might want to try to take this test."* And teachers generally agree that making the state tests count as the final exam grade is necessary. They feel *"it's an extra piece of*

leverage. It's something that is going to be used. It's vague. It's state-wide. It's their first exposure to state-wide and we make these big announcements."

The problem with using incentives, however, is that typically the students who need the extra credit or the extra review session the most are the ones who participate in them the least. So teachers find themselves needing to continuously offer opportunities such as extra credit both as a means to prevent too many students from failing and as a way to justify passing those students whose performance may be lacking.

The state tests get woven into the fabric of teaching and learning in a variety of ways. For the most part, teachers want students to be prepared and understand the format of the tests and there is a strong relationship between wanting students to be motivated to do their best on the tests, while also using the tests to motivate students to attend to what they are doing in class. For example, in an English class, the teacher is going over sentence fragments and run-on sentences. The students are getting restless. One of them comments: *"This class is boring, I can't wait until lunch."* The teacher agrees: *"I'm also getting leery of this topic but I want to drill it into you; less than six weeks what are we doing?"* No one answers. He mentions the state test as a reason they should know this and moves on. A week before the ELA, these messages become more frequent. For example, the students are given a practice essay with the expectation that they will need more time to work on it tomorrow but many are done by the end of class. The teacher tells them: *"A disturbing number of people are done. I don't think you've fully understood the importance of the test here. You shouldn't be done yet. You should be looking it over to make it perfect. You will have ten to fifteen minutes to finish tomorrow. You will not make noise. I will simply remove you from class."*

It would be simplistic to point to the current state accountability system as the culprit behind the cycle of rewards and punishment. External motivators such as grades, teacher reports, prizes, and incentives have existed for decades in our school system. Their presence, however, which for the most part is taken for granted, forms the basis for current accountability models. It is important to consider how traditional approaches based on external measures of achievement such as grades and rewards have not only influenced current accountability systems but may play a role in students' supposed disaffection from them. There are ample reasons to suggest that emphasizing test scores and other measures such as grades or points earned distorts the message away from the content to be learned and the rewards of learning itself.

In a discussion with several parents from Oak Ridge, the relationship between test-prep activities and students' sense of selves as learners is brought up. While the parents feel that preparing students well for the test and providing them with support is important, they begin to question whether this kind of attention which is entirely motivated by schools needing to do well on the state tests is a good thing:

"A week or two before the test [the teachers] *go over all the sample tests, and then on Saturday they gave an extra class on helping on the test which was great. They gave* [the students] *some pointers on what to do during the test, which I think is helpful*

because I feel that if you're not prepared like that, you might not know how to do the format of the test and you don't want to go in totally blank. So I think it's really great that they prepare them."

"The other thing they did was give breakfast to the children in their homerooms, which was nice. We went to each 8th grade homeroom and gave them a cup of juice and a bowl of cereal with milk. And I thought that was positive because one of the things you got to do is you got to say 'good luck on the test,' 'how you doing?' 'Hope you do well.' And that I think is a good thing with the students. I think it gave them the idea that this was important and that's a big thing with doing the test, the students at this level need to think it's important, you know to make an extra effort."

"But just to be devil's advocate, I wonder if by making such a concentrated effort on the test, they are telling the kids that the tests are more important than the rest of the school year? Because now all of a sudden you're getting the extra special treatment, you're getting the extra special food, and all of a sudden this test, which doesn't affect your grade but it affects the school, all of a sudden the school is taking this approach. What kind of a message are we giving our children saying you know all the other tests you took during the year we didn't do this for you but this test affects the school, here's some breakfast, eat hardy, do well, good luck. Are we giving them the wrong message?"

"Yea, I mean we shouldn't ask kids only for that time of the year but through the whole year we should always be sending a message to the kids that it's important to concentrate, that to learn, you know is a wonderful thing."

Teacher accountability: Teaching for success

> *It makes the teachers very angry that they've got this tilted field to play on and that it's not a fair situation for their students. I don't think any teacher isn't working hard. I think they work harder every year to try to overcome the inequities that are in the system. I don't know if you can win that fight until you have enough money to reduce class size by 50%. The quality of our teaching with half the student load can make a huge difference in middle school, but teachers can't possibly consider it because it's not going to happen…. Park City can't solve all of the problems facing us without help from a lot of other places and that help doesn't seem to be coming. So we can do a lot and we are going to do more, but we can't possibly do everything without help and that help is primarily financial. I don't see any changes happening until we get a different governor and a different attitude and a different commissioner of education.*
>
> (District administrator)

The teachers at Oak Ridge work hard to provide their students with quality learning experiences. And teachers believe that for the most part middle school students need more student-centered and hands-on experiences to connect emotionally and cognitively to learning. The tilted field, however, mentioned above seems to be tilting

farther away from making those kinds of experiences possible as the requirements set forth by the state and the district present seemingly insurmountable challenges. Over the course of the year, eighth grade teachers talk about several of those challenges. First, there is the increased pressure of bringing up failing scores on the state tests in a time-frame set forth by state personnel, not by people who work daily with the students in question. Second, there is the reality of doing so within classes of 25 to 30 students of various ability levels. Third, to teach well in these situations requires resources of space and material as well as support from personnel and administrators. And finally, in a setting where discipline presents a persistent challenge, the perceived benefits of more student-centered, collaborative learning experiences are often outweighed by the perceived risks that many of Oak Ridge students will not be able to handle a less-structured approach and that some will not be able to do so without damaging materials or ending up over the edge behaviorally.

The Principal agrees that these issues present real challenges to teachers. She feels, however, that many teachers use the current accountability structure and/or student behavior as excuses not to push themselves to try more hands-on, student-directed projects. Too many teachers want textbooks and worksheets, end up reading these in class or correcting homework, she says, and these approaches are not doing a good job of reaching and motivating students. And several teachers agree, as this teacher comments: *"We need to find a way to change what we do in the classroom.... We can't just stand up in front of kids and say we're doing* [for example] *respiration this week and here's what you have to learn and there's going to be a unit test next week. We can't do that anymore. Maybe there's just too much competition for the kids' attention? I think parents are overworked to stay on top of their kids. I think for a lot of our kids school is the enemy in their parents' eyes, so they're not going to buy into what we're trying to teach. We haven't captured them early enough. Too many people are wrapped up in the old way of teaching a certain body of knowledge, and I don't think we can do that anymore. I think we have to teach kids how to learn by teaching less content but teaching it better."*

For many teachers, however, the issue goes beyond teaching strategies to one of school-wide collaboration, communication and support. For example, many 8th grade teachers feel that even though administrators don't directly blame them for the low test scores, everything they do is being judged through that lens. They comment that on the one hand, the Principal frowns on their use of packets, textbooks and handouts, while pressuring teachers to cover everything so that students are ready for the tests. These contradictory messages are frustrating to teachers who feel that whenever they are merely lecturing or going over vocabulary they are essentially being 'bad' teachers, but if they spend too much time on an interesting project, they run the risk of being assessed just as poorly because their students may not be well-prepared for the state exams. A teacher expresses his frustration: *"I mean there are some things that have to be just learning it and memorizing it without a project or drawing or something that helps these students.* (Administrators) *don't like the idea of packets and reading and doing worksheets. They want you to include technology, things like that, which are great but there has to be a balance. You can't do everything like that. The test isn't technology. It's reading, writing*

and comprehending an issue. The test isn't exciting in any way at all. It's a very boring test so the kids have to know how to succeed in a situation like that."

Furthermore, teachers get conflicting messages all the time that they need to negotiate in order to gain recognition from administrators, colleagues, parents and students. And the same project or activity can be both disliked and liked by different people making it difficult for a teacher to self-assess. For example, a teacher comments: *"I'll teach, I'll be doing something that administrators say is not ok but then other teachers will say 'that looks great. Can I use that also?' And they ask me for my work and then they use what I've used. And I'll let them know that* (the Principal) *says this wasn't the best way to teach. They're like 'Oh this looks great.'"*

The lack of choice about when state test are given impacts on a teacher's flexibility to try out alternative teaching strategies. For example, a math teacher encouraged by the Principal to use a math program that includes manipulatives for teaching algebra concludes that she would probably not use that approach again. She explains that the approach works well for students, providing them with the extra visual support and could work very well as reinforcement in a comprehensive math program. Given some time, she feels she could work out how to use it to assist slower students while allowing faster students to move ahead. But the time to experiment, learn and improve are not compatible with the demands of state tests; the time she spent on this approach meant that she was unable to cover as much material as she felt her students needed for the state test. Similar issues were shared by science, social studies and English teachers. When the state test dictates the entire curriculum and forces teachers to cover more content than they feel is reasonable, there is no room to experiment and take a chance on alternative approaches.

District and building administrators understand that time and resources are essential factors if teachers are going to be able to design and create innovative lesson plans. Over the years, efforts have been made to assist teachers in the creation of collaborative or interdisciplinary lesson plans. These ideas formed the basis of a middle school reform initiative that was attempted several years ago by the district. The Principal at Oak Ridge explains: *"Six years ago, the district undertook a huge middle school systemic reform initiative, it's fondly known as Misery, MSSRI. It covered a lot of different areas. My first year here we had a half time staff developer and a half time teacher mentor. The staff developer worked with teams to implement interdisciplinary instruction. Teaming at the whole school level was new that year. The teacher mentor worked with individual teachers in their classrooms, mentoring them on a weekly basis. There was a magnitude of initiatives that were all a part of this plan. It was also the first year the 8th grade tests were given, in '98. We went two years and we made significant progress in those two years. Then we had a bunch of budget cuts and the two half time positions were eliminated. The middle school reform committee met again this year and proposed the reinstatement of certain initiatives including team leader positions at the middle school and that was presented to the Board at the end of December. It certainly is a concern and it's something that the Superintendent and the Board are very well aware*

of. Then we learned of the significant budget cut that would take place this year and the reform initiatives have been tabled."

The more complex and multiple the needs of a system are, the more likely limited resources will necessitate re-ascription each year. Furthermore, the more pressure placed on individuals to perform miracles, such as dramatic rises in test scores, the more important personal acknowledgement, reinforcement and support seem to be to the individuals involved in those efforts. A common source of frustration and disagreement for Oak Ridge teachers seems to emanate from the perceived lack of support and recognition for the efforts they have made. Teachers share stories of hours invested in team and committee work developing team-based integrated and interdisciplinary units and test preparation activities just to find the next year that the members of a team, district curricular focus, or district resources have been altered or are no longer there.

Teachers know there are multiple ways of helping students get the most out of their educational experience. They believe that some of these require that they learn new techniques. They also know that it requires effort and that they don't always have the time or inclination to put forth that effort. But there are other things that are out of their control and interfere with the efforts that they do put forward to reach their students. They know that smaller class sizes and focusing on fewer curricular requirements, more in-depth, and over longer periods of time would make an incredible difference to the students. Instead what they are experiencing are increased requirements, (including more accountability-oriented paperwork that has little to do with instructional plans), an increasingly diverse and challenging population of students, and higher stakes attached to narrow performance targets. A district curriculum coordinator comments: *"There are so many other demands on teaching that aren't really teaching that are causing more of a drift towards a safe and secure and not change because I have to do this and I have to do this and I have to do this. And it comes a time where there is no time for any experimentation or creativity or attempting to try something new. It just doesn't fit."*

The result is that the majority of classroom instruction at the 8th grade level is teacher directed. It consists most often of correcting homework, or introducing new content or a new skill and then going over examples of this skill in class. In most classrooms packets help organize the activities. And while teachers know that administrators frown at the use of packets, they feel they are better than the textbook. They help organize the material, separating out the key skills and vocabulary needed for each unit, and allow teachers to integrate material that may not be in the textbook and take out material that they feel is irrelevant. Teachers cite accountability as being another reason for these approaches. Packets can be counted, measured, and accounted for, whereas group discussions, presentations and other projects present more assessment challenges. And often, when teachers do vary their teaching approach to involve students in an art, role playing, critical discussion or hands-on activity they report feeling defensive, guilty or uneasy. Defensive because they feel that in an increasing standardized instructional world their own personal beliefs and philosophies are seen as liabilities not assets, and guilty because student-centered projects typically take more time to do and this means something else is not getting covered. If administrators are

serious about wanting teachers to alter their teaching approaches then such feelings shouldn't exist. These feelings reveal that for teachers there are conflicts between preparing their students well for the tests while also providing students with a variety of high interest activities. For the most part, teachers are left feeling that they stand in the middle of an impossible task.

Administrator accountability: Leading alongside teachers

Leaders have responsibilities that impact the responses of those they lead. As a large district, Park City has several levels of leadership, including the superintendent, subject matter curriculum coordinators, and building administrators. As the pressure to meet state standards rises every year that those standards are not or only partially being met, the pressure for administrators to both compel and support teachers in their work also rises. Some of this pressure comes in the form of curricular decisions (as will be described in the next section), while some comes from the kind of interpersonal relationships that motivate people to cooperate and strive to do better. This balance of educating, requiring, and pushing while also nurturing and supporting is one that is difficult to maintain especially when the end product, raising ELA 8 scores by 8% in one year for example, is perceived by some to be unrealistic. Administrators need to keep the morale up, critically assess what is going on, and ask teachers and students to do more.

The state accountability system with its Adequate Yearly Progress requirements has changed the nature of the message administrators need to convey to teachers. The Superintendent explains: *"There was a time where principals and people in my role, you know that whole concept of school as family and there were actually administrative theories about it and you were maternal or paternal, almost in the sense of protecting your staff, that type of thing. I think by and large while that still exists at some practical levels, it can't exist in terms of the state and the state mandates and standards. People have to know what it is they are expected to do, period. You can't buffer that, you can't alter that, you can be in it together with people, share with them, but you can't alter the message. It would not be fair to people."*

It is this balance of conveying expectations in concrete ways while also supporting the successes and failures of teachers that teachers at Oak Ridge expect of their administrators. Teachers at Oak Ridge discuss some of the ways in which district coordinators are addressing the state requirements and providing guidelines and support to teachers. For example a teacher explains: *"We meet at our department meetings with our coordinator and she will have us look at what the state standards are. And we'll go over them together, we'll put them together for the exam, we'll see if the standards are matched up to what we're teaching, and see if it matches up to what the state is saying."*

Others are more critical of the guidelines they get from their department coordinators: *"They just give us textbooks and it leaves me so much leeway and I thought I might be handed some sort of specific curriculum mapping of what they want me to actually do. Instead they just give me a textbook and then they expect you to take the information from the textbook, to elaborate on it and keep the kids interested by using the*

internet, activities, projects, and then it all has to go back to that state exam because that is where the administration will put the pressure on you cause that's how you're judged."

