

Testing, Testing, 1, 2, 3: A Play

Overview:

Several participants volunteer to read aloud a short “play,” dramatizing different perspectives about standardized testing. The views expressed by the characters in the play (two parents, a teacher, and the principal) briefly introduce some of the wide range of issues that surround standardized testing. The 10-minute play is followed by a group brainstorm in which participants name the issues that emerged in the play as well as things they themselves wonder about. In addition to serving as a relatively fun and engaging way to bring up serious issues, the play also serves as a device for introducing issues that participants might be shy about raising.

Use:

Since the purpose of this activity is to raise a full range of issues about testing, it should not be used as a stand-alone experience. Follow it with any of the other tools that address standardized testing and provide participants with a chance to discuss and learn more about the issues, such as: *Testing Tales: Discussing the Full Range of Results*, with the powerpoint, *What is Standardized Testing?* Or, come up with another way to prompt more discussion about standardized testing after the play.

Key Concepts Addressed from Public Understanding Framework:

Standardized Testing
Accountability

Time Frame: 20-30 minutes

Reading the Play Aloud (10-15 minutes)

Brainstorming Issues of Standardized Testing (10-15 minutes)

What You Need:

- o 5 copies of the play, “Testing, 1, 2, 3...It’s the ‘Principal’ of the Thing”
- o 4 nametags for the characters in the play
- o 1 or 2 blank overhead transparencies
- o highlighter marker
- o overhead marker
- o overhead projector
- o extension cord (optional)

Getting Ready:

Before the Day of the Workshop:

1. **Duplicate Scripts.** Duplicate 5 copies of the play, “Testing, 1, 2, 3...It’s the ‘Principal’ of the Thing” (master) Make a script for each of the four characters by highlighting that character’s lines. The fifth script is for the narrator.
2. **Make Nametags for the Four Characters.** Write the name of each character in large letters on a nametag.
3. **Read the Play Yourself.** Write the name of each character in large letters on a nametag.

The Day of the Workshop:

1. **Choose 4 Potential Volunteers to Read Aloud the Play.**
Be thinking of who to select to serve as the volunteers to read aloud the four parts in the play. Because the volunteers will need to read aloud in front of the whole class, make sure you choose people for whom this will be comfortable. A little pre-thought can avoid a potentially embarrassing situation.

Reading the Play Aloud

1. **Explain the Plan.** Tell the group that together you’ll be reading aloud a play called, “Testing, 1, 2, 3.” Ask for four volunteers who will feel comfortable reading parts aloud.
2. **Introduce the Characters in the Play.** Introduce each of the four characters of the play, one-by-one. Give them each a nametag to put on and their highlighted copy of the script.
4. **Begin reading the play aloud.** As narrator, begin the play by reading aloud the set of the scene. “The scene takes place during a middle school Open House. As parents are changing classrooms, the Principal is approached in the hallway by two parents with differing viewpoints. They engage her in a push-pull discussion of testing and related issues. A teacher also happens along.” Turn the reading over to the characters.
5. **Conclude the play.** When the last line has been read, thank the volunteers and ask them to return to their seats.

Brainstorming Issues of Standardized Testing

- 1. Brainstorm List of Issues from the Play.** Invite participants to help you make a list of issues related to testing that arose in the play. As an issue is shared, make sure that everyone understands it by restating or clarifying as necessary. Then record each issue on an overhead transparency.
- 2. Brainstorm Additional Test-Related Issues.** After there are quite a few issues on the list, ask participants to add issues that might not have come up in the play but are ones that they themselves feel or have heard others talk about.
- 3. Conclude the Brainstorm.** When the brainstorming slows down, conclude by saying that there is no shortage of issues and controversy surrounding standardized testing. Explain that your goal is to help them understand the wide range of views so they can decide what they each think.

Testing, 1, 2, 3...It's the "Principal" of the Thing

Characters:

Ms. Prince/Mr. Prince (the School Principal)

Parent #1

Parent #2

Science Teacher

Narrator: *The scene takes place during a middle school Open House. As parents are changing classrooms, the Principal is approached in the hallway by two parents with differing viewpoints. They engage her in a push-pull discussion of testing and related issues. A teacher also happens along.*

Parent #1: *(holds Principal by one arm) Ms. Prince, I've been meaning to talk with you about the standardized testing coming up in April. I've been reading about testing, and I'm not sure Lisa should take them. These big state tests seem to put kids under a lot of pressure. Last year she was a bundle of nerves.*

Principal: *Well, you have the right to have her excused from testing, but if test anxiety is the reason, please reconsider. She'll encounter lots of tests in her education.*

