

← Back to Original Article

Highly rated instructors go beyond teaching to the standardized test

Some Southern California teachers are finding ways to keep creativity in the lesson plan even as they prepare their students for standardized tests.

July 11, 2011 | By Teresa Watanabe, Los Angeles Times

Even as the annual state testing season bore down on her this spring, fourth-grade teacher Jin Yi barely bothered with test prep materials. The Hobart Boulevard Elementary School teacher used to spend weeks with practice tests but found they bored her students.

Instead, she engages them with hands-on lessons, such as measuring their arms and comparing that data to solve above-grade-level subtraction problems.

"I used to spend time on test prep because I felt pressured to do it," said Yi, who attended Hobart in Koreatown herself and returned a decade ago to teach. "But I think it's kind of a waste of time. The students get bored and don't take it seriously and it defeats the purpose."

Yi's approach seems to work: She is rated "highly effective" in a value-added analysis by The Times based on her students' standardized test scores in English and math. She also ranks among the Los Angeles Unified School District's top 100 third-, fourth- and fifth-grade teachers in English in that analysis.

Who says students need "drill and kill" exercises to raise their test scores?

The pressure to improve student test performance in California and across the country often meets with disdain from teachers who say they are compelled to throw out creativity and "teach to the test." The phrase is usually code for teachers who are forced to abandon creativity and focus exclusively on areas tested — reading, writing and math. That, critics say, shortchanges students of such other important subjects as art, history and even science in some grades.

A.J. Duffy, former president of United Teachers Los Angeles, for instance, dismisses the weeks before spring testing as "Bubbling-In 101," a reference to class time spent teaching students how to select correct answers.

Visits with Yi and other successful teachers around Los Angeles County, however, suggest that innovative teaching and rich classroom experiences need not be sacrificed in the quest for better test scores. But it's not easy to have it all. Several teachers interviewed said they spend hours of extra planning time and hundreds of dollars to create more interesting lessons. They say they must be supremely organized and strict enforcers of classroom rules. And some quietly skirt official district schedules to run with their own approaches.

Next door to Yi, Hobart fifth-grade teacher Rafe Esquith has cut down L.A. Unified's prescribed reading program from three hours a day to 75 minutes, saying his students can work on reading comprehension, vocabulary and other skills through other subjects. That opens up time to learn physics by building model roller coasters and rockets and to grasp history with Ken Burns documentaries. His students work on long-term art projects, perform Shakespeare and learn musical instruments.

"To teach all of the lessons they want us to teach using the official district schedule is impossible — it can't be done," said Esquith, who is rated "highly effective" by the Times and has won numerous national teaching awards. "Teachers have to finagle the schedule."

Esquith and Yi also bemoaned the increasing focus on testing and sympathized with frustrated colleagues.

At Los Angeles Elementary School in the Pico-Union neighborhood, fourth-grade teacher Maria Duarte lamented the loss of time to teach science — her favorite subject and one that she said most interests her students. Over the years, the time for that subject has dropped from 2.5 days a week to 1.5 days a week in favor of language arts and math. One casualty was a popular experiment growing radishes that Duarte said taught critical thinking and research skills.

Duarte was also rated highly effective in the Times analysis. Under value-added, a student's past test performance is compared with his or her current progress to measure whether teachers added — or subtracted — value to their students' academic growth.

"Painfully, I decided I had to let that go," Duarte said of the experiment. "There's just not enough time — or we need to think of better ways to use our time."

In Monterey Park, eighth-grade teacher Janice Pirolo said she no longer has time to delve deeply into the curriculum or stray much from it. When she does, she falls behind.

When her school, Monterey Highlands, received funding to visit the Japanese American National Museum, Pirolo prepared her students by teaching them about the World War II internment of Japanese Americans. She also spent time on Martin Luther King Jr. before the national holiday named for the civil rights leader.

But none of that is part of eighth-grade social studies standards, and Pirolo fell behind. For a month before the testing in May, she abandoned the textbook entirely to focus exclusively on test prep. As a result, she got through only the textbook's fourth chapter by year's end.

"We have stopped reading the textbook, sadly ... but you live and die by the test," said Pirolo, a 34-year veteran who teaches social studies and language arts.

The nation's enhanced focus on testing began under the 2001 No Child Left Behind federal education law, which attempted to hold school districts accountable for student progress through mandatory annual tests. The law, which is under review in Congress, requires that by 2014 all students meet 100% proficiency levels in math and English — a target no one expects schools to meet.

Many educators see an upside to the national focus on student achievement, as measured by test scores, and have unapologetically instilled intensive preparatory programs. Alvarado Intermediate School in Rowland Heights conducts a concentrated test-prep program before the state exams, using assessment data to identify students who need to strengthen specific skills. The sessions are held after school to preserve electives, such as computers, art and music. Attendance is mandatory, with detention for those who miss and prizes for those who participate.

Principal Ying Tsao said she supported the move toward state standards and regular assessments. In earlier times, she said, teachers might skew toward language arts, say, while ignoring math.

Bruce Clark, Los Angeles Elementary principal, said testing has robbed educators of some flexibility, but he said the benefits of higher student achievement are worth it.

Not that there's no time for fun. Clark sheepishly said he "sold out" and held pep rallies to excite his students about the tests. Duarte motivates her students with a party and movie, bringing in treats to entice them to do well. Monterey Highlands has "March Math Madness" every year to pump up students with math-related scavenger hunts and "problem of the week" contests. To kick off the testing this year, Principal Joe Cash donned an apron and chef's hat to serve pancakes at a school breakfast — while asking math questions (How many pancakes does Johnny eat if he gets two pancakes each of the three times he comes up?).

Los Angeles Elementary aims to avoid last-minute cramming by requiring 15-minute skills sessions at the start of the day throughout the year, featuring questions similar to those on the state test. Duarte prepares her students at the beginning of the year with intense work on Greek and Roman roots of words and multiple-meaning words — areas of student weakness identified by testing data.

A different model is the UCLA Community School, a pilot school launched last year by the university and L.A. Unified in Koreatown. Teachers there are free to develop their own assessments. Kate Beaudet uses an individualized reading test that she said is more sophisticated, allowing her to pinpoint a child's actual reading level and areas of weakness.

Beaudet and two colleagues, who joined the staff from other L.A. Unified schools, said district testing requirements had taken weeks of instructional time, skewed teaching toward what was tested and led many teachers to rely heavily on worksheets.

"Teachers only want to teach reading, writing and math, because that's what's assessed," said Beaudet, who teaches a second-and-third-grade class.

To prepare for state exams, Beaudet incorporated practice questions into work she did all year with literary genres, a third-grade reading standard. Using a test reading passage from an African folk tale, she read the book with her students and helped them analyze the elements and write their own test questions — which both conveyed needed skills and boosted their confidence, she said.

At Hobart, Yi figures she has spent up to \$1,000 a year designing more creative lessons than those offered by L.A. Unified. The district's fourth-grade reader presents only one chapter of "Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH," so Yi bought copies of the whole book to enable her students to read the entire story. She also bought materials so students could make stuffed rats.

Meanwhile, the project helped Yi's students practice a state standard: to read a set of directions and answer questions about them. She also wrote related vocabulary and comprehension questions. And Yi said that being able to read entire books has instilled in many a love of literature.

Not all teachers are willing to go to such lengths. Some of her colleagues have simply used test prep books all year, Yi said. But that's not for her.

"I enjoy challenging myself to think of better, different and fun ways to teach," she said. "I love to see the light of learning go on."

teresa.watanabe@latimes.com