CHAPTER TEN

High-Stakes Tests and Other Modern Miseries

Dear Francesca,

I hate to have to switch gears from the magic music played by children and their happy teacher on imaginary flutes to the miseries of high-stakes testing, which is growing more relentless and obsessive in the inner-city schools with every passing year. But you have told me several times how much this troubles teachers at your school, and other teachers in the larger districts that I visit speak of it repeatedly. They tell me that these tests, which, as you know, must now be given every year beginning in third grade at the insistence of the federal government, have started to create an atmosphere of high anxiety, almost a sense of siege mentality, within their schools.

The same tests, of course, are given in suburban schools as well, because the federal law applies to

every public school in the United States. But in most suburban schools, where students tend to do well on these standardized exams, principals and teachers do not feel the pressure to distort curriculum and resort to other drastic measures to protect their schools from federal sanctions when the test scores of their students are released each year.

It's a different story in too many inner-city schools, especially the ones that have been labeled "low-performing" for historically high rates of failure. If these congenitally underfunded schools don't post the gains the government demands, they face a series of penalties, including loss of funds, so that the schools with fewest resources will end up with even less. And if their rate of progress isn't fast enough to satisfy the government, they also have to pay for private test-prep corporations to come into school and drill their students for the next set of exams—more money for testing, less money for instruction.

In order to avoid these penalties, principals have often been reduced to taking measures which they tell me privately that they abhor. Thousands of inner-city elementary schools, for instance, have dramatically cut back the time permitted for instruction in the content areas—science, social studies, literature, and the arts (the arts themselves have been abandoned almost totally in many of these schools)—in order to create long periods of time, typically at least a quarter of the year, in which the children can be drilled on strategies to try to boost their scores.

At P.S. *65,* when Pineapple was there, fifth grade teachers had to set aside all other lessons for two hours every morning, and then again for the final hour of the day, to drill the children for their tests for three months prior to exams. On top of this, two afternoons a week, children had to stay from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. for yet another session of test-drilling, and on Saturdays they had to come to school again for three additional hours of the same routine during the final four weeks just before exams.

There was no pretense that these drilling sessions held the slightest bit of educative value for the students. If this had been the principal's belief, she would not have limited these sessions only to the weeks and months just prior to exams. If test-drilling were regarded as a valuable portion of instruction, it would have been given to all children in the school throughout the course of the entire year. The reason this was not done was that nobody believed test-drilling was of educative worth. Its only function was to skew the scores, defend the school from state or federal punishments, and, as many of the teachers at the school believed, enhance the reputation of the principal.

In order to gain extra time to prep their students for exams, some urban districts have, in recent years, gone to the extreme of taking recess from their children. In Atlanta, schools have been intentionally constructed with no playgrounds, so that no time can be wasted on activities that will not raise the scores.

Chicago has largely abolished recess too; the only exceptions that I know are some high-scoring schools, mostly in affluent communities.

In other districts, standardized exams are now administered to children in their kindergarten year, sometimes beginning in the first weeks of the fall, in order, as the principals say, "to get them ready" for the tests that lie ahead. Children of that age, unless they've had the opportunity for preschool, usually do not yet know that pages run from left to right. (You've told me that Arturo, the child whom you called your "little bear," didn't know this basic information when he started first grade with you last September.) Many kindergarten children haven't yet learned how to hold a crayon or a pencil. They look at these tests in terror. They start to cry. They pee in their pants. The teacher's not allowed to help them other than by offering some faint encouragement: "Keep going. The whole page. All by yourself. . . ."

Some of these districts have gone to the additional extreme of refusing to let kindergarten children have their "nap time" any longer, so that teachers can carve out an extra 30 minutes or an hour every day to prepare them for their tests. "If the state is holding us accountable" for raising scores, an official in one of these districts said, "this is the way we have to do it. Kindergarten is not like it used to be."

If at least these kids had had some years of preschool education they might have a better chance of coping with these tests when they are five or six

years old. But most of the low-income children in these schools have had no pre-K education, largely because of the underfunding of the federal Head Start program by the very government that now insists these children must be rigorously judged and tested. Nearly a million of our nation's poorest three-to-five-year-olds are denied even a single year of Head Start—a good many more than the number who receive it. And even though a number of states claim to offer universal preschool programs for their children, only in rare cases are these claims to be believed. In New York, for instance, an inaccurately titled program known as "Universal Pre-K" turns out, despite its name, to serve only a quarter of the four-year-olds within the state.

