

Boycotting the TCAP

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March 20, 2013



Kelley Coffman-Lee bides the time at home last week with kids Chloe, Ethan and Gabe during the TCAP tests. The three Coffman-Lee children have never taken the standardized test for Colorado's public-school students. The Centennial mother and her husband say the tests are unfair and a poor gauge of student achievement.

Photo by Peter Jones

Some parents keep kids home, but school officials defend the standardized test

By Peter Jones

The Coffman-Lees are spending quality family time – together, but alone – at home on a recent Wednesday morning.

Kelley, the mom, keeps an eye on the hordes while teenage Gabe reels through a paperback, 8-year-old Ethan surfs his tablet and 11-year-old Chloe plays on the floor with Jack White, her new guinea pig.

“I kind of like it because I don't have to go to school and I get to sleep in and stuff,” Chloe says of this day off from Cherry Creek Schools.

The fifth-grader's smile fades as she remembers her classmates taking state-mandated standardized tests back at Canyon Creek Elementary School.

"I still feel bad for the kids that have to do the test all day and miss all the writing and reading that's good for their brains," she says.

This is a TCAP testing day, which means a day off for the TCAP-boycotting Coffman-Lees, who give the controversial standardized test a resounding F.

"I don't think it's a good way to assess what a child is learning," Kelley says emphatically. "Year after year, the minority kids are the ones scoring the lowest. All children should be treated equally, but not all children are equal in terms of how they learn. The TCAP doesn't take into consideration the kid's background."

None of the Coffman-Lees have ever taken the TCAP or its predecessor the CSAP – and they never will, as far as Kelley is concerned.

"You need to rewrite the test or you need to get rid of it," she says.

Gabe, a freshman who takes advanced classes at Cherokee Trail High School, cannot say that he minds missing his classes for a few days every year.

"I think its dull just sitting there filling out bubbles for four hours," he says.

He will be back at school at 2 p.m. for track practice anyway.

The pointed reasons for this day off are not lost on third-grader Ethan, who recalls explaining to classmates why he does not take the TCAP test.

"I just say it's an unfair test to black kids, poor kids and girls," the child says matter-of-factly. "When I say that, the other kids just stare at me."

TCAP 101

TCAP or Transitional Colorado Assessment Program is the successor to the CSAP, the Colorado Student Assessment Program. By law, the standardized test covering mathematics, reading, writing and science is given annually during a period of three weeks to all public-school students in grades third through 10th.

"It's a well designed test with a number of validity checks," said Elliott Asp, the Cherry Creek district's assistant superintendent for performance improvement. "It gives information about both performance and growth on the part of the students. It's also helpful information for the teachers."

Asp concedes the TCAP is not a true diagnostic test, but says the results are nonetheless a valuable tool to help improve education and troubleshoot problems.

"Teachers use them to design their instruction. They look for trends and patterns where they were successful in some areas and could improve in others," he said.

Schools are rated by the averaged scores of their students. Low-scoring schools receive required assistance from the Colorado Department of Education. Schools with consistently unsatisfactory ratings can be converted into charter schools. School districts with regularly low-scoring schools can lose their accreditation.

TCAP is also connected to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which ties standardized test scores to qualifications for Title 1 and other federal education funding. The act signed by President George W. Bush required states to develop student-assessment tests in basic skills and set their own academic standards.

TCAP was instituted last year as a transitional test in response to new content standards approved by the Colorado Board of Education. A finalized version of the state's standardized test is expected next year.

Small statewide jumps marked TCAP's rollout in 2012. Although the results were largely flat overall, some districts, including Denver Public Schools, saw significant improvements. There were also slight statewide gains in reading and math, while other areas, such as writing, saw dips at some grade levels.

As for Cherry Creek, the district rose above the benchmark in the median-growth percentile, which charts student growth. Even so, fourth- and sixth-grade writing scores fell nearly seven points district-wide.

Although Cherry Creek has done some reevaluation as a result, Asp says the district finished remarkably well overall.

"We don't have any low-performing schools," he said.

