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These Testing Obsessions Are Getting a Little Weird

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Abstract

This morning, as she was getting ready for work, my wife noticed something unusual about our son, who is in third grade. He was quietly eating breakfast, like he always does, but something about him was different. He was wearing a plain white t-shirt.

He must have noticed that she was looking at him, because he looked up and said: "Do you think it's okay if I wear this shirt today?" His wardrobe normally consists of about five t-shirts that he cycles through, one after the other, and sometimes tries to wear twice in a row if we don't catch him. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

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By Dave Powell on April 4, 2017 9:02 AM |

This morning, as she was getting ready for work, my wife noticed something unusual about our son, who is in third grade. He was quietly eating breakfast, like he always does, but something about him was different. He was wearing a plain white t-shirt.

He must have noticed that she was looking at him, because he looked up and said: "Do you think it's okay if I wear this shirt today?" His wardrobe normally consists of about five t-shirts that he cycles through, one after the other, and sometimes tries to wear twice in a row if we don't catch him. Virginia Cavaliers Kids Club. NASA. [The Woody Guthrie Center](#). One with a cartoon of Willie Nelson on it with explicit instructions for anyone who sees it: "[Have a Willie Nice Day](#)." Another one with two zombies on it, one who has his eyeballs in his hands, preparing to roll them across the floor to the other zombie—who says "Don't roll your eyes at me." This is a guy who doesn't normally wear plain white t-shirts.

Of course she said it was okay to wear the plain t-shirt, but she had to know why he had asked. As it happens, he had worn one of his favorite shirts yesterday, a classic of the Georgia Bulldogs variety, but it wasn't suitable to wear to school. You know why? You know why. You know you know why. It's because it's testing season, that's why. He was asked to turn his shirt inside out because he started the first day of his first year of official state testing yesterday. And his shirt had words on it.

To be clear, those words were "Georgia" and "Bulldogs." I suppose I could imagine a situation where having access to those two words, in that combination, could have given him an unfair advantage on his test yesterday. Maybe there could have been one question that required him to know that bulldog is spelled with two Ls, not one; or maybe, for some reason, he would have had to name the state that contains the best college town in America and is home to the [true home run king](#)—at least the best this side of [Sadaharu Oh](#). Or what if *everyone* wore a shirt with a state name and a college mascot on it? Then all bets would definitely be off. There wouldn't be any point in giving the test at all.

And here I thought we had reached the height of absurdity last week when our older son, who is in high school, got pulled aside by his baseball coach and told that he can't wear his stirrups anymore because "showing your socks draws attention to yourself." It's very important for the JV baseball team to exude professionalism at all times, and nothing could be more unprofessional than wearing color-coordinated socks with your baseball pants. Everybody knows that professionals all have to look the same. That's what makes them professionals.

What's the argument for this stuff? Well, at least in the case of the testing, the overabundance of caution, and the obsession with standardization of everything—it's not enough to try to develop a valid and reliable instrument, *every single variable must be controlled*—is a direct result of putting way too much emphasis on the value of a single test score. In a rational world we would understand the tests to be useful diagnostic tools, tools that could help us understand what kids have learned and what they still need to learn, and we'd even be able to draw halting conclusions about whether or not our children's schools are doing a good job.

Instead, we obsess over every small detail, worried that words on a t-shirt might give enterprising students an unfair competitive advantage over their peers. We instruct teachers to take all the posters off the walls of their classrooms to neutralize any potential problems, or we ask kids to take their tests in sanitized spaces, like the gym, that only add to the pressure by taking them out of comfortable spaces and routines. I'm all for getting those terrible Garfield posters out of the rotation, but is looking at a picture of Einstein with his tongue hanging out in the middle of a test really cause for alarm? Oh, I get it: that could be inspiring. Better shut it down.

This Isn't About Common Sense or Political Correctness; It's About Trivializing Public Education

At this point you might be expecting this column to end in a very different way than it's about to end. If you're expecting a rant about the death of common sense and the encroachment of political correctness into everyday life, you're in the wrong place. I do think there's value in "common sense," but there's value in "book learning" too. This isn't about that, and of course it has nothing to do with political correctness either. It's about relentless pressure being put on teachers and students to produce high test scores. Even now, with No Child Left Behind officially a thing of the past, its legacy lives on. The rationale behind NCLB really has colonized the minds of almost everyone it touches, from policymakers to school administrators to teachers to students.

The end result of all this paranoia is not only that good education gets devalued more and more—it's also that public education is made into a punch line, a joke that gets passed around by people with worse ideas than this but who know that turning public opinion against public schools is the most effective way to undermine them. "Did you hear the one about the school that made the kid turn his shirt inside out because it had words on it? That's the dumbest thing I ever heard! The [pick one: 'Libtards/Right Wing Nutjobs/Corporate Interests/Teachers Unions'] win again!" You know who really wins? People who don't believe in public education, that's who.

So, please, teachers and coaches: let's be a little more thoughtful about this. I understand that teachers feel a lot of pressure to do things a certain way, and it's hard to blame them for taking every precaution in this environment. But we've got to start somewhere. Pressure from the bottom that pushes upward can be very effective these days. At the same time, policymakers need to be held accountable when they force teachers to do things that don't make sense. Let's dial back the obsession with test scores so we can get back to focusing on the things that really matter. Let's live a little. Those plain white t-shirts are so boring anyway.