Meanwhile, at the opposite extreme, children of the upper-middle class are typically placed in rich developmental pre-K programs starting as early as the age of two and, depending on the month their birthday falls, may receive as many as three years of very solid and expensive preschool education. (In New York, the most prestigious preschools, which are called "the Baby Ivies," cost as much as $22,000 for a full-day program.)

A few years later, when they get to the third grade, all of these children, rich and poor, are forced to take the same high-stakes exams, which in many districts now determine whether they will be promoted or held back. I don't think it comes as much of a surprise to any teacher to discover which ones tend

to score the highest and are slotted into programs for "the talented and gifted"—the initial stage in a long series of predictable advantages that will lead them in their secondary years to be assigned to Honors classes and A.R—and which ones are most likely to score far below grade level and may therefore find themselves subjected to the penalty of nonpromotion. To me, Francesca, there's something deeply hypocritical in a society that holds a child only eight or nine years old accountable for her performance on a high-stakes standardized exam but does not hold the Congress and the president accountable for robbing her of what they gave their own kids six or seven years before.

In any event, the tests are there; and whether they're introduced in kindergarten or a few years later in third grade, the better teachers in these schools detest the rote-and-drill routines that have been put in place, "aligned," as it is said, with items to be measured by those tests. The less creative, more robotic teachers don't object so heatedly to this agenda, which leaves almost nothing to the teacher's competence or her imagination. The less of the life of the mind a teacher brings into the classroom, the less that teacher has to forfeit when she gives in to these anti-intellectual techniques.

As you know, Francesca, I recruit young teachers every time I have the chance when I speak at colleges and universities. I never recruit people who seem docile, flat-natured, and boring. If they're boring to a grown-up, it seems likely they'll be boring to a class

of children too. But if they're dynamic and engaging individuals, if they're in love with children and in love with language and like to read good books and poetry and talk about them with excitement, and if their heads seem thoroughly screwed on, so I feel assured about their personal stability—in other words, if they're the kind of person you'd be eager to have as an intern in your class—I always say, "Come on! Wrap up the courses that you need in order to be certified. Then bring your interesting personality, your energy, your love of beauty, and the academic benefits of your good education into the schools where people with your gifts are needed most."

What happens to these teachers when they come into one of these heavily test-driven schools?

One of the first things they discover is that they cannot just walk up to the chalkboard on a Monday morning and write out in big bold letters as the outcome of a lesson: "Today I read my favorite poem of William Butler Yeats, or Gwendolyn Brooks, or Langston Hughes, to my third graders and discovered that they loved it!" No, that kind of outcome will not be regarded as acceptable. What children love or do not love has no role at all within the world of tough and testable accountability. Instead, if the teacher wants to read a poem she loves, she has to manipulate it somehow to pretend that it belongs in one of those compartments of officially ordained proficiency that we have talked about before. "I used"—or, preferably, "utilized"—"a poem by William Butler Yeats to deliver

the following three state proficiencies" that will be measured on exams. And she also has to put those state proficiencies right up there on the board, and put official numbers from the standards guidelines next to them, so that the skills that she "delivers" will be easily identified by any of those middle-level supervisors—"curriculum cops," as teachers call them—who stop by from time to time to check on her.

Even the stories and the dialogue found in those children's classics most of us grew up to love—the mystical adventures and the soft epiphanies of Pooh and Piglet, for example, or Eeyore's sorrowful pronouncements—cannot be presented simply as the literary treasures that they are but have to be treated as a kind of "quarry" from which numbered state proficiencies (or "competencies") can be hacked out and held up to the bright light of curricular illumination. The charm and innocence of the story can't be valued for themselves. Instead, they have to be exploited for an external purpose. So, apart from all the other thefts they undergo, children in these schools are robbed of any understanding that the reason, certainly the best of reasons, human beings read books is for the pleasure that they give us.

