

The “I” of the Hurricane

*In the long run men hit only what they aim at.
Therefore they better aim at something high.*

—Thoreau

This was supposed to be easy, the writing of this editor’s message. Months ago, I did research on what annual state-mandated tests do and do not accomplish. When the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress results were released, I studied the state-by-state results and national trends. I had all the data I needed for this message, I thought.

But when I finally began to put words to paper, I discovered I couldn’t focus on the data I had gathered. Two things kept interfering: the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the death of Rosa Parks.

I’m a Houstonian (though for accuracy, I live about 25 miles north of the Houston city limits), so Hurricane Katrina had an immediate impact on my life. As a resident of the greater Houston area, I was affected by having an additional 100,000 people relocate to the area, at least for a while. As a person who works with area teachers, I saw the result of having dozens to hundreds of new students appear in their schools. As a parent, I am watching our daughter—a junior at Tulane University in New Orleans—cope through a semester when her school, like the rest of the city, is closed for repairs. And like you, I can’t get the images of what happened in front of the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center out of my mind. I keep seeing desperate faces begging for help; I see babies and children lethargic in their mother’s arms; I see dead bodies covered with worn blankets and left on sidewalks; I see anger and frustration and I see, over and over again in my mind’s eye, the reality of just who was left behind.

Even on November 1, nearly two months after

the levees broke in New Orleans, we can still see the stark differences in those who have been helped and those who have not. Citizens in the Algiers parish of the greater New Orleans area were shown on a CNN report sitting on their clean front porches, reading the newspaper, doing needlepoint, and complaining that the regular garbage pick-up is sometimes delayed, while across the river, in the devastated area called Ninth Ward, populated mostly by poor African Americans, homes and lives are in the same catastrophic disrepair that they were two months ago. Algiers didn’t receive the same flooding as Ninth Ward, so it makes sense that things there were cleaned up more quickly. But it makes no sense, none whatsoever, that nothing has changed in the Ninth Ward. The suffering in front of the Superdome and the continued suffering of those who lost the most make me ashamed.

I’m ashamed that I’ve got a President who commended his FEMA director for doing a “good job” when thousands of people were begging for rescue from disaster. I’m ashamed that daily I don’t write to the White House, my Congressmen, my newspaper, demanding to know where the weapons of mass destruction are. I’m ashamed that I’ve been too silent about legislation that mandates we leave no child behind and yet does little to help teachers accomplish just that. I’m ashamed that I’ve not spoken up at school board meetings about the ridiculous amount of time teachers in my son’s school district must spend preparing students for our state-mandated test. I’m ashamed that in the most powerful country in the world—the richest and the most advanced—we have so often left our poorest behind.

And I am ashamed of the answer that our Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, gave on September 29 explaining how Adequate Yearly

Progress (AYP) would be affected in the school districts that had taken in the thousands of school children who were displaced from their home schools by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Her response, as stated in a letter to the Chief State School Officers, was that while these displaced students certainly must be tested, they can be counted in a special subgroup labeled "displaced students," and "special consideration" will be given to their scores.¹ What does it say about our priorities that less than a month after the largest natural disaster to have ever struck this country, our Secretary of Education tells states that children whose very lives have been ripped apart must endure a state assessment to show adequate progress? I haven't yet decided what's "adequate" when your home has been flooded, you've been trapped with no help for days, your family is torn apart, and you've been forced to abandon all that you know. What does it say that states and districts were so worried about AYP that they felt compelled to ask the question?

In the midst of all these concerns, Rosa Parks died. Her elegant act of taking a stand by keeping her seat taught all of us that one person, one single person, can indeed make a difference. Her courage humbles me. Furthermore, it reminds me that when confronted with a situation that I know is wrong, *that I know is wrong*, I must be willing to take a stand, a visible stand.

And so I will. Although writing about the myths of test-taking, exposing the confusion between testing and assessing, explaining that testing and learning are not the same, showing how kids who score high on state assessments (tests they are drilled on throughout the school year) often score low on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (a test they aren't drilled on) are all important, the aftermath of Katrina and the memory of Rosa Parks compel me to be more direct: The testing craze must stop. While the testing might not stop, the craze must. Pep rallies to get kids "pepped" for the test; daily test practice throughout the school year; test tutors; weekly practice tests with student scores

tracked on classroom bulletin boards; remedial classes that are little more than test-prep classes; writing instruction that only prepares students for responding to prompts on the tests; reading instruction focused only on teaching students how best to answer multiple-choice questions about paired sets of short texts; superintendent, principal, and occasionally teacher bonuses tied to student performance on tests; teacher, principal, and occasionally superintendent firings because of student performance on tests; millions of dollars spent on test-prep materials; morning announcements on the test-objective to be studied that day; failing students and withholding diplomas—it's all got to stop.

I urge you to read this issue of *Voices from the Middle* carefully. Here's what you'll find: information on how to teach students to read and write better. Here's what you won't find: information on how to help students take a test. That's because the authors of the articles and all the column editors understand that teaching the *process* is what allows students to become better readers and writers. Teaching the test does not.

When principals require that you spend valuable classroom time with practices that you know stand against powerful instruction, I encourage you to review with them the 2005 NAEP scores.² In particular, tell them that national averages reveal that between 1992 and 2005, eighth-grade reading scores have effectively remained the same. More important, from 2002 to 2005 (testing frenzy years), they've gone down. If rigorous testing was the answer, if more focus and more time spent on testing was the answer, if more money on tests and more punishments for poor performance were the answer, then I suggest scores would have improved. More testing isn't the answer. Better instruction is.

I'm proud of this issue because of its approach to helping students perform well on state tests: good teaching. I'm more proud of the work many of you do each day as you stand calm, the "I" of the hurricane—becoming your own Rosa Parks—and look carefully at the children before you.

¹ Read the text of the full letter from Secretary Spellings at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/050929.html>.

² Go to <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/> for state-by-state results and national trends.