

Student Voice

Teaching Students to the Test

As a high school freshman in a magnet STEM school, I felt the pressure to succeed from all sides. In the rat race for good grades, I never enjoyed class. Later that year, I realized that every high school student suffered the plague of stress culture—cramming for tests and feeling their self-worth was bound up in test scores.

Education should be fun and collaborative. Instead, it produces anxiety and fails to encourage students to love learning. Even when adults ask students for their perspectives on school climate, student feedback is never well received. Thus student governments are essentially party planners, making decisions on prom decor and homecoming floats but with no power over curriculum, coursework, or the pace of learning.

This system continues to fail millions of high school students. Four reforms will help transform the outdated education system.

Leverage students' optimal learning styles. Mine involved kinesthetic, visual, and auditory learning, which were part of elementary school but hardly ever revisited in later schooling. Use of pictures, projects, and hands-on learning ought not be phased out as students progress to middle and high school. Education researcher Hilary G. Conklin stresses students' needs for creativity through play, which is stifled as students get older.¹ Even in the era of COVID-19, where teachers and students have had to adapt to online learning, there are ways to cultivate a love of learning rooted in student preferences.

Cater to student needs. The classroom should be a safe space for students to take risks, without fear that their ideas will

be ridiculed or dismissed. It is crucial to recognize that everyone may not achieve the same level of understanding from concept to concept and to encourage everyone to try their best. Mandating benchmark tests against a set of standards at the beginning and end of the year risks deemphasizing individual student needs. The key is for teachers to use test scores to see where students began and to use subsequent exams, projects, or other hands-on mechanisms to determine student progress toward understanding.

Use positive metrics. Some schools group students based on their levels of understanding. Honors courses or teachers' announcements of the highest class test scores may encourage some students to excel, but it will not produce a growth mind-set in all students. I never made the top five in honors or AP calculus, and I felt my attempts were never good enough, despite earning high B's. Teachers could foster engaged, reflective learning by letting students set independent goals. They could share only average scores to encourage classes to grow as collaborative communities.

Be responsive to student feedback. Students must help shape their education. Providing a place for continuous student feedback on content pacing and understanding is paramount to engagement and success. Students should have a voice in curriculum and standards development as well. Until the system begins to treat students like people, students will continue to be left behind. ■

¹Hilary Conklin, "Playtime Isn't Just for Preschoolers—Teenagers Need It, Too," *Time* (March 3, 2015).



Dorcas Olatunji

Former Student Representative on the Delaware State Board of Education

This column reflects her views alone and not the views of the Delaware State Board of Education.