



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of April 23-27, 2012

## **"Well, Give Me a Break!"**

by UCLA IDEA

Children's author Daniel Pinkwater wrote a cute story, whose ending is pointless and absurd—a "shaggy dog" tale that cracks up many 13-year-olds and leaves others clueless or annoyed.

Parts of the story were changed (without Pinkwater's permission) and it became known to many 8th graders as "The Pineapple and the Hare." A pineapple challenges a hare to a race. The surrounding animals bet on who will win, with some figuring the pineapple must have a trick up its sleeve. The hare wins, and the animals eat the pineapple. The moral of the story is "pineapples don't have sleeves." (Well, you have to read it.)

The story was included in New York's state English language arts exam for 8th graders—testing for reading comprehension. The questions—why did the animals eat the talking fruit? and which animal was wisest?—baffled not only the students, but their teachers and parents. And disclosure of the questions has been an amusing, embarrassing, and deeply troubling addition to the national debate on standardized testing.

Kevin Welner with the National Education Policy Center asked, "How could such an item, for which so many adults struggled to choose a logical answer, be used to make incredibly high-stakes judgments about students, teachers and schools?" The New York test is indeed "high-stakes," influencing along the way students' future school choices, schools' reputations and judgments about teachers. Author Pinkwater said, "Well, give me a break! It's a nonsense story and there isn't an option [on the standardized test] for a nonsense answer."

As students across California are now preparing for or taking standardized tests, the pineapple story points to a dilemma for them, their teachers and education policy. With art, music, and other creative options being stripped from schools' curricula, reading and literature are among the few remaining opportunities to promote creative, imaginative, "out-of-the-box" thinking. Instead, student readers are being coached to look for single correct answers from among four choices. This is bad teaching and worse assessment. The current reliance on tests can be a destructive practice even when the testmakers' questions aren't completely stupid.

A group of civil rights and education organizations across the nation has released a resolution criticizing high-stakes testing that shapes and limits how students learn, what they learn, and what skills and knowledge is most important. The resolution urges state officials to "reexamine public school accountability systems...and to develop a system based on multiple forms of assessment which does not require extensive standardized testing, more accurately reflects the broad range of student learning, and is used to support students and improve schools."

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The newest National Teacher of the Year, Rebecca Mieliwocki, has been teaching for 14 years, most recently at Luther Burbank Middle School. President Obama honored her for her broad skills in promoting critical thinking and creativity; her outreach to parents by hosting family nights; and engaging students through social media. In accepting her award, Mieliwocki spoke of the kind of teaching and learning that aren't revealed by—and can even be thwarted by—the heavy weight given to standardized testing:

*Every day here in America, teachers with patience and creativity are opening doors for students to reach deep within themselves to learn more, to solve problems, to grow and to nurture their dreams, and that we do this work with conviction — that's not unusual. It isn't even rare. It happens in America's classrooms every day and I need you to know that.*

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