Furthermore, teachers at Oak Ridge disagree as to the amount of support and guidance they feel they are receiving from their building administrators. For the most part, they feel that their principal cares about the issues affecting urban education and goes out of her way to provide teachers with information on teaching in urban settings. A teacher comments: *"She's always looking for best practices, proven things that are positive or have been successful in urban settings. The goal is for us to give it a try. She is good at seeking out urban strategies; things that might work in our setting."* Where many feel she falls short is in her ability to relate to and listen to teacher concerns. They state that her lack of presence in day-to-day classroom issues has affected teacher morale and has not been conducive to a collaborative atmosphere. A teacher explains: *"She's not a hands-on person in terms of being approachable. She is not able to listen to people in the trenches."* And another agrees: *"She is making an effort but falls short in terms of nurturing change or faculty ideas. I don't feel a sense or a lot of effort at nurturing."* But other teachers have added that it is difficult to fairly assess their principal's overall performance because she replaced a very popular principal and this caused resistance from the start.

Regardless, however, of how some teachers feel about her style, several teachers have pointed out that there are areas in which she has received school-wide support such as her leadership on a possible middle school reform initiative and on building-wide policies such as sharing test preparation responsibilities. A teacher explains: *"Last year at one of our building-wide,* (the Principal) *gave us the listening* [section of the ELA]*, and said: 'Now these are kids taking it remember, you know how restless you feel right now and frustrated, and these are kids, and this is after already taking the multiple choice part.' And I've been fortunate I've worked under two principals who have always said, 'you know some people have their name on the top line, but we're all signed underneath.'"* Furthermore, there are several female faculty members who have felt especially empowered by this principal's professionalism and her ability to present and discuss issues with other more seasoned male administrators. For them, she is a role model, someone who gives hope to the idea of a female teacher successfully moving into an administrative role. So it may be that what makes her stand out as a competent professional who is able to articulate her ideas at district and regional meetings is what also makes her stand apart from the daily experiences of some teachers.

Whatever the source or depth of the feelings, positive or negative, the faculty has towards district and building administrators, they play a role in how they respond to the demands placed upon them. And while these relationships affect how decisions about teaching and learning are made and occur at local and interpersonal levels, it is important to consider the kind of impact the state accountability system has on these relationships when the stakes are high.

Teaming and the Park City shake-up

For the most part, teachers and administrators in Park City value the potential of human relationship and have tried to implement an instructional team approach wherever they can. Teaming is seen as a way to encourage interdisciplinary approaches and build upon the strengths of individuals so that not everyone in a team needs to provide in-depth assistance in technology for example as long as this is integrated in some way within a team. In reality, however, while teams of teachers are responsible for the same group of students, actual collaborative, interdisciplinary or coordinated activities vary considerably from team to team. The reasons for this aren't always clear and involve curricular as well as political and personal issues.

Teaming has been used at Oak Ridge as a structural and instructional strategy for 6 years. While 6th grade teams are organized differently, 7th and 8th grade teams are made up of 4 to 5 individuals representing the 4 core subjects: English, social studies, math and science. Most teachers favor the team approach and pairs or groups of teachers can be heard discussing specific students, providing teaching and disciplinary support, sharing materials, and planning activities. But implementing a team approach is not without its issues. The biggest one for teachers begins at the end of every school year when they wait anxiously or in anticipation each June for what they call the "Park City shake-up" which is the end of year assignment or reassignment of teachers.

Teachers at Oak Ridge feel that last year team changes seemed especially wide-spread. A teacher comments on these changes: *"I think to some degree it was a morale thing for some teams. And I think there were teams that were very strong and teams that weren't as strong. I think there was an attempt to try to shake that out a little bit and maybe mix the personalities a little bit and see how that all turns out."*

The Principal acknowledges that to some extent the quality of the team or team dynamic influence the decisions she makes around teaming, but there are also a wide variety of other factors that are out of her control that play a role in these decisions. She explains: *"Just this year there were 17 new staff members at Oak Ridge Middle School. Some were due to staffing increases, but openings have occurred for a variety of reasons: we've had a large number of retirements, and other changes, some anticipated, some unanticipated. People have moved on to other jobs and people have been promoted to other jobs and then it leaves a hole in a team. People make requests to change grade levels so some of the change is to honor teacher requests. Then there are* [other] *factors* [like] *when you find that things aren't successful one year you go back to the drawing board and start looking at well maybe this person would be more successful at this, let's try this. Personalities or complaints* [are other reasons]. *Now teacher certification has become an issue and there are going to be more changes this year because of people's certification and NCLB requiring highly qualified teachers."*

She goes on to explain that she has teachers who are certified to teach AP classes at the high school but the federal government is telling her they aren't qualified to teach 6th grade. While New York State just upheld the middle school waiver for another year,

the Principal explains that this doesn't solve other issues like the shortage in teachers certified to teach math and science. And it does not appear that the Commissioner of Education is working towards a solution for these shortages. The Principal explains that when the Commissioner heard that New York had 11,000 classes taught by uncertified teachers and they only expect to fill 5,000 of those with certified people, he recommended that schools not offer the remaining 6,000 courses. The Principal states that that is not much of a solution: *"You're not going to be able to say don't offer high school math or middle school math, but if those people don't exist, you've got to put an uncertified teacher in the classroom, that's just a given. So we don't know where or if there is going to be a safety net."*

And many teachers agree that teaming is not a simple issue. They are frustrated when not everyone is a team player or when one member of a team does not participate as effectively or as equally as the others. Some teachers just don't get along while others feel less valued even when they attempt to do their part. Overall, however, teachers feel that the impact of starting from scratch every year affects the production and purpose of teaming. They feel that:

- their knowledge base is impacted as teachers lose the ground and understanding they build with the content area of a particular grade level or pedagogically with their experiences with students of a certain age.
- interdisciplinary teaming and special education consulting is impacted as relationships with certain teachers are constantly being broken – projects that are successful with one may not be with another or may not be relevant to another's curriculum. One effect is that teachers stop putting the effort into building these projects.
- the pockets of support and friendships that teachers build for themselves and their abilities to reach out to each other is threatened when they are separated or moved to another grade level.
- their sense of trust in their administrators is threatened as well as their sense of personal worth when they are led to believe that their input is valued and then changed, as one teacher explains: *"I can't say how many meetings we have, planning and then in September it's totally different. They say they value our input and then don't do it."*

But when all these things occur at grade levels with substantial state testing as in 8th grade, team reassignments can create a loss in momentum. For example, last year the 8th grade team spent 30 hours of professional development aligning standards, building classroom strategies for improving test taking strategies, and working on key areas to hone in on. The summer prior to that year they went on a team sharing retreat as well as a conference on team collaboration. They worked on teaming strategies and how to facilitate them. When they returned in September they sent letters home to parents about what the expectations were going to be. They had a parent night with a Power Point presentation, examples of what kind of questions the students will get on the state exam with a question period. This was something initiated by the team. When this year one of the teachers was suddenly transferred to the high school, it left an evident gap in the way

the team worked. Only two teachers from the previous team remain and one is the consultant teacher. This year the team has not worked as well together and few of the above activities are being implemented.

Parent accountability: Being involved

Parents are another important resource for schools and getting good parent involvement in urban middle schools is recognized as a challenge nationwide. This year the district received a federal grant to put into place parent involvement programs at the middle school level. While the program fulfills the requirement put forth for parent involvement in the NCLB act, it is not funded by NCLB money. The chair of the Parent/School Partnership Committee at Oak Ridge explains that they are working to develop new ideas to increase the involvement of parents who are not traditionally involved. She states that while the primary goal is to increase family exposure to the school community by getting them into the building, the overall goal is to increase parental involvement in children's academics because research shows that parent involvement is a key factor in student achievement. Over the course of the year, the committee held a potluck dinner, Harry Potter night and a barbeque/poetry evening. And while the committee admits they did not recruit as many new parent volunteers as they would have liked, the program chair is not disappointed since it drew people who may never have entered the building before.

Parents already active in the PTO contribute in many ways to school programs. Not only do they volunteer on a regular basis in classrooms or around the school building but they also help organize special events such as serving breakfast to 8th graders before the administration of the English language art and math exams. However, most teachers and parents agree that the percentage of parents who are involved in the school is low. Two parents comment during a parent group discussion:

"Most of us here it sounds like we've really taken a role in our kids' successes. And some child may do better than others, that's just the way it is, but as a parent you really have to take a role in your child's education and be there to help..., encourage them, that's what parents have to do. Unfortunately and you know when you are talking about the differences between urban schools and suburban schools I don't think there is an intelligence difference. I think kids are smart here as they are anywhere. I think that there is an attitude towards school, toward education, and it comes from their environment and... it comes from their parents."

"When children are disrespected in their home and grandma is being disrespected, it's a very difficult system to change, it's hard to, because it's like a culture you have to change. And it has nothing to do with what color, what religion, it has nothing to do with that. It just has to do with where we are in 2003 and it is extremely difficult to work with. Teachers have to earn people's respect and if you don't spend enough time with a teacher, you don't know them so you don't have any reason to respect them."

And teachers feel the same way. They believe that many students come from home situations in which the parent is unable to help or is absent most of the time because of work. Several teachers explain:

"One of the big things our city kids versus typical suburban upper class kids, the [suburban] *kids probably at 12 years old are not picking up the other kids at elementary schools, taking care of them, cooking dinner, having everything ready when the parent comes home at 8, 9, 10 at night. Or the parent is going to work at 2, 3, 4 in the afternoon and not coming home and the kids are the parents at home. They are really junior pseudo-parents. We have a lot of those kids who are taking* [siblings] *home and doing all this work, then they may or may not do their homework, and they're not doing well in school. They are very savvy at life skills because they need to be, and many of them are very good at street skills and all that stuff, but in the classroom they just don't know. And their parents are not there, or their parents don't like school or they dropped out from school so all that role-modely thing for many, many of our children is either negative or not present. And in other districts that's not the case."*

"It's the expectation. If the home-base has an expectation of success and what it takes to be successful and that we expect you to do your best, even if you're not a good student, if you're doing your best, kind of that work ethics, apply yourself notion. If that's at home and the parents checking on that even minimally, the kids will put forth some effort because there's a follow through at home and it makes a cycle."

"And when the parents do come in if the parents aren't backing say (the Assistant Principal), *the kids get to mess up. And the parents come in for the conferences and a lot of times they're very supportive of administration, like you shouldn't have done that, but sometimes they're not and they get right in the administrator's face with the kid there and the kid sees oh there's no respect for the administrator so I don't have to have respect for him either."*

And teachers share stories of students who are defiant and unreachable and parents who yell at them when they call to discuss the matter with them. Moreover, teachers explain that one of their main challenges is reaching parents in the first place. Many families don't have phones or their phones have been disconnected or are unlisted. When they do reach a parent, and even if they find the parent to be cooperative, they find that many of them have difficulty helping their children with work in the middle school. A lot of it is new or they didn't reach that level in school themselves or they don't speak English. A teacher comments: *"Very often even when you're talking to parents on the phone or in conferences they say: 'I don't know what to do with them.'"*

Teachers and parents both agree that parents who care are the ones who attend school activities, help chaperone, ask how their children are doing, and support students at home. And they both agree that there will always be a group of parents who complain about the school or teachers regardless of how good a job they are doing. Furthermore, while there are parents and teachers who feel that Oak Ridge is doing an adequate job

responding to parents' questions and concerns, others don't feel as positive. Several parents comment:

"As long as you don't disagree with the school you're ok, because I've disagreed on certain things sometimes with the teachers or the way they do things, no matter, I could bang my head against the wall, the principal backs the teacher and there you go, and we have no say."

"And what I found with the teachers is that they'll say we have to work as a team, you have to make sure that the students get their homework done, this, that, and the other thing, but trying to get any information out of them is like trying to get blood out of a rock."

"You have to fight that's all there is to it. You have to fight. We have to come physically in here and show your face and they're looking at you like 'oh.'"

"And then sometimes they still don't give you the information."

A parent who works to promote parent involvement comments: *"I do not feel in this school it's fostered the way it should be as far as getting the parents involved. It seems to be discouraged here. I do not feel that it is as open as it could be because I know for a fact through experience how open it can be, you know, as far as working with parents... and I'll even add as it should be."*

Many teachers, however, feel the school has made steady progress towards including parental voices and concerns. They also feel that in general, if a parent is vocal, they can impact change. A teacher explains: *"If you disagree the school usually tries to get things done, if you're vocal about it and tell them what it is that you expect of them. You can see change happening in that way."*

The choice is yours?

In the narrative of individual responsibility, responsibility lies in the hands of individuals, so the blame, if there is blame, gets targeted to those individuals who appear in the larger scheme of things not to be doing their job or taking their responsibilities seriously. Moreover, when the measure of success is imposed upon by an outside authority, one of the results is that it creates and/or reinforces separation and conflict between groups of people, such as between teachers, students, administrators, and parents, who begin to see each other as causes for failures rather than as partners on the road to success. In a discussion on leadership styles, the Superintendent comments: *"The state's accountability system has probably created more of a top down atmosphere or environment in a district where I am trying to go the other way, not too successfully. There's nothing within the state's accountability that tells you to be top down, but the tendency for any of us is when we have stuff dropped on us, we just keep dropping it down lower. If I were called in with a cross section of superintendents to sit with the commissioner and we planned the whole thing, what the standards are going to look like*

and the testing, then I might come back and the tendency would be to try to do that model. So that's what I mean by the environment. The problem is you don't get good solutions top down. The only way I believe you get good solutions is from both, it's got to be a combination of bottom up and top down in order to come up with some good solutions. And right now I don't believe we have enough bottom up." He goes on to say that it is a challenge to create more collaborative decision making processes in a high stakes environment because collaboration implies shared responsibility for the outcome of the decision and not everyone wants to take on that responsibility.

One reason for this could be that the problems for which teachers and administrators are expected to find solutions for are not the ones that, given a choice, they would have tackled in the first place. Many teachers and administrators feel that the focus on test scores, especially at the middle school level, will cause more harm than good to the overall educational experiences of the students. This is because developmentally, 12 to 15 year olds are at a socially unstable, sensitive and self-critical time of life. Teachers joke about hormones but they are serious in their worries about the effect the increased stress caused by the state tests will have on children who are already navigating multiple social, emotional, physical, and psychological demands. When the focus gets turned away from the needs of students to cater to the demands of the state, it affects the morale and commitment of a whole system. It also forces individuals to consent and comply to a common vision; one in which they had little, if any, part in the actual design. The choice then is not whether they will but with what attitude.