School officials pay lip-service now and then to the worth of learning "for its own sake." But these statements do not hold up very well in schools where kids are being told it's not just important that they pass their tests but, as a teacher at one New York City

school observed to me, that "passing this—the test—is actually the only thing that *is* important." When teachers have to underline this point by sticking Pooh and Piglet with official numbers that connect them to the items on a state examination, the message becomes utterly indelible.

I've noticed you refuse to put the standards postings with their numbers on your walls. You said that you'd feel stupid "putting up a bunch of numbers" for no other reason than "to cover my rear end." More teachers than not who work in urban schools do not feel emboldened to dismiss these regulations quite so easily.

I was stopped cold one day in the South Bronx when I saw the following outcome written on the blackboard of a third grade class: "English Language Arts No. E-2, [subtopic] D . . . The student will produce a narrative procedure." When I later asked the teacher what it meant, he showed at least that he had a sense of humor and he laughed about the phrase. "It just means to write a story," he replied. I asked him what would happen to him if he used those words instead of the elaborate phrase he'd written on the board. He gave me a shrewd and knowing look. "You have to use the language of the standards."

I told him that "producing a procedure" sounded kind of strange to me. The two words didn't seem to go with one another. "It's horrible syntax. I agree," he answered without any hesitation. I didn't even ask

about the posting of the number. I knew he considered it a waste of time but felt he had no choice but to comply.

The scripted lessons that he had to teach, like other scripted programs you and I have talked about, relied upon a rapid-fire series of short questions he was forced to ask and already-scripted answers that the children were expected to provide. In dozens of cities, similar methods are mandated now for black and Hispanic children who attend the lowest-scoring schools. They're used in major districts like Chicago and Los Angeles and in smaller districts such as Hartford, and right here in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which, I think you know, is overwhelmingly minority.

If these methods actually worked, much as I dislike them, I might put aside my reservations (I know you'd be very disappointed if I did this) and I might say, "Okay, do them if you have to." The trouble is, they do *not* work except for the lowest-scoring children in a class, and, even then, the gains that they achieve sustain themselves for only a brief period of time. These are testing gains, not learning gains. If they were learning gains, they would persist into the secondary grades; but I have followed many of these children into middle school, and then into their high school years, and seen how rapidly these artificial gains evaporate.

"Scores up for minority children in their fourth grade tests!" newspaper headlines periodically report when there's been a modest upward blip in test results in any given year. But I meet the same kids four years later in eighth grade and find that most of them can't write a cogent sentence and can't comprehend a simple text. Some of them are able to sound out the words phonetically, but when they read a text aloud they read in droning voices without affect or the slightest evidence of understanding. They sound like plastic people reading plastic words but not ideas.

As middle school teachers also note to their frustration, many of these kids cannot constructively participate in class discussions because they have never learned in elementary school to ask discerning questions or to analyze or criticize complex ideas. The children of the suburbs learn to think and to interrogate reality; the inner-city kids meanwhile are trained for nonreflective acquiescence. One race and social class is educated for the exploration of ideas and for political sagacity and future economic power; the other is prepared for intellectual subordination. The longer this goes on, Francesca, I'm afraid the vast divide that we already see within American society is going to grow wider.

The advocates for these approaches have now been in power and have had their way in shaping urban education for a lengthy period of years. Some of these practices, indeed, preceded the passage of the federal law No Child Left Behind and took effect in cities like New York as long ago as 1995. Yet, after all these years of hype and sloganeering and exhausting incantations—"All kids have potential!" "Every child

can achieve!"—and all these years of verbal bloat and bombast on the part of those who market rote-and-drill instruction with the same exaggerated claims as those who market miracle weight-loss programs on late-night TV, the average black and Hispanic twelfth grade student reads at the level of the typical seventh grade white student.

Even this statistic, devastating as it is, probably understates the learning gap for students in the secondary years, because so many black and Hispanic students disappear from school before their senior year and therefore aren't included in these numbers. For black males in particular, noncompletion rates have not merely "not improved" but seem to have worsened somewhat in these years. In New York City and Chicago, which together enroll 10 percent of all the black male students in the nation, more than 70 percent of those who enter ninth grade fail to finish twelfth grade in four years, and most of the overage boys who do not make it in four years are likely never to graduate at all.