An opt-out movement

In 2011, more than 1,420 students opted out of Colorado's standardized tests, according to the Coalition for Better Education, an organization opposed to TCAP. A large group of TCAP-boycotting parents and students organized a school-walkout and demonstration last week at the state Capitol.

The Coffman-Lees are among the less than 2 percent of Cherry Creek students that regularly skip the tests each year, according to Asp.

For Kelley Coffman-Lee, the primary issue is fairness to minorities and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

"I just don't think a [fair] test should continuously show better results for white males than minorities," the Centennial mother said. "They have these unreachable standards and then say, 'OK inner-city Denver, let's see what you can do.'"

Despite last year's statewide gains among black and Hispanic students and improvements in some of Colorado's turnaround districts, there was still a double-digit performance gap overall in comparison to the state's white students.

For example, Cherry Creek saw "inadequate" growth among students with disabilities and those qualifying for free or reduced lunch in some categories at all grade levels. The district received the same designation for minority students at the middle and high school levels. At the same time, "adequate" growth was measured in other learning categories for those same "disadvantaged" students.

According to Asp, the varying results have nothing to do with bias.

"The test is reviewed for bias in a variety of ways," he said. "Every item that goes on the test is reviewed by several different groups. Every item is looked at, discussed and argued about. The test is also subject to peer review."

What's more, Asp says accommodations are often made for Spanish-speaking students and those with special needs.

Still, the will to succeed among some schools – especially those on the bottom rungs of the economic and educational ladders – can be fierce.

Last year, a cheating scandal at Beach Court Elementary School was a focal point for TCAP critics. Two years of standardized tests at the struggling west Denver school of underprivileged students were invalidated and the principal was fired after the district discovered widespread test-falsification by school administrators. Test scores plummeted at the school last year in the wake of the scandal.

Coffman-Lee thinks TCAP has created an unhealthy competition among schools that seek state funding from out-of-district open enrollment.

"It's pitting schools against each other to see who can get the highest score," she said. "The more students you get to each school, the more you're going to get for each student."

Asp stresses that Cherry Creek does not encourage "teaching to the test," nor does the district tie test results to teacher bonuses.

No test result left behind

Many education experts think officials have placed too much emphasis on testing in the wake of No Child Left Behind. Still, Kevin Welner, an education professor and director of the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, says there is nothing wrong with standardized tests per se.

"If we took the high-stakes consequences away and simply administered the tests to measure student learning, they would do a pretty good job of measuring student learning within the domains they're focused on," he said. "Before No Child Left Behind, a lot of schools were writing off a lot of students. You ended up with students whose schools were warehousing,

instead of teaching.”

According to Welner, the problem is when school districts and governments put too much stock in the test results and use them to drive policy.

“We’re transforming the nature of what we expect schools to do,” he said. “Instead of setting up a mechanism with experienced skilled professional teachers, we’ve set up a mechanism that de-professionalizes the teacher and puts a lot of emphasis on an accountability system.”

While Welner is unsure of long-term alternatives, he says tests such as the TCAP should be one of a number variables considered when comprehensively evaluating a school’s or a teacher’s performance.

“We shouldn’t be looking for magic bullets,” he said. “We could reduce the amount of testing hugely, but testing, itself, I don’t see as problematic. We need to understand the limitations of an accountability system. We’ve taken assessments as a form of information and turned them into a battering ram.”

Coffman-Lee, for one, is unafraid of battling back – even when it means controversy in the classroom or elsewhere.

The vegan tofu lover made international headlines four years ago when the Colorado Division of Motor Vehicles rejected her request for a personalized license plate reading “ILOVTOFU” because of perceived sexual connotations.

“I’ve been pushed to the fringe,” Coffman-Lee said of her more recent controversies with the school district. “I’m the parent who questions things. That’s what parents should be doing. In the end, parental rights trump school rights and state rights. I had to hang up on the school principal once.”

Asp encourages concerned parents like Coffman-Lee to call their elected officials, instead of school administrators.

“We’re going to abide by the law because we’re a public entity,” he said. “If you want to make a change in this, you’ll need to go to the legislature or the state education board and register your protests there.”