* * *

At the end of the day, more announcements about sports and clubs, and more words of wisdom: *"And our words of wisdom: think of someone you know who has real character, someone who is honest, self-disciplined and respected, maybe a parent or a minister or a teacher or a friend. Did you know that the word character literally means to engrave. People with character have engraved honesty and respectability into their daily lives, like musicians engraving soundtracks onto a cd. So here's something for you to think about. With every thought, word and deed we are recording, engraving the traits and qualities that will determine our future character. A Greek philosopher by the name of Heraclitus once said 'a man with character is a state', in other words what you're engraving in your life now will determine your future. As you move through the day ask yourself, what kind of tracks am I laying out for myself and where would they lead me? When the bell rings you may go to your Tuesday club or lab."*

A Narrative of Diagnosis

A narrative of diagnosis assumes that there are strengths and weaknesses in individuals but looks beyond the individual in search of overall patterns of strengths and weaknesses in specific groups and subgroups of students. It is a process of figuring out the overall instructional needs of groups and addressing these programmatically through the appropriate means. It takes an instrumentalist approach and assumes that appropriate instruction can make a difference. This approach has involved district-wide and school-

wide collection and organization of student data including long-range tracking of test scores on state and district standardized tests, attendance and retention records, disciplinary records, and other demographic information that might provide insight into group and subgroup achievement and performance.

The promise of data

Table 1: Oak Ridge scores on New York State 8th grade tests

ELA (all students)	Level 1 (not passing)	Level 2 (not passing)	Level 3 (passing)	Level 4 (passing)
1999 - 2000	8%	66%	22%	4%
2000 - 2001	10%	60%	27%	3%
2001 - 2002	8%	60%	28%	4%
2002 - 2003	19%	47%	30%	4%
Math (all students)				
1999 - 2000	30%	44%	24%	2%
2000 - 2001	29%	43%	26%	2%
2001 - 2002	27%	43%	24%	6%
2002 – 2003	28%	45%	24%	4%
Science (all students)	below State Designated Level		above State Designated Level	
2001 – 2002	1%	26%	54%	19%
2002 - 2003	0%	22%	53%	25%

During a December faculty meeting the Principal and an AIS consultant share the results of the TONYSS which were given to all 8th graders earlier this fall. (AIS consultants are district appointed staff members who collect and organize information on and about Academic Intervention Services for the purposes of supporting teachers' efforts at implementing such services to students.) Similar to the state tests, the TONYSS (Tests of New York State Standards) are criterion-based tests, meaning they are intended to measure students' performance on specific standards. The Principal reports that she is pleased to see 16% of the students in level 4 on the English portion and hopes that the TONYSS is a good predictor for the ELA. *"As I've said before,"* she states, *"every teacher is a teacher of reading and writing, something here has been paying off. On the other hand 33% of the students scored at level 2 and will need significant attention if those are to be 3s on the ELA."* She goes on to state that math scores are still low and there needs to be some real effort made in math. For example, 29% of students are at level 1 and only 25% at level 3. Furthermore, she points out that there are 30 students who are in advanced math classes, while there are only 9 students who scored a 4. She comments that these 9 might not even be in the advanced class but again something needs to be addressed here.

The AIS consultant then shares some of the more specific findings and states that at this school, Standard 1 was the weakest standard and more specifically students had difficulties with interpreting information and organizing information. She explains to the teachers: *"At the elementary level we did a trend analysis and found that students generally did poorly on Standard one and especially on the multiple choice section so one strategy is to incorporate more multiple choice test taking strategies.... What I'm*

passing out is a form that will show you which answer was chosen and the distractors for why students fell below. I encourage you to get a copy of the test and look over the distractors. We went through again to look at what the distractors were. What we found was that some of the words chosen looked like students were not going back to locate the answers in the original text and picking things that were similar but not right, for example if they used terms like mainly, the student didn't read or understand and did not look for the main idea but rather a related but lesser idea."

In a separate discussion, the AIS consultant explains her reasons for providing TONYSS results by class to the teachers: *"It's not a reflection of the teachers. It's a tool in their hands. They can look and see 'wow my period 4 really doesn't get properties of numbers, I'm going to have to do a little more with them on that, but my period three class did fine so I don't have to worry about them on that.' And that's just a beginning. Another thing we do is to pattern the TONYSS results after the state scores, which come back either as a high or low within a performance level (i.e. high 2 or low 1). The makers of the TONYSS (Riverside Publishing) have set the level 3 cut off at a raw score of 37 on the math exam, so the AIS staff decided to focus on the students who are 5 points above that and kids who are 5 points below, these are the low-3 and high-twos. We want to watch each group because we don't want the low 3s to fall back into the twos, and we want to push the high 2s into the level three. So I identify the kids as high and low, put them in alphabetical order and then re-organize by results and that makes it easier for the teacher to group students according to their need or a particular skill. I also did a multiple choice item analysis. I highlighted where a student just skipped the answer, so we find out who the student is and we say, 'you know honey if you leave it blank you have no chance of getting it right.' Teachers are saying that this gives them a tool to put their arms around, to be able to make concrete changes in their instruction as well as in students' lives. For example, this class right here struggled on question 21, only 3 got it right, 8 fell for that distractor, so then we go back and look at what the question is asking, what is it that they're not getting in that particular process?"*

The Principal explains that the AIS consultant is like *"a professional development specialist* [who focuses on] *how to provide teachers with additional resources or strategies like helping the teacher devise test items for a particular novel to mirror the ELA."* She explains that she has always been interested in data and is part of a state-wide data group and has gotten several others involved including the AIS consultant. She states: *"We have typically not made decisions based on data and people didn't understand what they were looking at or how to interpret test scores, and the district as a whole has made significant strides in that area."*

A teacher comments about the usefulness of the data provided by the AIS consultant: *"I think it's wonderful. I mean the amount the work that she's done to compile all that I think is astounding. I do like the fact that you can start to look at specific areas. I know one question in particular that a huge number of students missed was a question they were given a group of scores and they had to pick, I believe it was the mean score, and the way the numbers were arranged, they wound up picking the median. So what that tells me, is when you get to that concept maybe really stress this,*

spend an extra day on it, or somehow come up with a little system of mean versus median, median you're driving down the highway there's a median on the highway, where's the median, it's in the middle, the middle is the median, that kind of thing. Other questions stood out like that too, and I think the way she had it compiled I could focus on groups of students that consistently missed certain types of questions."

Another teacher comments, however, that it is difficult to know how useful this information really is because it relies on believing that the state tests are reliable and valid sources of information. If you have doubts, as he does, that the questions are actually measuring what they say they are measuring, structuring your lessons around data reports of performance might in fact make things worse. For example he explains, on the ELA, the AIS consultant pointed out that students did poorly on inference questions, but 1) we don't know whether inference as a construct is or can be clearly measured, and 2) it is obvious that all questions measure other skills as well such as reading, so we might just be fooling ourselves into thinking we need to focus on inference when in fact the solution might be just, for example, to read more.

The consultant model

The AIS consultant for middle level education explains that in the district AIS plan, *"AIS services at the middle school level are mostly provided within the classroom because of the constraints of the schedule. So as middle school AIS consultants, we are working with departments and teachers to change what we do in the classroom to align what we do to what the tests measure. Also, there is a power point presentation on the State Ed's website that states that 'when numbers of AIS students are large, AIS is to drive program intervention.' And our numbers are large, because students are identified for AIS if they:*

-are at level 1 or 2 on the TONYSS or state tests
- have more than twenty absences in the prior year
- have an F on a report card in an academic class or final exam."

The advantage of the AIS consultant model is that it takes the paperwork load off of teachers. Teachers still need to determine the appropriate AIS intervention and provide that intervention to students, but the data analysis has already been done for them. AIS consultants are also in the process of putting together data portfolios for each school. This has already been done at the elementary school level and will soon be completed at the middle school level. These portfolios organize the details of student performance around such areas as demographics, attendance, and the district and state test results. The Superintendent explains how these portfolios will be used by schools: *"We formed what we called 'building leadership teams' to review the data and develop a plan. So for the first time we had a different kind of an animal here in terms of who was going to be working on it and the school had more data than they ever had before about their building. And this year they will be implementing. For the middle school that is occurring now. So what does that do for us? Well I think part of it is and I don't want to get into pretending that we've never used data before until Bush or somebody told us about it, I mean we've always used data. The truth of the matter is that it is more available because*

of technology so it's easier to access and it's easier to provide people with data. So at any rate it gives people the ability to identify a problem or problems and it could be used in a variety of ways. I mean a school leadership team may choose to work on attendance, they may come to the conclusion that our scores aren't that good but look we don't have enough 8th graders coming to school everyday or we're suspending too many kids and we have to figure what to do with them because they need the instructional time. So there are a number of ways they could approach a problem. We didn't give them a singular way to look at it."

Special education

Students are assigned to special education services for a variety of reasons and creating appropriate plans for them involves resources, parental participation, and assessing behavioral and academic needs. Oak Ridge Middle School implements several programs through which special education students receive the services they need: the Learning Center which is a self-contained program, the Consultant program where students are integrated into regular classrooms but receive extra support from a special education teacher, and the Social and Emotional Group which is a self-contained program with more direct supervision than the Learning Center. Only the latter group, the social/emotional students are exempt from taking the state tests. While these programs run separately from each other, the consultant and the learning center teachers often consult each other when there is a feeling that a student might do well in one or the other program. Allowing students an opportunity to be in a variety of settings is part of creating individual plans for these students. The state test requirements make it difficult for special education teachers to maintain the flexibility they need to create the best learning environment for a diverse group of students.

The district has been exploring the idea of moving more if not all special education students into regular classrooms, using the consultant approach as a model. While the district has been interested in moving towards integrated services for all services, including remedial help and special education, the new testing requirements for all students seems to have added increased pressure on the district to do so. Budget cuts and space and resource limitations means that this structural transformation will not happen overnight and more planning on how to implement a whole-school integrated model is needed. However, special education teachers are concerned whether such a plan is feasible considering that the needs of special education students are so varied. A special educator comments: *"Implementing inclusion is a big project – you need different reading programs for every special education student and the space to provide support within an inclusion environment."*

Special education teachers are expected to teach to the Individual Education Programs (IEP) of individual students while also preparing all the students for the state tests. This means that they find themselves working at one level, for example instructing an 8th grader who reads at the 2nd grade level in all his or her subject areas, while also somehow keeping that student working parallel to the regular education curriculum and preparing them to pass the 8th grade tests in five subjects. Special education teachers

administer, train for, and score all 8th grade tests. This year removal of most of the modifications for testing (see figure 1) added new pressures to special education teachers. As a result only one special education student in the district passed the 8th grade ELA.

Figure 1: New York State Education Department changes in accommodations

ELA - "As of September, students with disabilities are no longer allowed to use spell-checking or grammar-checking devices on any part of the test, or have the test read to them, except directions. They will also no longer be able to have requirements for spelling, paragraphing or punctuation waived for the extended writing items."

Math - "While the use of calculators will continue to be permitted on Book 2 of the test for students with disabilities, they will no longer be allowed use of calculators on Book 1 because that part of the test assesses proficiency in making basic calculations."

Science and Social studies – "SED (state education department) changes in accommodations did not affect science or social studies."

(From NYSED guide to new standards 3/03)

Because special education students must also take and pass all state tests in 8th grade, special education teachers need to fit in test preparation activities. A teacher shares one of the activities they do: *"I find that the 8th graders this year have a very difficult time with listening activities. When they have to listen to some sort of passage and then respond to questions based on a passage. Taking notes is a very difficult process because a lot of the students really struggle with their writing. We've been practicing with getting some good notes down, listening both times the passages read as well as writing both times, and then responding to questions, and I've done this for short and long periods of time. And I think they've really improved their endurance as well for test taking which is another thing I think we find in special ed the students really get tired because it is so difficult for them, they have to work twice as hard as some of the regular ed kids so I think they've improved that as well."*

Furthermore, special education teachers are not subject matter specialists and are dependent on regular education teacher for information on grade level content as well as information regarding the format and content of the state tests. So special education teachers need to find the time to seek out regular education teachers and then adapt this information to the needs and disabilities of the full range of their students. Fortunately, for the special education teachers at Oak Ridge, the regular education teachers have been very supportive and responsive to their needs and concerns and offer resources and information whenever they can.

Special education teachers get upset when they cannot administer the tests in ways that make sense for their students. For example, the ELA test has students complete the multiple choice section first and then the listening section. For regular students with allotted times per section, this does not pose a problem but for special education students who can take as much time as they need as part of their modification, when to begin the listening section presents a considerable challenge. The teachers are concerned that

students who are done with the multiple choice section will need to wait for the others to finish before moving on to the listening section which will be disruptive to all involved. Furthermore, they are concerned that not all teachers will follow the same procedure which may alter the results between buildings. A teacher explains that a colleague asked the state administrator in charge of special education if they could switch the sequence. She thought that since the state guidelines tell you to begin on day 2 if a student was absent for day 1 and then do day 1 during the makeup day that sequencing was not that important. The state administrator however disagreed stating that a lot of thought went into the sequencing and teachers were not allowed to alter it.

The learning center teachers explain that in the end what they did is give the students a ten minute warning that they would move ahead and read the listening section assuring them that they could go back to the multiple choice questions after completing that section. *"It worked well,"* she said, *"Only a few of the students weren't done but they could go back and finish after - no one said we couldn't go back. Then we gave them a 10 minute warning before reading the listening passage. Then we read it to everyone."*

Teachers state that time is not as much an issue as stamina and that modifications that include extra time are helpful but it would make more sense to break up the sections across several days. A special education teacher explains: *"I feel the ELA could be broken up a little bit differently in terms of how it's given. I think that with special education students especially, I have students who have a very difficult time with the writing piece, and yes writing is a significant portion of the test, that I have no problem with, but the fact that the second day is just writing is extremely exhausting. And I know how my students tend to wear down easily and I think that that's where they're failing, with a lot of the essay parts. It's not that they don't know how to do it; it's that it's too hard and they're tired. And to some degree I don't blame them so I wish that it could be apportioned differently."*

There are other issues when considering whether to integrate or not to integrate special education students and helping them do well on state tests. The particular reasons why a child might be classified special education are not only varied in terms of academic needs, but these needs affect their behavior as well. Finding appropriate space to administer the state tests for special education students can be a challenge. This year, because a decision is made to give the TONYSS at the same time as the state math test, all the special education students need to share one space, and this turns out to be a technology room which consists of stools around work tables; not the most ideal setting for taking a test. Since not all students need to be read to, this creates a very distracting environment for those students who don't need the test read to them.