These are not just bad statistics; they are plague statistics. Those who believe that high-stakes testing and the methods of instruction, modeled upon B. F. Skinner's work in rat psychology, that it has forced on many inner-city schools are an effective substitute for equal opportunity have had their chance to prove that they know something that the rest of us do not know, but they have failed in this. They have been proven wrong.

The terrible losses children of color have incurred during these recent years are seen most vividly at the nation's most distinguished secondary schools such as the very famous and highly selective Stuyvesant High School in New York, where black enrollment constituted 13 percent of the student body at the beginning of the 1980s but today is a humiliating 2 percent. More to the point, since we're talking about testing, during the period since relentless test-drill regimens went into effect in the elementary schools that serve the city's poorest and most deeply segregated children, the number of black students getting into Stuyvesant has dropped by half. Do advocates for high-stakes testing ever sit down and thoughtfully reexamine their ideas? It seems that they do not.

President Bush and his advisers, during his first term in office, sometimes used to charge that teachers who oppose these testing policies do so out of fear of being judged on their success or failure and that this, rather than intelligent and ethical reflection, is the reason why they are "opposed to accurate assessment" of their pupils, as the White House frequently alleged. The recklessness of this accusation is a classic instance of the uninformed contempt with which the president appeared to view the teachers of our nation. The truth is that most teachers in our public schools are not "opposed to testing," just so long as the tests they give are genuinely diagnostic and enable them to pinpoint areas where children have the greatest needs. But this is not the case with high-stakes tests, which

tell us almost nothing that's directly relevant and helpful to an individual child but are used instead to paste a retroactive label of "success" or "failure" on a child, class, or an entire school collectively.

Last month, I watched you give a diagnostic test in which you were sitting down beside one of the children and keeping a running record of her areas of weakness so, as you explained to me, you could come back and focus on those weaknesses in later periods of individual instruction. There was absolutely nothing in this process to intimidate the child. Instead, she seemed delighted to be able to have so much time alone with you. And, unlike the standardized exams mandated by the state, the test did not subtract time from instruction, because it was a portion of instruction. Both you and the child learned while you were doing this.

I've watched teachers in suburban schools giving exactly the same test to their first graders. Again, the process was inherently instructive and relaxed; there was no tension or anxiety attached to "the results." And those results, moreover, were immediately useful, which is not the case with standardized examinations, a point of which some of the die-hard advocates for these examinations seem to be strangely unaware.

"All we want to do," they say, "is to help the teacher recognize the problems that her students face so she can place a greater emphasis on areas where more attention is required." It's hard to figure out how isolated from the real world of the classroom

high officials of the government must be when they make statements of this sort. In most districts, high-stakes tests are given in the end of winter, but the teachers never see the scores their kids receive in time to be of any use to them because the scores don't usually come back, at earliest, until the final weeks of June. (In New York, I've been with a principal in mid-July when she got her first look at the scores on tests that had been given five months earlier. In a number of urban districts, scores on an examination given in the winter have not been received until the end of August.) What is a teacher supposed to do at this point? Send her kids a bunch of postcards telling them that they weren't trying hard enough in the preceding winter?

The same sense of being out of touch, of having little first-hand knowledge of what takes place in the schools themselves, comes across in several of the other routine accusations we are hearing from conservatives. Many of those, for instance, who incorrectly charge that teachers for the most part are opposed to any form of testing in the public schools also make the incorrect assumption that most teachers are opposed to making use of phonics as one portion of instruction. This is, indeed, an accusation that has taken on almost liturgical importance among critics of our public schools.

"Phonics" is a magical word in the thinking of conservatives; but, as you know, Francesca, this is another reckless accusation, since the vast majority of teachers in our elementary schools consider a well-organized

and consistent emphasis on phonics to be not merely useful but essential in those cases where a child truly needs it. The teachers who are willing to work hardest, and to put in the most time in preparation, learn how to extract their phonics lessons from the initial writings of their pupils or from the story-and-picture books their students are attracted to, rather than rely upon the pit-pat phonics scripts that isolate phonetic skills from any context that has meaning or holds interest for a child; but this does *not* mean they reject a systematic use of phonics where it is of value.