Parent #1: *That's not the only reason—I've talked to lots of other parents who are concerned about the class time taken up by testing. It seems like the whole spring is spent either preparing or taking tests!*

Principal: *Yes, well.... I'm generally pro-testing, I mean maybe you are thinking of protesting, but I'm pro-testing, uh, I mean I'm **in favor of** testing.*

Parent #2: *(interrupting—grabs Principal by other arm, pulls a little): I feel so good about these tests. I was thrilled with how good our school's test scores were last year. How else can we find out if kids are learning, and whether or not teachers are doing their jobs!*

Principal: *Uh, but.... the tests are designed to measure students progress, not teachers or schools, you see....*

Parent #1: *(interrupting—pulls Principal by the arm): But there's so much pressure on teachers to "teach to the test." Students are taught the "right answers" on the test, rather than really thinking or going into depth with topics so they remember them. Is that good teaching?*

Principal: *I hear your concern, but we have to recognize that—from the federal government on down—the pressure is on for **accountability**. Large-scale testing is on the increase in every state.*

Science Teacher: *(to Principal) So how's Open House going?*

Principal: *The usual...*

Parent #2: *(pulls Principal by arm) Accountability—that's exactly what I'm talking about! I mean, if there's nothing driving forward progress, then the result is too*

often lack of focus—every teacher just teaching his favorite topic. No reward for student progress.

Parent #1: (*pulls Principal by arm*) But how can a single test really measure student learning? How much can one test tell you about what a student actually knows?

Science Teacher: I agree that important decisions about a student should not be based on just one test. There are lots of other ways classroom teachers measure student learning— homework, quizzes, special projects, portfolios of their work, class discussions— all that goes into the grade.

Parent #1: But then how does the grade relate to a standardized test score? I'm sure my daughter is not so unusual in getting very good grades, but not doing very well on big tests. I mean what's a better measure of what a student has learned—a whole semester's assignments or one big test?

Parent #2: How do you know your daughter's **really** doing well? Unless we have large-scale tests we can't compare our students' progress to others!

Parent #1: I read that many states have not aligned their tests with their standards. That means that the tests are not testing what the state standards say is important. By that logic, what should teachers teach—what's on the test or what's in the standards?

Parent #1: (*turns to Principal and pulls by the arm*): Is that really true?! What about our state tests?

Principal: (*looks miserable and shrugs*)

Science Teacher: (*to Principal*) Speaking of standards reminds me that we need to talk soon about the latest state science standards. Do you know that students are expected to know about the theory of relativity in the fourth grade!?

Principal: (*getting a bit upset*) Whatever you think of the standards, we are mandated by the state to teach that content.

Science Teacher: But it's impossible to address all standards well in the time we have. They're crammed full of facts and concepts. If I tried to teach all the standards for one year in science, really teach them—not just *cover* them— it would take two and a half years! Or we'd need to extend the school day till 2 AM!

Principal: (*first to parents*) You see what we're dealing with? (*then to teacher*) Well, all we can ask is that you do the best you can, without sacrificing good teaching practices of course.

Science Teacher: (*shaking head back and forth*) Yeah....Okay... ..Right....Sure...No Problem.

Parent #1: If there's way too much to teach that might mean some kids would be tested on things they were never taught!

Science Teacher: Tell me about it. That happens all the time.

Parent #2: Good tests not only hold students and teachers and principals accountable. They can help teachers focus on what the student needs to do to improve. Say everyone in a class is missing questions related to **fractions**—then you know that needs to be worked on.

Science Teacher: In theory, yes, but we don't get results from the state tests until after the end of the year. The timing makes it so the test results aren't useful to teachers in helping students.

Parent #1: Look—if the tests don't correspond to what the teacher taught, or aren't based on the standards, then I think it's just a mess!

Parent #: The biggest mess I've seen is the state of education in this country before there were standards and accountability for them. It may not be perfect now, but we've got to give it a chance!

Principal: (*looks at watch*) Whoops—I'd better get to the auditorium! But listen—the things both of you raise are important—the uses of tests, their fairness, their accuracy, their effects on students, teachers, and schools—maybe we need to have a series of parent workshops about all this!

Parent # 1 and Parent #2: (*together*) That sounds like a good idea!

Principal: Then we have some agreement! And I think we agree on something else as well—that the main thing all of us want is whatever is best for the education of our children and all students!

Parent #1: I can get behind that!

Parent #2: Me too!

Teacher: Absolutely!

Principal: Awww...I think that calls for a group hug! (*they do*)

Principal: (*to parents*) Can I get you two to volunteer to get these workshops started?

Parent #1 & Parent #2: Sure—but we're already in one!