But even when the different needs of students are taken into consideration, problems still arise. For example, during the state science test, the special education teacher reserved a quiet room for the students who need to have the test read to them only to find that a student is having a hard time anyway. *"I can't concentrate"* the boy says. Most of the students settle in and work quietly except for this student who pushes his chair around, gets up to sharpen his pencil, and then bursts out again *"I can't*

concentrate." He wants another location. The proctor says that it is quiet here. He replies *"no you're talking."* She explains that she has to read the test to him. It turns out that he is only on question 6 when she had just read question 8. She stops and lets him catch up. He quiets down momentarily. When she continues reading, she does so more slowly. The boy is however still agitated so the proctor asks a paraprofessional to ask the Principal to come down and remind this student to get it together because it is a state test. The paraprofessional goes and comes back and tells her the Principal can't come down but wonders if they can't find another location for him. The proctor says she can't because he needs the test read to him. The proctor continues to read the questions. Shortly after the boy has another outburst, this time over a pencil that he wants to sharpen but instead the proctor hands him another one. He kicks his desk. Finally when he loudly throws an empty juice bottle into the trash the proctor sends him out and asks someone to escort him to the office. The proctor however changes her mind and asks the escort whether she can take him to the library and read the test to him and if that doesn't work to take him to the office. After he leaves, the proctor continues to read each question to the 6 remaining students. However the problem of reading to a group is readily apparent as several students work ahead of her reading while others lag behind.

The issues raised around special education and state testing pose considerable challenge both in terms of the day-to-day administrative aspects of resources and staffing, but also because it would seem that what happens with special education programming in a standardized environment will create ripple effects throughout the whole system. Special education teachers have mixed feelings about whether the state's accountability will have positive or negative results for special education students. They believe that the day to day impact has been for the most part negative and has added considerable stress and a deeper sense of failure for the students. On the other hand, they admit that in the long run raising the bar for special education students may have a positive impact on how special education teachers understand their role in the lives of their students. A couple of teachers comment:

"I think if they learn the routine and some of those skills there's no reason why they can't be successful. So that's to me an eye-opening experience because I think again I kind of get into this special ed role and unfocused as to what special ed truly is there for and that's to support kids with what they're being given."

"I think we've always propped them up and then when we're gone they fall, instead of using the accommodations to build independence."

Teaching diagnostically

One of the primary purposes for district-wide data collection and analysis is to assist teachers in assessing students and in creating more successful learning environments for them. The basic premise of teaching diagnostically is that if the students are not learning, then teachers are not doing a good job teaching. The Principal explains: *"Unfortunately I think we've gotten to the point where teaching and learning are seen as the same thing, while in my opinion they are very different. And trying to get teachers to*

understand that they may be the best presenter in the world but if kids aren't learning… I have classes here with as high as a 70% failure rate and that teacher thinks he or she is doing a marvelous job of teaching, but learning as defined by students' ability to pass assessments is simply not there for 70% of the students. And it's very difficult to get people to understand the necessary connection. And we don't measure success as often as we should by the amount of learning that goes on in a classroom. We measure by people's ability to present and those two things are very distinct and different. … It really requires teachers to be diagnosticians in evaluating why is this particular student having difficulty, what could I do differently to meet his or her needs? You have to look at what's working, evaluate what's working, evaluate what's not working and you need to make adjustments. And that's a scary proposition for many teachers, there's a level of discomfort that comes with that."

The Principal goes on to explain that this is more than an individual teacher's responsibility but a programmatic one as well: *"We're still looking for ways to integrate the skills that are needed on the 8th grade, especially math assessment with the overall structure of the curriculum in 8th grade. And I don't necessarily believe that these assessments are bad, we just haven't hit on the key to integrating it appropriately into the instruction from K through 8 to allow our students to pass the state assessments in greater numbers. We know, for example, that we have students who qualify for honors English and honors global studies who score a 2 on the 8th grade ELA. That means they're in danger of not passing a state assessment, a high school comprehensive English Regents yet they're in an honors program at the high school. And I'm talking small numbers but there is a disconnect there that we have not been able to put our finger on."*

It is unclear why the majority of Oak Ridge students fail to pass the English and math state tests. What is clear is that test scores are driving instruction. The expectation is for teachers to pay attention to those scores and alter their teaching accordingly. And while assessment and evaluation practices have always been a part of teaching, the challenge is different now. Teachers generally include a variety of assessment practices for a variety of goals, not all of which are academic. Now teachers are still expected to teach for multiple learning styles while also preparing the students to do well on one form of measurement. Besides using information such as the data provided by AIS consultants, one way the district is attempting to integrate the needs of individual students while also keeping all students on the same page in terms of content and skills is through differentiation, which is a teaching approach that works with individual students' needs within the framework of the general curriculum. More and more textbooks include examples of ways to modify the level of lessons for individual students while keeping the assessment uniform. According to teachers, however, differentiation isn't occurring often or at all and, if it is isn't working as well as it should. They cite discipline issues, large class sizes as well as the breadth of the curriculum as the main barriers to implementing a differentiated curriculum in their classrooms.

Teachers who do attempt to address multiple learning styles often do so through projects or group activities that use technology, visuals, and other alternative resources. For example a social studies teacher describes how students are able to connect in

different ways to the material when asked to put together group presentations: *"Groups of 4 students will have to present to the class: someone summarizes the article, someone covers vocabulary, someone has some graphs and maps and timelines, and someone comes up with a quiz. And everyone in a group reads the article, but then they're making information concrete in their mind in different ways, whatever feels best to them. So kids who can draw a map or make a timeline or change a graph from a pie graph to a bar graph are getting the information a different way than a kid who needs me to lecture. And a kid who needs me to lecture is listening to the groups present."*

Another way that differentiation is intended to receive support is through the consultant special education and remedial teachers. The district would like to see each using their particular expertise to co-teach along with the regular teachers and modify lessons as need be for individual students. And while teachers in theory would like to see this happen, in practice they cite time, space and persistent behavior issues as reasons for why this isn't occurring. And for the most part remedial teachers agree that the consultant model and differentiation are not working as planned. A reading teacher suggests that one solution would be to make reading the primary responsibility of all teachers while providing small group remedial reading to students who really need it. She explains: *"We haven't been allowed to do pull-out anymore so I have spent my career making teachers' lives easier but not fixing reading for kids. And if we could ideally do anything for this district, we would help every teacher in every class realize they are teachers of the English language. And that anytime they do an activity they come at it from a learning perspective instead of a teaching perspective. 'Now this is a really hard thing to read right here, here is how I as the social studies expert here among us would handle reading this.' Then we could use our remedial specialists for the kids who can't get the word off the page…. But instead we're given a schedule of classes we're supposed to be in, sometimes every day, sometimes every other day, and how much can you influence a kid if you're only there every other day? You don't know what's going on in the lesson. So how if you can't pull out anymore can you ever address the kid who can't read."*

Standardizing the curriculum

State standards are expected to guide districts as to the content and skills that ought to be covered by grade level and subject matter. According to the state, however, this does not mean that everyone needs to teach the same material or use the same activities or examples to reach the standards. A technology teacher explains how the same unit of study, for example communication, might be covered differently: *"We're covering the same units but as far as the same curriculum, the content can be totally different. For example, we can talk about the many different forms of communication, but if I concentrate on using the computer, say sending faxes or emails as my example to these children as a way of communication and some other district uses advertising, making a magazine cover or something like that, we're still touching on communication but two different ways of doing it. And* [depending on what is actually on the test] *I think the kids see 'well wait a minute we didn't make a magazine cover, we only, we never did that' and they can't, or they didn't, I can say for some kids didn't, can't put the two together and say it's still a form of communication. And we don't have a state*

curriculum. It would be nice if we all had to teach the exact same thing but we don't. There are guidelines, there are standards, suggestions but nothing set in stone."

However, the state tests push forth another message; one that is usually taken up by districts as being the necessity to standardize the way the content is delivered to children. A district administrator explains the reasoning behind standardization: *"You have to use the same tests and the same methods. What teachers need to understand is that they may know the content but if they are not teaching the strategies and tasks that are on the state assessments, the students will not do well."*

As described in the previous section, teachers disagree with the quality or amount of guidance they receive from the district coordinators. Where they agree, however, is that they are seeing a concerted push towards standardization of the curriculum. A teacher explains: *"It's very clear with our coordinator. He has been keeping an eye just to make sure we're on the same page. He made everyone email him where they are in the curriculum. And I understand his responsibility because if he has students transferring from school to school and having people in totally different places in the curriculum* [would be hard for those students]. *And he wants it fair and the teachers to be consistent with their teaching. And if he sees a teacher who has a real successful rate on the state exam then he'll ask that teacher to share with other teachers who maybe haven't had a very successful rate."*

So while in theory, standards can be met in many different ways, in practice, the presence of high stakes tests is determining the shape and content of how those standards are to be met. Standardization fits the narrative of diagnosis because it is meant to assist schools in their efforts to diagnose curricular and instructional weaknesses. If all teachers are teaching the same content at the same time and creating assessments that match state assessments both in form and content, then it should be possible to track changes as well as identify weak areas. In Park City the efforts to standardize are met by aligning the local curriculum to the state standards and tests and by adopting textbooks that meet the goals of alignment.

Picking a textbook can take a long time because it needs to appeal to wide variety of teaching styles as well as tie into the standards. The math coordinator explains that it took two years of research and discussion for the teachers to adopt (starting year 2003-2004) the Glencoe series in math. The appeal of this series ended up being its resourcefulness for finding and covering particular key ideas (in New York, math standards are organized around 7 key ideas). If the data analysis approach works and teachers and AIS consultants can pinpoint particular weaknesses by key ideas then having a textbook organized in such a way is a logical next step.

Not all teachers, however, agree that the time spent picking a textbook is the best use of their committee time, as this teacher expresses: *"Pick a book, there's not this be-all, end-all textbook series, you still have to teach, And I think that they've devoted so much time to trying to find this wonderful textbook series that we've lost point of the whole thing, you're still a teacher."*

Figure 2: Textbook series currently used by Park City School District for 8th grade students

Prentice-Hall Literature (4th Ed.). (1996). (8th grade SILVER), by Prentice-Hall, Inc. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Simon & Schuster Education Group.
(Introduced in 1998)

Passport to Algebra and Geometry (1999). Evanston, Illinois: McDougal Littell A. Houghton Mifflin Company. (Introduced in 2000)

The American Nation (2000). by Prentice-Hall, Inc. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Simon & Schuster Education Group. (Introduced in 2001)

Physical Science (2002). National Geographic Society. New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill. (Introduced in 2002)

The movement to standardize the curriculum goes beyond the adoption of textbooks and also includes efforts to create curricular consistency vertically and horizontally across grade levels. Each subject matter department has a Curriculum Coordination Committee (CCC) that is either required to come up or is assigned yearly charges or tasks. For the past two years the committee's charge has been to create a Sequential Curriculum Timeline, a standardized outline of the units and assessments in each subject matter, by grade level. Part of the rationale behind this, a teacher explains, is to have something concrete to give to teachers who are new to the district or to a particular grade level. It also helps create consistency across schools. For example, in language arts committee has increased the required reading in English. The language arts coordinator explains: *"We are going to have much more commonality than we've had. Part of the reason for that is it builds program and for those kids who change schools during the course of the year which as you know is not uncommon here, there will at least be points of reference for those kids when they get to their new school."*

Teachers agree that the state tests and standards influence the way they teach the material and format their own classroom activities. They have real questions, however, about how much of what and how they teach should be dictated by the state standards and tests and end up varying their instruction for a variety of reasons. Some feel that the strategies necessary for the state tests do not always support their primary pedagogical focus such as getting students interested in and appreciating the material. A social studies teacher questions: "*Should we focus on what the state thinks or should we focus on what is important in these kids' lives which could help them actually understand history, like history, and help them relate history to their own lives. So it's a balance that I think falls on the teacher, because if you have your strategies for the state exam and you can do that in a brief period then you can spend more time on the stuff that gets the kids interested."*

Similarly, a math teacher wonders how much the standards should dictate what she does: *"I don't try to design lessons or teach around those standards. I do my thing and see how the standards fit in. For the most part they fit. I don't understand all the hoopla around teaching the standards. You can design any lesson you want to teach those standards."*

While a science teacher explains that in her mind the science curriculum comes first and should adequately prepare students for the science state test: *"I know that my assessment at the end of the unit are more difficult than the state test and I usually make sure that they need more information for me so that when they actually get to the state test they are well prepared. So it's going to be, 'oh yea I know that' because they have to do it for me. But I don't usually gear my work just based on what they are going to be doing on the state test. I cover more than they need for that. I'm not going to say ok this is what you need for the state test so this is all we're going to do, which is why I don't spend a lot of time preparing them for the state test. I think just going through the whole curriculum that we have for 8th grade by the time we're finished they should be ready."*

And teachers don't always agree that the skills emphasized by the tests always support the best teaching strategies. After the ELA during an English language arts department meeting, several 8th grade teachers talk about teaching and the ELA:

"I'm trying to do more non-fiction stuff because of the ELA. But I don't only want it to be social studies so I use some stuff from the New York Times and I edit them."

"We're told we aren't doing enough multiple choice, but I've never given a multiple choice assignment and I've never lost any sleep over it."

"The listening section is useless. It's just like the awful teacher in college who tells you to take notes but doesn't tell you for what reason."

Furthermore, teachers occasionally ignore both the state test requirements and the district curriculum spending more time on material regardless of the probability of it being on the state tests. Teachers explain that they do this because: 1) they believe students ought to have been exposed to that content; 2) they personally love the topic and feel they have expertise to offer; and 3) it is an important, day-to-day topic that children should know the correct facts about. For example, a science teacher talks about how difficult it is to take more time on a topic like childbirth when that is only a tiny portion of the reproduction system: *"You are going to go through the curriculum because, you know human body is going to be on the science test, but you don't know which section they are going to focus on so you're going to teach all the parts of the human body. You've got to get through the curriculum and you have to do it in the format of the test. But there are times when you would do better to not have something looming over your head at the end and you've got a number of kids and many of them have seen the birthing process of their mothers and their sisters, but they get a lot wrong. We were at the beginning of the skeletal system and I was asked a couple of questions so I took a day to answer these, I mean what they didn't know was astounding. I didn't want them to remember it wrong and most of the time you could hear a pin drop in my room. I mean they were just riveted because of the topic. And they hear their friends talk about what happens during childbirth and what they saw and what they look like when they come out, so we had that discussion. But there's not enough time for that. There's not enough where you hit on what the kids are interested in and what they need to learn, because*

we've got to get to this other stuff, so you need to balance that against what you have to get through."

Regardless of the source of influence, however, most teachers do seem to cover the same material throughout the year, not always at exactly the same time or in the same way but teachers can be seen checking to see where other teachers are in order to catch up and sharing materials with each other. At Oak Ridge, this is most evident in science and social studies where packets based on the chapters are used to organize the material. English and math show a wider variety of activities and teachers don't always coordinate these with each other. Furthermore, the district only owns a limited amount of the novels read by students so English teachers are rarely able to provide the same texts to their students at the same time and show more variety in their teaching strategies.