In most of the better elementary schools I visit, there is a delicate balance between teaching children to decode phonetically, developing their comprehension skills, exposing them to good, enticing literary works, and encouraging their early efforts to set down their own ideas in words. What young teachers will discover rapidly, however, is that there is a large and highly vocal group of advocates for phonics who have no interest in such balance but who are convinced that phonics in and of itself represents some kind of bitter medicine that every child must be forced to swallow, whether he or she already knows the basic consonant and vowel sounds or not.

I think I told you once about one of these people, whom I call "the evangelical believers," a woman well past middle age who claimed, quite inexplicably, that she was a fan of mine and managed to show up at almost any lecture that I gave in Phoenix or at the nearby university in Tempe. At the end of my talk, no

matter what the subject might have been, she would approach me and chastise me for not having recognized that phonics was the only real solution to whatever problem I'd described. She did this once even at the end of a talk I gave on homelessness! My research assistant, to whom she wrote repeatedly after I became exhausted from replying to her long handwritten letters, called her "The Phonetic Fanatic from Phoenix." But, no matter how discouraging we tried to be, she kept on writing to us anyway.

Much of the contemporary pressure upon urban teachers to "do phonics" to the virtual exclusion of all other aspects of instruction in the language arts originates in a postmodern version of the same fanaticism. Balanced approaches like the one you use, and which is supported by your principal, are regarded by the strict phonetics advocates as "unscientific," "too informal," and "not research-based." (I also get the sad impression sometimes, when I hear the sternness in their words, that almost any method of instruction children actually enjoy is, for this reason, automatically distrusted; but that's a separate issue altogether.)

There's a final point you raised in your last letter, a blasphemous point given the views that are ascendant now in Washington and in most state capitals. This is the whole business of the intellectual authority that is attributed by many of the high officials in our urban schools to the entire body of materials that are being turned out by the standards-writers and technicians of accountability.

Most of these materials, as you slyly surmised, are written not by seriously respected scholars or by wise and venerated teachers but by fairly undistinguished semi-intellectuals who would seldom qualify for tenure at a first-rate university. The clunkety prose, the reliance upon arbitrary overstatement, and the seemingly obsessive need to fit all pieces of the learning process into namable compartments are not the characteristics of capacious intellectuals. Wise philosophers, good scientists or poets, gifted mathematicians, accomplished literary critics, or reputable specialists in children's psychological development would not likely be disposed to spend long hours of their time in numbering and naming isolated particles of balkanized cognition that usually have only forced connections with each other and, most often, no connection with the context of our children's lives. Standards compilations tend to be, exactly as you stated it, "the products of the dutiful but uninspired."

Teachers who are coming for the first time into inner-city schools need to be well armed with the same level of self-confidence that has enabled you to see these standards compilations, and the testing superstructure they support, with the healthy dose of skepticism they deserve. Ernest Hemingway's raw-edged, somewhat blustery remark that writers need good "shit detectors" when they look at their own work might usefully be paraphrased to say that teachers need the same tough critical capacity when reading through the mountains of state documents and

test-related federal mandates that are handed out to them and often end up spilling off their kitchen tables late at night when all they really want to do is to prepare good lessons for their classes the next morning.

I do agree, Francesca, with the realistic point you made that teachers who oppose the high-stakes testing regimens, no matter how intense their feelings, do not have the right to simply "shut the whole thing from their minds," because their students, as you put it, "will be judged and sorted" by the scores that they receive. So here, as in so many other situations teachers face, they have to balance some of their most deeply held convictions against the practical necessity of defending students from the punishments and stigma that the educational establishment seems all too willing to dole out to them.

Still, tests, as every educator knows, do not teach reading, writing, or the other basic elements of subject matter; only good hard-working teachers do, and only if they work under conditions that respect their own intelligence and do not try to rob them of their own identities by forcing the junk-lexicon of "systems experts" down their throats. Teachers have to find the will to counteract this madness. At very least, they ought to make it clear to every child in their room that high-stakes testing is, at best, a miserable game we're forced to play but that our judgment of our students' intellect and character and ultimate potential will have no connection with the numbers tabulated by a person who is not an educator, and has never

met them, working in a test-score factory 1,000 or 3,000 miles away.

I don't like to say something so harsh, but if teachers cannot figure out a way to do this, it is possible that they should not remain within the classroom. Abject capitulation to unconscionable dictates from incompetent or insecure superiors can be contagious. We should not permit this habit to be passed on to our children.