

Thinking Outside the Testing Box

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The testing protocol in Florida has real repercussions for students and graduation plans. One teacher teaming up with two guidance staff can make a difference that matters in the real life plans of senior students who desire to graduate with peers. Yet, these senior students have not found success on the state mandated exit exam after having taken the exam repeatedly. Florida accepts concordant test scores where a score of 15 or above on the ACT will qualify students for graduation on both the Math and Reading portions. Eleven students at one Florida high school are able to meet the demands of high stakes evaluation with this option in place.

Thinking Outside the Testing Box

Being in a crisis situation led two colleagues and me to a jubilant success story in which students who had experienced repeated testing failure on the Florida Comprehension Achievement Test (FCAT) finally reach testing achievement. Having been down the path of testing failure for the 4th and 5th time, 35 seniors from a Central Florida High School who had felt down and disappointed from testing failure decide to endure yet another attempt at testing achievement. Under my instruction and joining forces with two guidance staff, high school students received coaching and emotional support. My students took an additional chance on an alternative testing option in the ACT, when given the option. According to Florida State Statute, students receiving a score of 15 or above on the ACT are awarded a standard diploma and a score of passing on the reading portion of the state's mandated exit test.

The Program

Embellished with the term "FCAT Seniors", my colleagues and I designed a program aimed to deliver testing success. The project centered around 8 weeks of

coaching. Students were invited to voluntary coaching sessions geared toward positive test outcomes. Our school had invited 35 seniors who had not yet passed the FCAT reading portion to participate in the coaching. The program was designed to fit in an already existing schedule, which took some creativity and administrators' support. Our enthusiastic trio agreed on the times already set aside for Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) and began to plan the sessions to fit into that forty minute time period. The first session was to invite the group, including administration and parents, for an informational meeting concerning the graduation requirement of FCAT and the efforts our team wanted to exhaust to help the students receive a concordance pass score, making them eligible for graduation. After the administration, parents, and students were on board, the coaching sessions began. The coordinated efforts of the guidance staff was instrumental in creating passes and delivering them to students on the days of coaching so that the anonymity of students was kept private and students arrived on time to coaching sessions. We created intense sessions spanning the following topics: (a) testing stress, (b) test taking tactics, (c) positive affirmations, (d) test preparation, (e) test item analysis and (f) testimonial success. Reading materials were collected and questions for testing practice were designed in testing format aligning to the stories in a typical "read", "think", "write", fashion, but the team added an "analyze" portion onto each item they reviewed as a group. The analyze portion was aimed to help students in the thinking process. Providing a model of how to think critically about answer choices was essential and our group focused on correcting minor thinking flaws in choosing answers correctly. The goal of the program was to sharpen skills, think positively, and prove to students that they were worth the teams' dedication and commitment towards testing achievement.

Ultimately, we wanted to prove to the students that they were not forgotten, and that they would not be the disposed. An overriding theme during our sessions was, “Do NOT let past failure define future success”. Aiming for success, we applied for a mini grant to pay for the students to take the ACT. An administrator was so enamored at the progressive attempt to aid students in achievement that she not only helped the group receive funds, but also ensured student transportation and breakfast the Saturday of the exam. An additional unique feature was that our team which led the coaching sessions was also part of the testing coordination of the ACT. On the morning of the ACT, all of our friendly faces were there to receive the students. We met early to remember the positive affirmations and to wish each student the best outcomes.

Let's break down the demographics

Of the students who had not passed the FCAT on their 4th or 5th time, 10 were identified as students with special needs and 16 were minorities. So, why is thinking outside the testing box so important? Some tests have been found to be culturally biased or a mismatch for subjects. How can educators expect a different outcome after having had so many failed attempts with the same instrument? The team looked over the names and knew the students' individual stories and saw patterns that seemingly and undeniably overlapped in similarity. Knowing some testing options, we decided to be proactive and supportive in developing an alternative testing option with support. What we could not believe is that we did not implement this program earlier.

Lesson Learned

If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try a different test! From the “FCAT Senior” group 16 students came on a regular basis, regular being defined as 4 or more sessions.

Out of the 16 students who received coaching, 11 earned at least a 15 on the ACT, which is the concordant pass score. The belief in students was the motivation and jewel we innately possessed. Given the ability to replicate this program, one senior recommended that the meeting room be positioned next to senior parking, “so we can make it lunch with our friends”. After action review identified the theme of not defining themselves by tests, however, one student commented, “we are kids, just trying to enjoy our senior year and we still have this test over our heads”. Before the coaching program, they had not been invited for extra support and they did not quite fit in with the rest of their peers on the exit to graduation. Emotional support was a greater need than the educational and testing advice; almost all sessions ended with our team battling student self-doubt. We offered emotional guidance and support by way of friendly faces and private pep-talks, through the use of one-on-one guidance meetings. If one were to replicate this program in full or part, the guidance office and staff must be a critical role in the plan.

*note: Per s. 1008.22(9), F.S., a student must take the Grade 10 FCAT a total of three times without earning a passing score in order to use scores from the ACT or SAT.

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