Clearly decisions at local and district levels are being made to determine what and how to teach and these decisions are driven by the need to succeed on state evaluations. So even while district administrators wish to see more variety in teaching approaches, their efforts and directives end up pushing teachers to narrow the scope and reinforce the belief that teachers must teach to the test in order to prepare students for the state assessments. The district pushes teaching to the test by confounding standards-based teaching and standardized teaching. This is evident in the way the test has become a primary topic at district, curriculum, and professional development meetings. The adoption of textbooks and the teaching of test taking strategies provide a sort of foundation upon which teachers and administrators can feel they are doing what they ought.

Teaching to the tests

Teaching to the test seems different from teaching the curriculum because it consists less of teaching the content of the subject matter and more about teaching students a basic list of test taking strategies. From the directions teachers give students about what to attend to and how to go about taking the state tests, it becomes clear that teachers have spent considerable time considering why it is their students aren't doing well on these assessments. And the conclusion they have come up with has more to do with paying attention to the directions and following explicitly the required format, than knowledge of the material, although knowledge of the content is also expected and taught. The following excerpts describe these mini lessons.

"Read, read the directions"

In science, the teacher passes out a work sheet the students completed the week before.
T: *"Last week you went over the different phases of matter. The first part asked you to write 'yes' or 'no' in the places in the box. If you simply wrote 'Y' or 'N' you did not follow the instructions. If you left any blanks you did not follow instructions."*

She has the students call out yes or no as she reads the questions. This is followed by other questions. After going through several questions, the teacher tells the students to look at the bottom of the page.
T: *"Let me show you how this would be scored if this were on the state test, look at the bottom."*
S: *"This was on the state test?"*
S2: *"This is easy."*
T: *"That was the state test. This is what some people did. They left things blank. If they did not fill all 3 boxes they did not get credit for it. If they had any wrong, they did not get credit for it. Read, read the directions."*

"If it's not stated in the article, it's not valid"

In English, the students are working on a test packet that they began yesterday. The teacher takes attendance. There are 23 students here. He tells them they have the rest of the period to work on this. Among sniffles and coughs the students work quietly and steadily.
S: *"What if the paragraph that I'm writing is longer than the lines given?"*
T: *"Just try to fit it underneath."*
The students continue to work.
T: *"Ok, one little note while you are working. I noticed this in your cars and bikes essays where they ask you to list the kinds of risks these people encountered. The directions say use details or examples, but make sure you use details or examples that are from the articles. For example in the bike part, some people wrote that no one wore helmets in those days as one example of a risk. Is that true?"*
S2: *"Yes."*
T: *"Was that in the article?"*
S2: *"No."*
T: *"If it's not stated in the article, it's not valid. For example, what you are working on now with the boy going to the city, you can probably infer aspects of his character but if it's not in the article it's not what they are looking for. Even though you are probably right, it's.."*
S3: *"Irrelevant."*
T: *"Right. You need to add details that are in the article. You may just want to think about what you wrote so far on the listening and make changes. It's not that hard to make changes. That's why you want to take good notes."*

"Answer the question completely"

The students are going over a question in math which asks them to write a problem that can be interpreted by the graph and then solve it. The teacher explains: *"A lot of you wrote a problem and then didn't solve it. You need to read the question. You can't pick and choose on the state test what part of the question you are going to disregard. You need to answer the question completely."*

"A lot of information is in the instructions."

Two social studies teachers are working with 26 students in an extra review session for the social studies exam. This is the second day of a review class and the students have already worked on the multiple choice section. Today they give the students time to work on the Document-Based Questions (DBQ) that lead up to the essay.
T: *"Remember these documents hold all the information that you need to answer the questions."*

While the students work, the teachers go around answering questions.
T: "*When you get the DBQ always read the instructions. You might think you know what they are going to say, but always read them. Maybe they put something different in there."*

After working through the documents, they turn their attention to the essay.
T: *"The DBQ questions are where I think you guys can make a killing with the points because it's all right there in front of you. Always read the instructions, they give you information. They always have the documents first and then the essay. Read your instructions. They will give you information for your paragraphs. So a lot of your information comes from your instructions. Before you even get to the documents you can start forming those ideas in your head."*
T2: *"The better you answer the questions in the DBQ packet, the better your essay will be. The idea behind the questions is that it helps you to interpret your documents and your documents lead you into your essay, so please use these when you write your essay."*

"Use your mathematical terms."

In math, the consultant teacher is showing the students some strategies for 'reading' triangles. She shows the students how ticks or little lines are drawn on the sides that are equal by drawing an isosceles triangle on the blackboard.
T: *"But they can twist this thing around so it can be tricky. So an isosceles does not need to look like a teepee."*

She draws the same triangle but this time it is lying on its side.
T: *"So if you have a problem where they give you one measure, let's say 5, you know that the other side with a tick is also 5. What's another name for equal?"*
S: *"Congruent."*
T: *"Very good. Use your mathematical terms, that's why we've been pushing the vocabulary."*

"Don't just describe, say something about it"

During the social studies review session, the teacher gives some tips to students about the expectations of the state test.
T: *"On every state test so far every one of the documents relate to the topic in a way that can be used in your essay. I'm telling you right now use all 8 documents. If you don't understand one don't go off on some big long tangent explaining it. Figure out where it belongs and mention it, but don't make a fool of yourself. Don't try to baffle us. Use all*

the documents, all 8 of them to keep your grade up. I promise you that alone will get your grade up. And then make sure you interpret the information from those documents. Do you know how many people on the essays that I am correcting right now, DBQ essays just tell me what the document was, 'this was a picture of a Vietnam veteran standing at the Vietnamese memorial wall.' Well what's the significance? If you don't know what the significance was, pull in a so-what statement. A so-what statement tells me you thought about it a little bit. Say what it is and say to yourself so-what, 'gee it must be really hard for him to see the names of all the other dead and wonder why he was so lucky.' 'Gee it must be a place that people can get some kind of comfort seeing the name of their loved one.' Whatever you are going to say about it, say something. In my class I call it a so-what statement. It shows the grader, that's us, it shows the graders that you guys have actually thought about the significance or the importance of this information to the point where you can tell us something about it that's not included in that documentation. You are going to add to that information by giving us a so-what statement."

"You need to catch the reader's attention right away"

In English, the students are working on another practice ELA test. The teacher walks around and reads the essays of students who are done. He reads a girl's:
T: *"You are not clear on whether you are talking about bikes or cars. You're not clear about that."*
The teacher looks at the beginning of an essay of another girl's:
T: *"'What am I writing about in this essay,' Aaargh! Don't start with 'what am I writing about,' 'my name is' or 'I am writing this essay…' Never start with that, never."*
S: *"Why?"*
T: *"Because you need to talk about your topic immediately. You need to catch the reader's attention right away. You need to write the topic down."*
S: (defiantly): *"I am writing about writing something."*

"Read everything, read, read, read."

The day before the performance part of the science exam, the teacher provides last minute directions before going over a lesson on classification:
T: *"In case you have forgotten tomorrow's going to be one-day, one-hour exam, three stations, a piece of cake, you folks don't have to study anything, this is nothing to study for, it's general knowledge. You should all do well on this, at least I would be shocked if you don't. I reiterate this, you can't study for it. I don't want you losing sleep over this. You either are going to know this material or you're not. We've covered everything about it so you're not going to sit there going 'wow what's this. I've never heard of this.' It's simple if you read the directions. All I'm going to ask you to do is read the directions, read everything once and then go back to the top, start there again, read, read, read. Good there's one more thing I want to touch base on, classification, classifying. Anybody know what the word classifying means?"*

* * *

Sometimes in their test preparation activities, teachers remind students that there are scorers on the other side of the table and these scorers have biases like everyone else. For example in an English class, the teacher warns students not to get too crazy with their Ah statement! (which is a concluding or interpretive comment).
T: *"Let's talk about the Ah statement. Remember I told you because you're from Park City you will be judged more harshly. It wouldn't bother me because I'm a cutting edge guy, but if I was a real old world scorer, what am I worried about with the Ah statement?"*
S: *"He might take points off your essay because it's not…"*
S2: *"Not formal"*
T: *"It could be formal"*
S3: "*It might not want to have extra stuff that you might not need"*
T: *"I just wouldn't get too crazy with your last statement. Be careful. Should you make an Ah statement? Yes, just don't knock them out of their chairs – make a standard one like 'most people learn a lot from their courage.'"*

* * *

For the most part, teachers feel that teaching the format is essential for doing well on the state assessments. An English teacher talks about what needs to be focused on: *"The form, the form of the essays, the process of organizing them, the process of taking your notes during the listening, that stuff is essential. Even a newspaper article ultimately still needs some sort of introduction, conclusion, you know, it's just your voice, and I mean honestly voice that's down the road for me, to really deal with the voice of our essay. I've got other priorities first. You sort of take your chances that most of the writing is the same kind of voice. You have to use examples. That's probably the hardest one for them is having an example and explaining why it proves what you are trying to prove. And that's a middle school thing. That's what I'm working on even in the essays that aren't geared towards the state test."*

Teachers might also devise certain strategies to enable students to gain a better grasp of the way test developers go about putting together the test. For example, in social studies, the teacher has her students build DBQ packets from the inside-out. She explains: "*Usually you hand a kid a packet, it has 8 documents, it has a task, has some historical context and they have to answer all the questions and write an essay, just like on their state exam. What we're doing is we're building the packet, because I want them to be able to understand how it's organized kind of inside out. So you're choosing these documents and you're writing your task this way so you're imaginary student, because they are the teacher now right, so their imaginary student who they'd hand the packet they create would know how to organize their essay. And in doing that I make sure that they choose 8 documents, because 8 documents is what is used on the state exam."*

But even with all the effort put into preparing students for the state exam, it seems to teachers that there is always something more they could have done. For example, the week before the math test, a math teacher reflects on the preparation process: *"I've jumped through hoops. I've embarrassed myself in front of them. I've done everything to*

prepare them for the test. I've done everything I could. Now it's out of my hands… The one thing that I wish that I had done more of is actual writing in the math class, you know explaining your answers, how did you get that answer? But these kids have to be extremely precise when they're explaining things to me. I don't take that thingy or the top divided by the bottom, I have them elaborate, 'what do you mean by the top divided by bottom?' So they are giving in-depth detailed answers. I'm just not having them physically write it out on a piece of paper, which I do think would be very good practice, because they are going to have to do a lot of that writing on the state exam. They are going to have to explain how they got their answers, and you can't just say I got it while I moved the dot, or I moved the point two places, no you moved a decimal point, you need to be specific about those things. … One thing I have learned this year, do not take anything for granted, do not assume that they learned this in 6th grade, or they learned this in 7th grade, or this is a concept that they should know, because I have gone back and taught so many things that should have been taught in 6th, and probably were taught in 6th grade, probably were taught in 7th grade, but they, 'ok I studied it, I knew it for my chapter test, now out of my head, done, gone, finished.' And it is tough because I've got to go back and reteach a lot of these things that they were supposed to have known or supposed to have learned in 6th grade or 7th grade."

Teachers aren't the only ones to question whether the emphasis on teaching to the test supports the development of life-long learners. In a discussion with parents the evening of the first day of the ELA, a parent reports what her son said about the essay they had to write that day. This prompts a conversation about teaching to the test:

"My son said that the essay part was very confusing. He said it took him awhile to figure out what they were looking for. I'd be curious to know what he's talking about."

"It's like the Regents format almost; you have to teach it to the kids. I remember in 5th grade, that's what they did all year."

"But that's not right either. Why should they take a whole year learning how to take a test when they should be learning what they're learning?"

"Well I think that [the 5th grade teacher] *incorporated that into her teaching and it was also part of the English homework that was taken home and they wrote stories every night. I mean that's part of learning period, you need to learn how to write. But I think in helping them with the test and feeling comfortable is, you need to know the format."*

"Well here's the dilemma. Now when my daughter took global studies, almost all of 10th grade was spent teaching the kids how to do the rubric, that's all that they stressed. She learned little pieces of global history but I don't think that she got a clue as to what was going on in the world in the 19th and 20th centuries. She doesn't have a clue what happened, WWI, WWII, Korea, any of that. So now because they spent so much time on how to take the test so they can pass the test, and therein lies the problem, why do we have to spend so much time learning how to take the test? Why are they doing the test so difficult, making it so important, that the kids aren't learning, but all that they are

learning how to do is take a test? What good does that do when they get out into the real world and have to do critical thinking?"

After the tests

Even after the tests are over teachers do not cease to learn about the tests and in essence 'teach to the test,' or use the test to teach and reinforce the skills and strategies they have been teaching all along, as in these two scenarios:

As students walk out of the first day of the ELA, a couple of boys reluctantly walk over to their English class, which is next in their schedule.
S: *"This test was stupid. The essay didn't make sense."*
S2: *"English right after an English test, what's up with that?"*

The essay question the student is referring to reads:

> The article states, "one way to solve a problem is to ask the people who are closest to it how they would solve it."
> Describe how this method was used by the author. Explain why it is a good method for problem solving and discuss how it could be improved. In your answer be sure to include
> * A description of the method used by the author
> * An explanation for why this is a good method for problem solving
> * Suggestions for how this method might be improved
> * Details from the article to support your answer

Teachers use the time after the tests to go over certain problems, prep the students for the next day of testing, or share aspects of it with the students. An English teacher asks students for their perspectives.
S3: *"Those tests were dumb easy."*
T: *"I do want to discuss what you just did and get your thoughts on this. But I want you to think about what you are saying and not just mouth off. The listening I thought was a little long but I thought the topic was easy. How was the multiple choice?"*
S3: *"Easy."*
T: *"Thoughts on something specific. Any part particularly hard?"*
S4: *"I didn't understand it because it said how was the method?"*
T: *"They want you to talk about the method."*
S4: *"But then they asked how can you improve that method?"*
S5: *"When it said ways to improve, was it wrong to say test the backpacks?"*
T: *"I'm not sure what the question really was?"*
S5: *"Don't you have the test booklets?"*
T: *"No, they are locked up until tomorrow. Did you have difficulty taking notes on the listening? I thought the topic was easy, almost too easy, so that sometimes you might have too many opinions so that I thought maybe you'd dismiss information too easily. I was also worried, especially when they talked about the wheelie because some people have those and I didn't want snickering."*

S6: *"Well that's true about the neck and back because when I wear my pack it twists my back all around."*
S4: *"That essay at the end got really confusing because at the end it was all opinions. I got off topic so I just stopped. I didn't write as much as I would have."*
S7: *"I hate it when they say at the end after you're done, add more details."*
T: *"That should have been in your paragraphs. You should add details all along. That's what I've been telling you all along. Tomorrow everything you do, everything you do will be using details and examples. Tomorrow you'll get your booklet and they will say go. What are you going to do tomorrow?"*
S8: *"We don't know. We didn't look ahead."*
T: *"What's the process? You know the process."*
S5: *"Come prepared."*
T: *"What do you do first?"*
S5: *"Read an article."*
T: *"Probably two and do the same format, intro, paragraph, paragraph and conclusion. What's the last thing you do?"*
S5: *"That personal response essay."*
S9: *"Are they serving us food tomorrow? I'd like Honey Nut Cheerios."*

In math after the math test, a similar scenario unfolds. After the first day of the math test the teacher fits in a quick review of trigonometry. Then after the second day of the math test, she goes over some of the questions students found difficult:
S: *"Are you going to make us do work after all that math?"*
S2: *"Can I come to your EA* (enrichment activity time) *on Thursday?"*
T: *"You're on the list. Alright, easier or harder than yesterday?"*
S3: *"Harder."*
S4: *"Easier."*
T: *"Which questions seemed to give people trouble?"*
S5: *"The barbell"*
S3: *"The ladder"*
T: *"The one with the ladder, isn't that the Pythagorean Theorem with a right triangle?"*
S4: *"Yes."*
S3: *"Oh, really?"*
T: *"The one that seems to be most difficult and I'm going to go over real quick, the circle graph, you had to construct a circle graph and the rectangular playing field. You have an area of 1200. How do you find the area of a rectangle? How do you find the length and height? Give me some dimensions."*
S4: *"30 X 40"*
T: *"The question asked you to list the dimensions that would give you the smallest amount of fencing. If you are fencing an area of 1200, how much fencing do you need?"*
S4: *"140"*
T: *"How did you find that?"*
S4: *"By adding"*
T: *"By finding the perimeter. Can you come up with another rectangular playing field that requires less amount of fencing but still has an area of 1200 square feet?"*
S6: *"No."*

T: *"Find another one"*
S4: *"60 X 20"*
S6: *"160 feet"*
T: *"Which has less?"*
S4: *"30 X 40"*
T: *"Are there any other dimensions I can use?"*
S4: *"No."*
T: *"I think what happened was that there were several things to do and you froze on it. I say use pictures, draw different options."*
S7: *"What if we didn't show a lot of work, will we get points taken off?"*
T: *"It depends on how much work and if you had to explain. How about the circle graph? Do you want me to explain real quick?"*
S7: *"Yes."*
They go over the problem and then they play a game till the end of class time.

Teachers are constantly amazed by their students. How can it be that after months of having the teachers drill into students, for example, that the fourth bullet on all the essays, the one that says to include "details from the article to support your answer," needs to be included in every single paragraph and is not a paragraph in and of itself, a student can miss doing it on the ELA? Or how can a student not recognize that a math question with a ladder leaning against the wall will involve the Pythagorean Theorem?

* * *

Teachers also decide how much to focus on different aspects of the tests by the value they perceive the state to be placing on different components of the test and in turn the value the district places on these items. These perceptions aren't always correct as several teachers found out after the ELA was administered this year. In 2002, the state decided to switch from pattern scoring to number correct scoring, which simply means that a point earned in any area is equal to a point earned in any other area. The AIS consultant became intrigued by the value of each section. After some work, she is surprised to find out how much each section is worth (see Table 2) and brings it to the attention of the English teachers.

For the most part teachers are surprised by the disproportionate value of the multiple choice section because it goes against the skills they and the district have been emphasizing all year. They feel, however, that this isn't the first time state administrators have thrown them a curve, nor will it probably be the last. One teacher remarks: *"I found out about the scoring criteria the day before the testing was to occur. Since I was placing such emphasis on writing skills, as stressed in past ELA testing, I was shocked to find such heavy weight given to the multiple choice section. It makes me wary about changing my teaching methods, because who is to say that the state won't go back to the old way of scoring, in which the writing sections are again weighted more heavily. Nice to have us playing a guessing game, huh?"* Another teacher said that the AIS consultant had alerted him but that he didn't quite believe her. He had been told to emphasize writing and that's

what he did. Similarly on the math, science, and social studies state tests, the multiple choice section is disproportionately worth more than the other sections.

Table 2: Points per section on English language arts exam

Task	Time allotted	Possible points	%worth of total points
25 Multiple Choice	45 min	25	58%
Listening/ Writing	45 min	6	14%
Reading/ Writing	45 min	6	14%
Independent Writing	45 min	3	7%
Writing Mechanics	NA	3	7%

It is interesting to consider this from a 'cost' effective point of view. Administering the state tests takes its toll on the students in more ways than just having to put the effort forth to do well on the tests. For the ELA alone, several teachers are taken out of their classrooms for 2 days of training and 3 days of scoring for 42% of the total score. Furthermore, a second day of testing disrupts everyone's schedule for little more than 21% of the total scores. Count in administrative costs of handling the tests and hiring substitutes as well as the long-term costs on the quality and quantity of students' instruction as they take the tests and then lose teachers as well as remedial and special education services during testing and scoring, and the impact of these tests takes on a new and arguably negative dimension.

Thinking, reading, and caring: Determining the academic needs of students

Teachers state that the amount and kind of skills that Oak Ridge students lack vary widely. They believe that students have difficulty elaborating, interpreting and going beyond the text, but they also have trouble simply deciphering what the text is saying. They have trouble writing complete and correct sentences, but they also have trouble structuring their essays around ideas including a voice and a framework. Finding an instructional balance is therefore a challenge. If, for example, they focus on grammar then they risk losing the student's attention and desire to write. If, however, they focus on so-what statements to help the student move beyond simple description into interpretation, they run the risk that the student may not have grasped how to comprehend a text or how to structure an essay. This is why teaching to the test often involves going over practice tests because teaching to the test is diagnostic while it is purposeful. It helps teachers assess how their students do on these assessments and thus point to strengths and weaknesses while also providing students with an overview of the skills they will need to know in order to do well on the test.

But what can anyone really know about students' strengths and weaknesses in a practical sense, in the sense of creating environments and interventions that are considered successful? And what is it about this community, this educational structure that seems to keep students from being successful? These are of course the kind of questions that teachers and administrators are in the business of asking and ask themselves all the time. The answers are not simple and reflect the complexity of this business called learning. For example, an issue that came up repeatedly in my conversations with teachers and administrators is the issue of critical thinking. Teachers feel that for the most part they are focusing more on critical thinking skills in their curriculum because of the state tests. They describe critical thinking as going to the next level. Students are asked to describe the 'what' and the 'who' of a task or question and to understand these tasks as level 1, and then explain the 'how' and the 'why' as level 2. When asked how they encourage critical thinking, the teachers respond that they do so mainly through word problems and essays. Furthermore, most teachers feel that this is an essential skill to be teaching the students and that for the most part students really struggle in this area. But that is also where their agreement ends. Deciding on the cause and the solution of this issue brings about a variety of responses.

A primary reason provided by teachers to explain the difficulties of students is that many of the students don't have the reading ability to tackle what the problem is asking of them. With so many students reading below grade level, every test becomes more a test of their reading than a test of their knowledge and skill.

But other teachers feel it is more of a thinking problem. For example a social studies teacher describes what that might look like: *"My students can read and know exactly what it says. They can read every word, understand every word, but they can't bring* [the ideas] *together. For example, today we were reading something, and I said, there were 259 women army core non-combat posts, what does that mean? No one had any idea. They know what non-combat means. I could get them to understand that a post means a job or a position but what does it mean together? They didn't know. It really took awhile for them to grasp the idea that it meant that they had jobs that weren't fighting. So they have word attack skills but they don't have overall comprehension of what they're reading."*

Others see it as more of an instructional issue. The math coordinator explains: *"We need to create mathematical problems that are embedded in work, because that's where mathematical problems come from, they don't come from somebody writing on the board 6 plus 3. And we need to teach kids how to look at that and solve it in a variety of ways, not the one way that somehow was the most efficient because that's probably not how it's going to be used in true life application."*

Still others believe that it is the nature of schooling and the relations students have with teachers that prevents students from showing the skills they have. A teacher explains: *"I don't feel that the students lack thinking skills; if they are interested most kids are pretty good thinkers. I feel that there is a lot of generalizing about things like that, you know if they don't care, they don't try, they can't think, they can't solve*

problems. I think if you can lead them in the right direction, yea they can, they use it for what they're interested in, like kids do. So, I don't agree that they don't think. My feeling is that there is a great deal of defensiveness on the part of kids and so they will shut down without a lot of reassurance, a lot of positive encouragement and then it appears that they can't think, but they just don't try; they don't have confidence. That's the best thing you can do is just keep building up their confidence, you know, it's very corny but success does bring success and if you set them up to succeed instead of setting them up to fail, the taste of success is addictive and then they will also believe that they can."

Most people would probably agree that it is a little of all of these things and that the solution to creating interesting and successful instructional environments for children lies in a system's ability to integrate a wide variety of approaches and experiences. This would also seem to mean that the relationship between the narrative of individual responsibility and choice and the narrative of diagnosis would need to be balanced and integrated. When diagnosis focuses solely on the results of testing at the expense of understanding the complex interactions and needs of learners, it limits the way systems evaluate and address the complexity of their strengths and needs. This seems to be one effect of New York State's accountability system.

The State's Accountability System

Administering the Tests

Despite all the rules around appropriate administration of the tests, smooth and consistent test administration processes do not regularly occur, a fact largely gone unmentioned by state administrators. Poor air circulation, bells, PA interruptions, lack of seating, space, light and materials for taking the tests, lack of personnel for supervising and/or providing accommodations for the tests, are real challenges. The staff at Oak Ridge put a lot of effort into providing the best environment possible for the students. But schools aren't set up for uninterrupted blocks of time where 267 students are expected to each have a calculator, the right pencils, a comfortable desk, good light, and a pleasant temperature.

Furthermore, within the rigid structures around test administration and scoring there is an evident form of ranking that is occurring around the state tests. While the ELA and the math tests both require district or regional training for scoring, and the organization of a district or regional scoring process, the science and social studies tests are scored unsupervised by teachers within each school. This ranking is then taken up by school personnel. For example, breakfast was provided before the ELA and math tests and hallway monitors made available to keep the halls quiet, but the lack of these things for the science and social studies tests is itself a message that they are not as important. For example, during the science performance test, the science teachers joke that *"if it was any other test we would be having breakfast."* Another example is the social studies state test which also counts as the students' final exam. The test, which is originally a two-day test, is administered on one morning during finals' week which consists of half-days and has a daily dismissal time of 11:15. So the social studies teachers need to somehow fit a 3

hour test in a 2 hour 45 minute testing time. Luckily most of the students don't need the full three hours, but for those who do, the stress of rushing is apparent as teachers try to assure them to take whatever time they need and call out to hold the buses. But the decision to administer the test in one morning does not work as well as the teachers would have liked. The students are not only rushed, but they are distracted by the 10 AM bus announcements and then by other students who finish early and need to wait around till the later bus.

Another effect of this relationship is that there is a broadening perspective that the subject matters that are tested are the ones valued by the state and that other subjects are at risk of being under-funded or eliminated. For example, while the 8th grade technology exam is optional from the state's perspective, Park City has decided to make it mandatory. A technology teacher explains: *"Well we decided that it was a good idea because the technology and the home and consumer science mandate is being looked at by the State Board of Education so we figured that if there was something holding us, like a state exam, maybe they would see it as a more important subject. For example, if we say our class isn't important enough to have an exam at the end, why even have a class? It gives us leverage. It doesn't make a difference to the kids, but to me and other people who would consider lifting the mandate on those two subjects."*

The technology teachers feel that the state is not at all focused on exposing middle school students to technology. The implementation and then optional status of the state test is evidence of this. Furthermore, for districts that opted to use the state tests anyway, a teacher is surprised when the test they give the students has the exact same questions in the exact same order as a previous exam; one that they had actually used in review sessions. *"The state didn't bother to take the time to even move things around, let alone make up a new exam, they simply don't care. It boggles my mind that the state took 3 to 4 years to develop, pilot test questions, just to scrap the test the year after it was implemented."* However, he continues, *"In the district's eye technology is very valued. We are keeping the test to show that this subject is important."*

Scoring the State Tests: Is There a Point to All These Points?

The perceived value of the different tests is also evident in the rules surrounding scoring. While the technology, science, and social studies tests are scored by teachers in their own school, the math and ELA scoring processes have more stringent rules and must be scored so that no teacher scores all of their own students' tests. This year the math test is scored by a group of math teachers from across the district while the ELA is scored regionally through BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services). Regardless, however, of the configuration, scoring provides both positive and negative experiences to teachers. It is a social, educational, political, subjective, ethical and tightly dictated process.

The regional training and scoring of the ELA organized by BOCES takes place in a hotel/conference center. Several English, reading and special education teachers from across the three grade levels participate from Oak Ridge. A BOCES facilitator informs us

that this year scoring involves 5500 tests by 308 scorers, 47 table facilitators, 26 scoring assistants, 6 scoring leaders, and 3 coordinators from 19 public school districts and 17 non-public schools. The purpose of regional scoring is clear: To score the tests under similar conditions and to make sure everyone is aligned to the rubric and to what counts as a 0, 1, 2, and 3. One of the facilitators explains: *"People tend to have preconceived ideas of what to expect and how to interpret the rubric. The hardest thing is to break people's own interpretation of the rubric and so doing this in a group usually leads people to even out their interpretations and find a common ground, hence the idea of regional scoring."* By the end of the morning of the first day of training, the facilitator is pleased with the teachers: *"it is nice to see that level of consensus."* The afternoon training also goes smoothly. The facilitator of that session expresses her approval: *"Five years ago there were so many questions about every aspect of the scoring and now 5 years later there is a lot more acceptance of it whether or not we agree with all of it."*

This does not mean, however, that there are no issues. During the training on scoring writing mechanics, the facilitator explains that the two key words are Readability and Comprehension and these factors need to be determined across all three essays. She goes over the rubric with the teachers and then they tackle some examples. Example 1 is given a 1. The facilitator reads the next one. She states that she had to ask herself *"what is he talking about? The scoring guide gave it a 2."*
A teacher asks: *"I'm confused. The readability was as difficult as number 1."*
Facilitator: *"It wasn't to me. See how it's an opinion judgment."*
Teacher: *"I felt the first one was a 2 but the book said it's a 1."*
Facilitator: *"It's never going to be black and white as long as it's subjective."*
Teacher: *"But this is mechanics, there's very little use of grammatical construction* [by the rubric]*."*

The next example is given a 3 with no complaints. They turn to some practice training. The first essay they read, they all agree and give it a 1. But the next set of essays brings forth more argument. Teachers are split between 2s and 3s and the scoring guide gives it a 2.
Teacher arguing for a 3: *"It's not too deep, but it's pretty straightforward and clear, and it demonstrates that the person has an ability for the conventions."*
Facilitator: *"Remember you have to look at all 3 pieces."*
Teacher: *"This is way too subjective."*
Teacher: *"It is very hard to totally void ourselves from that content."*
Facilitator: "*That's why this is holistic. There were errors and no risk taking."*

On the day of the actual scoring, the teachers are again led through some quick scoring review. There is practically no talking as the teachers read over sample 8. One teacher whispers: *"I would give this a two but I know the guide expects it to be a one."* I hear this comment several times throughout the training and scoring. There seems to be a clear understanding among teachers that the regional scoring process is about consistency and their job is to learn to interpret how the consulting group that is responsible for creating the scoring guide interpreted the students' responses and score accordingly. As predicted, Sample 8 is given a 1. On the third example, sample 6 entitled "Future Prisoner of the Past" there is laughter as the teachers read and then a sudden roar of talking as

teachers ask each other *"did the student answer the question?"* It turns out that figuring out whether a student has answered the question is the main reason teachers go to the table facilitators for a second opinion. As teachers begin the actual scoring, a sober mood descends upon the group. There is no talking as the teachers begin the process. There does not seem to be any heightened tension or obvious joy or distaste - rather an air of solemn resolution. The teachers know the scoop: they are going to have to read essay after essay all day. Some teachers consistently go to the rubric, while others don't seem to look at it at all.

Teachers seem to get involved in the scoring process on many levels and through their conversations one can sense a desire to make sense of what they are witnessing. For example, during lunch several teachers talk about the quality of the essays. They agree that the best papers seem to be coming from a middle school in a nearby suburban district. They comment: *"Even some other good district papers weren't as good as those." "They must have good people there." "They have a good English program there." "Yes the teacher does some great stuff with those students."* In their discussion they also talk about the districts, primarily urban, with the worst essays and remark sympathetically that it must be difficult to work with *those* students. Then a teacher shares that she read a paper that was about peer pressure and about how drugs were being dealt at the school and how the author of the essay resisted the drugs every day but that the pressure was intense. The teacher then goes on to state that she *"thought of reporting it or at least flagging it for a second opinion"* but *"decided not to because it was* [district X]*" and you wouldn't expect those problems at* [district X]*, you'd expect them at* [neighboring city districts]*."*

What is interesting about this conversation is how teachers talk about the success and failures of students and what these might be caused by. According to these teachers one could conclude that good teachers must be behind good scores, but bad populations explain bad scores. This is not a parallel statement but reveals the kind of thinking and stereotyping that goes along with these assessment processes.

Two teachers from Park City comment how difficult it is to be from a district whose scores rank near the bottom of the pile. One teacher comments that there is a huge difference between Park City students' essays and nearby suburban students'. I ask the teacher if she pays more attention if the paper she is scoring is Park City. She says *"Yes you definitely pay more attention if it's Park City. It's embarrassing. There's such a drop off."* While the other teacher comments that he really enjoys the scoring: *"It's sad to say but we don't get to spend a lot of time with our colleagues and as crazy as it seems, this is time together."*

Spending time with colleagues seems to be one of the positive parts of test scoring, especially during local scoring for the math, science and social studies exams. Regardless of the overall test results, it seems that for the most part teachers enjoy the challenge of interpreting what a student was up to and figuring out his or her process whether or not the student was right or wrong. These are teachers who value their subject matter and are interested in the results of their students.

Teachers use the scoring time to share unusual examples of student responses, to consider the source of student weaknesses, to decide on future strategies, to praise each other for work well done, and to discuss the lives, both good and bad, of their students. Even an onslaught of zeros whether from a student who tried but failed every problem, or obvious resistance or refusal brought forth friendly discussion rather than anger. Each time, the scorer in question would ask the others about the student and they would discuss a family in crisis, a student who's smart but just doesn't care, or another who tries so hard but just doesn't get it. And despite the obvious evidence unfolding before them that these students will be bringing the overall district score down, their tones are full of care and compassion for their students mingled with frustration and worry for their futures.

Throughout these processes, especially in a district where most students do not pass the math and ELA assessments, keeping one's humor seems to be an essential coping strategy. For example the scoring guides frequently talk about 'high twos' or 'low ones.' The teachers find this distinction ridiculous since for them a one is a one whether it is high or low. But as several math teachers move through the third day of scoring the math test, their comments take on a mixture of sarcasm and amusement (as a way to prevent despair it seems since the students are obviously not doing well). A teacher comments out loud: *"This student recognized the numbers but didn't know what to do with them. It's a high zero,"* bringing laughter to the whole room.

Teachers use these interactions to determine gaps in the students' understanding or curriculum. For example, on the science test the students are asked to interpret a map where earthquake activity dots are listed. This question brings forth a variety of wrong answers:

- There's a lot of ocean in the west so there's a lot of earthquakes.
- There are a lot of volcanoes which cause the earth to shake.
- There are more earthquakes because there is more wind.
- The west has a warmer climate.
- There's a lot of earthquakes in the west because it is hotter and there's a lot of flat land.

One teacher comments: *"They still think it's hotter and that's why there are earthquakes."*

Another one replies: *"Well they have the 140 degrees right there."*

She is commenting on the fact that the question shows a map with earthquake activity dots and has listed the degrees of latitude up one side and the degrees of longitude across the bottom which have as values from 140 degrees on the left to 60 degrees on the right. Students may be interpreting the degrees of longitude as temperature.

They are pleased with answers like 'It is warmer so that the plates move more,' even when wrong because the student used the word 'plates.' And especially pleased with correct answers:

- There's a fault line in that area.
- One reason there are more earthquakes in the west is because there is more crustal movement.

Similarly on the social studies test, the teachers are able to learn that despite all the work they did on writing DBQ essays, students are still having difficulties incorporating information from the documents into their answer and with how to do this. They find that many of the students are structuring their essays by having each paragraph refer to each document. Information like this assists teachers in practical ways as they make decisions for next year.

Sometimes it's a change in the test content itself that prompt teachers to alter their approach. For example, an English teacher comments how every year the state throws them something that catches them off guard. He states: *"This was the first year they had so many quotes, for example, "Mathew Hanson said, blablabla, what does it mean?" And that's what I'm working on in my classes right now because that's a Regents thing. I will now know next year to have parts in our review where they have to explain a quote. But they haven't had as much of that 'take a statement and analyze it in an essay' kind of thing using examples. That's one of those things where every year there's something we don't know is coming, so it catches us off guard. One year it said imagine you visited a wealthy Italian Renaissance family for a meal, what would it be like? Use what you heard. It was on the listening, and they were supposed to write it in a story. Those are the things that pop up each year and so if you have a kid who's looking for an excuse to shut off, that's it."*

But they also use the scoring experience to plan future strategies that aren't necessarily academic. For example, during the math scoring the teachers came up with a list of suggestions to guide their students in writing explanations: *"We should tell the students not to use words like 'always' 'all' 'every time' in their explanations because often they lose a point just because that word made their statement wrong."* To which a teacher adds jokingly: *"Don't write anything in your answer box, don't circle anything, don't indicate what your answer is, and we might be able to give you one point from the work on the page."*

Other teachers share strategies that they use even when these aren't always successful. For example, during the math scoring a teacher asks the others whether they know the good guys/bad guys approach for integers. She shows them how the plus represents the good guys and the minus represents the bad guys – (+)(-)=(-) (+)(+)=(+) (-)(+)=(-) (-)(-)=(+). She had asked because a student had used the term 'good guy' in his explanation. The teacher explains that she can't give him credit for his explanation because even though she understands what he means, it would be irrelevant for anyone else who scores it. The teachers discuss helping students understand the difference between using different strategies like good guy/bad guy to help them remember the concept but then having to use mathematical words in their actual explanations.

Teachers for the most part work hard to understand the rules by which they are expected to score their students' work. But when these rules work against their students, for example, when the test penalizes students for interpreting a question another way, or takes points off for correct work because a certain procedure isn't followed, then teachers feel betrayed and angered. The math test provides some good examples of this:

Question 31 of this year's math test asks:

> Justin says that if he adds any two negative integers, the result will always be a negative integer, but if he subtracts the same two negative integers, the result will always be a positive integer.
>
> Part A
> On the lines below, explain why you agree or disagree with Justin's statement.
>
> Part B
> On the lines below, give one example of adding two negative integers and one example of subtracting the same two negative integers that support your explanation.

In the scoring guide provided to teachers, a student's response used as an example brings forth an issue the teachers have with this question. For part A, the student had written: "I agree with it because if you do add any two negatives integers there will always be a negative. But if he subtracts the same two negative integers the result will always be a zero." And in part B, the student provides these two examples:
-8 + -9 = -17
-7 - - 7 = 0

This is not the only student who interpreted "the same two negative integers" as duplicating the same number instead of being about using the same two numbers 'as in the first example you provide.' The state gave this student a 1. The teachers feel he/she should get a two because he/she was consistent between the first part and the second part. They call the state's help number. While they are not allowed to change their interpretation of this question they are pleased to find out that the state has been receiving numerous phone calls on this question. The teachers' position is that if it is clear how a student interpreted a question and their answer is consistent with that interpretation, they should be graded accordingly. Setting arbitrary standards of grading without consideration for a students' approach seems counterproductive.

Another area students lose points in ways that teachers disagree is with run-on equations. These are equations students write that show their work but is not acceptable to the state. So for example on question 28 the students are given a chart of snowfall measurements and they are supposed to calculate the mean. Several students wrote: 3.25 + 5.75 + 2.4 = 11.4 ÷ 3 = 3.8. The guidelines give this student only one point out of two because "the shown work contains an incorrect mathematical statement, indicating only a partial understanding of the mathematical procedures embodied in the task." What was wanted was for the student to first write 3.25 + 5.75 + 2.4 = 11.4 and then 11.4 ÷ 3 = 3.8

Teachers disagree that the first shows less understanding than the second. They explain that if a student does the correct equation this shows that they understand the mathematical procedure because they need to understand it to use it. Students lose similar points in other examples: when they correctly show a fraction but fail to write the word 'fraction' in their explanation, or when they write out only partially the equation they are working out on a calculator but provide the correct answer. When each point carries so much weight, it becomes clear why these things matter so much. The teachers argue that if a student gets to the correct answer, they need to have followed the correct steps and to penalize them for not writing every single step down not only unfairly punishes students who are actually learning the material, but is a poor assessment practice since it means that the score a student receives carries little if no valid feedback to teachers.

Another issue for teachers is that depending on what skill or key idea the state is targeting, the criteria will change from one question to the next, so for one it is the reasoning that is highlighted and not the work shown, while for another it is the work shown. By the end of the math scoring training, most teachers are frustrated with the inconsistencies between one question and the next. Sometimes the shown work is considered adequate and other times it is not. *"It varies from question to question. It's confusing because how do you direct students?"* Furthermore, the focus on the key ideas means that to solve a mathematical problem, students may need to go through a four part algorithm, but the question may only be worth two points because the state is focusing not on the mathematics but on one particular key idea. This kind of problem does little to inform teachers whether students missed an addition or didn't understand the key idea. Similarly, while teachers are pleased that the state accepts guess and check as an acceptable approach, they question its insistence that students show evidence of 3 trials, 2 wrong and one right. *"It's unbelievable that they can determine you need 3 trials." "What if the student gets it right on the first guess?" "Or the second?"*

Scoring provides an opportunity for teachers to assess their students, the nature of their curriculum, their teaching approaches, and their test preparation activities, but it also provides them an opportunity to assess the validity, value, and intent of the state accountability system. What the scoring reveals is that there are contradictions between the rhetoric of the state curriculum and the actual practice as designed in the state tests. Some of these have already been discussed. Other surprises this year was the emphasis in both the science and social studies exams on 7^{th} grade material rather than 8^{th} grade. The social studies teachers feel that having so much of the test based on 7^{th} grade material not only makes it more difficult but undermines the value of the 8^{th} grade curriculum to teachers and students. *"It takes us at least 3 weeks to review 7th grade material and only superficially and we still have to cover all of the 8th grade material."* The question becomes what to do next year. Similarly a science teacher describes this year's science test: *"A lot of earth science, no chemistry, no physics, no motion, no periodic table, no chemical bonding, what did they do, give up the 8th grade curriculum?"*

And teachers question the way the rubric actually makes it difficult for students to pass. For example a social science teacher describes how there is minimal difference between the criteria used to give a student's essay a 1, 2, or 3 but there's a big jump

between 3 and 4 and another big jump between 4 and 5. Students will get a 3 if they incorporate some information from the documents and a 4 if they include relevant information from 4 documents as well as including outside information. So if they include outside information or some larger social context, but fail to use at least 4 documents or if they use all their documents but fail to bring in outside information, a student cannot get a four on their essay. Furthermore, there is very little guidance for what constitutes outside information so teachers with higher expectations may be unfairly penalizing students while others accept even superficial information.

Other times scoring the tests help the teachers understand how state administrators are interpreting information. For example, the social studies teachers are surprised by the superficiality of what constitutes an analytic statement according to the state. They find that analytical statements are considered as such by the rubric if the student writes statements like "made it more valuable." Teachers sometimes find they need to lower their own expectations or standards to match those of the state. A teacher comments: *"There are our standards and their standards, and theirs are making us score in ways that go against our practices."*

Finally, reoccurring mistakes, either in the content of the exams or the scoring process, cause teachers to question the quality of the state assessments. In the math question about the two negative integers, teachers are left wondering whether the state actually pilots all the questions and if they do then why would they use one that obviously has problems? And in the science test, the teachers are baffled that the state rubric accepts the term 'rotation' as an acceptable answer on a question for why there are seasons. *"I want them to explain why they accept rotation. It has nothing to do with seasons,"* a teacher states. *"It is simply wrong."*

Responses to the State Tests from Students, Parents, Teachers, and Administrators

When the ELA scores come back, an English teacher decides to take this opportunity to discuss this with his students. He tells them that Oak Ridge 8th graders didn't do that well and wants to know what the students think the reason for their low performance is. This is a short excerpt of that conversation:
T: *"If the state is telling us that none of the 8th graders are making the standards, we're talking about the fifth consecutive year, you have to ask the question is it the fault of the students, the teachers, or the test?"*
S: *"It's the fault of the test."*
T: *"Why are you saying the fault of the test?"*
S: *"They ask us stuff we don't know."*
T: *"You didn't know about backpacks?"*
S: *"We are not knowing everything we could."*
S2: *"They didn't give us enough time."*
T: *"Maybe the fault needs to lie in getting some students on some board to discuss the issues with Commissioner Mills and others who make these things."*
S3: *"It's because of the teachers."*

T: *"Okay, so every 8th grade English teacher in New York State pretty much is incompetent is what you're telling me."*
S3: *"Yes."*
T: *"Ok, I can live with that. So you're not learning how to find information. In other words, you lack someone to tell you here, here's your answer."*
S4: *"It's our program."*
S3: *"Maybe it's a method we are using to teach?"*
T: *"Ok, maybe it's a method. That is a good point. We are trying to use SQ3R. What else should we be doing?"*
S5: *"Why don't you do what you want?"*
S6: *"Everybody works on computers."*
S7: *"Work in pairs so we can discuss answers, we learn more."*
T: *"Maybe but usually you just wait till someone gets the answers and then you copy. What is your incentive to look for the answer yourself?"*
S3: *"To get good grades."*
S4: *"To find out stuff."*
S6: *"We should do the thing when we just sit at computers at home."*
S8: *"I wouldn't like that."*
S7: *"No then we wouldn't see our friends."*

Overall the students are engaged and interested in this conversation. They discuss at great length the pluses and minuses of online learning. The teacher is skeptical that any of this would improve their performance. He asks them over and over how can schools improve student performance, how can we make kids learn? While they did not arrive at a satisfactory solution, this conversation points out the common reliance on specific lens to understand success and failure: teacher, student, context, program, method? Maybe we are all asking the wrong questions?

This question is raised by a group of Oak Ridge parents who are concerned that the state's accountability system is not an answer to a well developed question. In a discussion about state testing, parents express concern that student individuality is being sacrificed in a system that seems to lack a well-developed message:

"When Richard Mills came up and said 'I don't care who is in the school, they can pass Regents exams.' I'm sorry there are some special education students who aren't going to pass the English Regents and why would he then say 'you cannot get a high school diploma?' You've cut the kids off at the knees and the kids see that, the kids understand that, they're not stupid and they probably give up."

"Just because a person can or cannot test well doesn't mean they are a good or a bad student."

"The standardized tests can help you determine if the students are meeting these minimal levels at least and then you can adjust the education system to help the students meet the needs. The test should not drive the education system. The education system should drive the tests and there is what I think is wrong. What's happening now is the

tests are driving the system. The students are placed according to the tests; the tests will say oh well this child deserves to get accelerated, this one doesn't, and there's the problem, the test is driving the education. That's the wrong way; it should be the other way."

"I'm really concerned with the way each and every individual student, if you don't learn the way they want you to learn, you are advised to see a child psychologist, you are advised to see your pediatrician, and it all starts as soon as you enter kindergarten in the public school system it starts there. Why can't they learn different?! That's how they learn, they learn best learning differently, everybody, every child. And I think that because a lot of this testing has become so important it really singles them out."

"It pushes them out."

"And it kills their spirit and I see it kill a lot of parent's spirits."

"When I went to high school there were three different options, you had the high school diploma, you had the Regents' diploma, and you had the GED. We didn't look down on kids who got GEDs, we just figured that they were just doing it a different way and they went out and they led productive lives. Today the only thing that's out there is the standard thing."

"You don't get the Regents, that's it, you don't get no stinking diploma. And any other diploma you get isn't worth it, and this is the same thing with these standardized tests. This is the only way that you can be tested, the only thing that counts, and if you fall outside the norm you're no good. And I think a lot of kids feel left by the wayside."

"I'm sure everyone here has heard about Albert Einstein. He was absolutely horrible at math so could you imagine what would have happened to our society if they said 'oh geez you can't pass the math Regents, you have no intelligence, toss you aside.' So I think some flexibility needs to be built into the system as far as the standardized tests. Also there's a commercial going around now about the lack of art, it's very good. And the idea behind the arts is to have individuality, have imagination, have different ways of thinking. Another commercial is the one where the people have to think outside the box, so you know there's a mixed message there, we want people to think outside the box, we want them to have imagination, yet we want them to sit neatly inside of the box."

"They're so busy getting them in the box."

"So there seems to be a little bit of a problem going that either you're in this box or you're out of the box. So we need to figure out what type of message we wish to tell our children."

While teachers generally have nothing against the idea of assessing reading, writing, thinking and arithmetic, they are unsure that the tests are serving the expressed

goals of the state of forming a strong learning base for all students. A math teacher provides her thinking on this issue: *"I feel that the state is constructing the tests, at least in math, in a way that is self-defeating for what they want to accomplish. For example, the state test creates the questions in a manner where there are far too many ways to have an error. I feel that math answers should be black and white especially at this age. At this level it shouldn't be self-defeating. The questions are so convoluted that even though you know it in your sleep, you know what you are doing, there are so many avenues for error in every single question. For example, we teach them the uses of probability that they see in their everyday life, however to then take probability and combine it with another equally vague topic, to take those two, intertwine them and make* [the students] *scrape like their digging through mud to get to the answer, they can have advanced to an understanding of the topic that's beyond their years and another topic and then somehow they kind of obscure it all together. So a kid has to sift through to try to get to, you know to combine those two things during a test. I don't get that. I mean it will point out your brilliant kids, sure, but I think there are kids, you have your challenged kids, why shouldn't they have all of that? They should, but not like this."*

And most teachers believe that it is unrealistic to have students retain so much information and unfair since it ends up being a measure of their memory rather than their understanding of the topic they are currently investigating. A science teacher explains: *"Your 8th grade exam is brutal because a lot of kids have forgotten this. What we try to do is cover the core curriculum in physical science but also tie in earth science and life science. I do this when it's applicable to what lessons we're going over but what I'm going to end up doing after April vacation is their favorite thing, review. This whole thing to me seems like a Regents' course because I have to review a lot of material for these guys that they have not thought about. I mean realistically once they're out of 6th grade and they go to 7th grade, they're like woohoo, next subject. Done with 7th grade, woohoo, next subject, you know. And now all of a sudden the state is saying we want to know what they've retained, which I think is fair but again I think what the state is sometimes missing is these are adolescent kids who are going through hormonal changes, peer pressure, hating their parents, making new friends, I mean they're going through such a turbulent stage these three years and to say alright you're going to need to know everything you've learned. A lot of kids at this age can't handle it. Some do. Some people succeed very well but that's a minority I think of the students."*

District administrators are also in search of solutions that support student and teacher needs but these solutions must now also fit within the narrow scope of the state's rigid rules. This is why data analysis and pre-testing to predict test achievement is so prominent. It is also why Park City administrators are strongly considering returning to the neighborhood K-8 schools as a solution to the middle school dip in achievement scores. Finally, there is also consideration of moving the district out of regional scoring. The idea being that Park City would pair up with another urban district and work together to set up a system for scoring the English language arts exam. Again it is a solution within the framework of the state assessment's system and points to the limits that district administrators have in making choices that they feel might benefit the schools in their district.

The decision to consider scoring the ELA locally is based on a lot of teacher feedback about the bias they feel is evident in the way suburban teachers go about scoring the papers during the regional scoring. A teacher explains: *"People have horror stories like one of our teachers reported hearing someone say 'well there's got to be garbage collectors in the world' and throwing the test book from a city in the box. There's that kind of bias, but that's not what bothers me. What bothers me is when you have a* (suburban wealthy district) *where kids go to Disney World twice a year and to Switzerland once a year kind of thing, and they're writing in 4th grade essays that our 8th graders can't even write, and by the time they get to 8th grade they're writing on a 6 point rubric and their essays are like a 14. I think that skews your expectation."* Furthermore, she continues, *"if you just spit back the answer ... or if you just give a literal, correct answer you only get 4 out of 6 points. So ELA is almost a measure of a piece of art or ice skating. You know it's so subjective, no matter how concrete they say that rubric is. And when you have paper after paper after paper from the suburbs of kids who are extraordinary writers, who have parents who buy into their kid's education, then that skews* [the scoring process]."

Most teachers agree that some form of bias is occurring and that it is difficult for suburban teachers to understand that the range of essays that would get a score of a 5 or a 6 is actually much broader than they are used to considering. However, not all teachers agree that local scoring is a good solution. Some teachers feel that it is beneficial for urban teachers to see what suburban students are writing otherwise how will they know what to strive for? Other teachers worry that pairing up with another urban district might actually bring Park City teachers' expectations down since the higher end essays will probably only compare to the average essay written by a suburban student. These are real dilemmas and are ones that Park City administrators and teachers have been involved in openly discussing. Most people seem to come to the conclusion that there is rarely a solution that benefits everyone and so the decisions that they make are more about considering what kind of results are wanted and for whom, which is another facet of how the narrative of diagnosis works within the system.

The Fallacy of Accountability

> *"I think* [the state's accountability system] *puts us in a very black and white world, it's either good or bad, and you are a good school or a bad school based on this very, very narrow criteria.... The testing situation puts the entire burden on the school. And I think that's part of teachers' and administrators' unspoken frustration. We receive students, you know literally raw material, and all of the students are at different stages when they come to us, but we are supposed to have one end product by the end of the year. Now other than industry that makes no sense at all when you think about it."*
>
> (Park City District Superintendent)

The story told here of this middle school is not pretty. It is not the neat, wiped down setting a suburban school might provide, but neither is it a story of neglect. The two

narratives of accountability described earlier of individual responsibility and diagnosis are clearly apparent. They are interwoven throughout the experiences of teachers, students, parents and administrators and are built on an accountability rhetoric that pushes them farther apart from each other rather than closer together. Furthermore, what is lacking in this story are the many ways in which Park City as a district and Oak Ridge as a school positively affects the daily lives and school experiences of its students. Looking through the lens of testing and tests scores leaves little room for describing those experiences.

There is ample evidence to suggest that students do care about their learning and try to learn and have many skills to build on, that parents do value the education of their children and try to assist their children the best they can, that teachers do reach out to students and try to meet the expectations set forth by the district and state, and that administrators do understand the experiences of teachers and try to guide them in those endeavors. There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that what is presented as "choice" is nothing more than a rhetorical device that manipulates people to comply with a system that in practice presents no real choice of action on the part of the players. It is this imaginary concept of choice that attempts to prevent people within school systems such as this one from discussing and evaluating real choices that need to be made if the goal in the end is to improve the quality of education for urban students.

Park City as a district has clearly shown itself to include people who do not shy away from discussing real issues, critically and substantially. Their primary concern is how to meet the educational and social needs of a diverse body of students. They understand what is at stake if they don't. Unlike more affluent settings, they witness the failure of American social and educational institutions every day in their commute through the city to and from work. So it is no wonder that teachers and administrators in inner cities get frustrated with state and federal policies from afar using these very same examples to push forward their agendas for reform.

Furthermore, teachers and administrators are frustrated that solutions they know work and exist like smaller class sizes, smaller schools, more time on task, less content to cover, and collaborative learning are not priorities of the state. If they were, this is where its money would be spent. Instead millions are being spent every year to tell teachers what they already know; that students lack the skills and knowledge to pass this kind of testing. A district administrator explains: *"Things we know work that we never implement like smaller class size. The Tennessee study proved it, no argument, it was the largest, longitudinal study ever done on class size and it worked; those kids maintained their gains right through high school. It costs so much money no one is doing it, not even Tennessee anymore. Well when we know a solution and we don't implement it because it costs too much money then society's priorities are out of wack and one school district can't fix that. Society has to start working to spend money on kids. We spend money on xyz, but not on kids. That's a problem. And that's one that none of us can fix. So I think politicians who like to point to the test scores and the bad schools and the good schools should look in the mirror and see where the problem is. We can solve all of education's problems, it just takes money. Jonathan Kozol said it way back in 1971 and he's been*

saying it ever since. No one is listening to the man. He told a tale once about speaking to someone in Washington, a congressman or senator, it was right after he wrote Savage Inequalities, and some politician in the room said 'surely you are not suggesting we just throw money at the problem,' and Kozol looked at him and said 'it's a novel idea, let's throw money at poverty and see if it makes a difference.' But that's the attitude that we are up against…. We pretend there's a national crisis in education. There is no national crisis in education. There's an urban crisis in education and the urban crisis is based on money. Every standardized test I've ever seen measures poverty. It doesn't measure intelligence, it doesn't measure teachers, it doesn't measure kids' potential; it simply measures poverty."

Both the federal and state accountability systems tout 'higher standards for all,' 'local control,' and 'parental choice' while forcing schools and districts to comply with rigid performance measurement tools and results. And people buy into these concepts because they agree with them philosophically and morally. The problem is that by agreeing with the goal, they have little choice but to agree with the means. Choices like these detract attention and funding away from other issues. Talking about scores and scoring, test preparation activities, attendance, behavior, placement, textbooks, whole reading versus phonetics detract from the real question which is what can educational systems really achieve on its own in communities fraught with poverty and unemployment, and all the associated challenges. In the state's accountability system, students need to comply or they are left out on the street. Parents need to comply or they face charges of neglect. Teachers and administrators need to comply or they risk losing their jobs and having their schools taken over by outsiders. What kind of choices are these? But more importantly what impact do they have on a system? When accountability structures are based on goals that cannot be attained (in the timeframe and with the means provided), it creates division rather than collaboration between those who are accountable. In other words, administrators blame teachers for not working miracles, teachers blame students and parents for not making school success a priority, and parents and students blame teachers and administrators for not doing a better job. A reliance on structures of merit and blame seem to be natural outcomes of such systems. The higher the stakes the stronger people need to work to defend their own positions.

Many teachers and administrators in Park City are beginning to believe that the state's accountability agenda is not about assisting schools in reaching higher standards, nor is it about people working together to meet common goals. Rather this kind of accountability system works by creating hierarchical structures where the larger nesting dolls require the performance of the smaller ones as a determination of their own performance. So the people on the top feel the need to control the output of the people on the bottom and in the process forget that their goal is to guide and support the growth of those they supervise. What happens in a system like this is that people adopt a defensive posture; one that pushes people away from assisting each other in meeting common goals. So practices that are shown to work like adopting an interdisciplinary, theme-based curriculum that focuses more in depth on fewer content areas are not even attempted or are abandoned. Instead teachers and administrators do what they think they are supposed

to do to show that they are being accountable and focus on the tests and when the test scores don't budge, they wonder who isn't doing their job.

It is no wonder that most teachers at Oak Ridge express powerlessness, skepticism, and frustration when discussing the state's accountability system. They have not lost faith in the promise of education or in the belief that Park City does provide a quality education for some and can improve in its ability to do so for others. What they have lost is the belief that the state is even minutely interested in assisting them in this goal. Everything points to the state's accountability agenda as promoting competitiveness and conflict rather than collaboration, even when collaboration is what is sought after by schools and districts. Moreover, the punitive nature of the system does little to motivate those involved to put their best foot forward. There is a real need to integrate, not separate, the ideas of diagnosis and responsibility and utilize these to implement change that focuses on the common good and needs of the community. This may however involve looking at diagnosis and personal responsibility from a different lens, one separate from the state tests and more focused on the human needs of the teaching and learning community. The choice seems clear: stand together as a community against the divisive tide of accountability or watch as each doll is smothered within the other. The question for teachers and administrators in Park City is whether this is a choice that can safely be taken.