

The Showdown: Challenging students to achieve excellence on state tests

by Joe Fragale

A look of courage in their eyes, a bit of sweat on their palms, an air of excitement and unnatural quite fills the classroom. The showdown begins in moments. What has come over this sixth grade class? What big event is about to happen? Why are they so determined to succeed? The answer: state testing.

As educators and politicians continue to squabble over the value of state testing (or the lack of value) our children are the ones being put to the test. We as educators must properly prepare our students *mentally* not just academically for the challenge.

I propose that state testing is a positive force in the classroom that can be used to shape the mindset of our students. Students of all ages and at all levels of achievement enjoy the thrill of competition. I propose teachers need to foster a mindset of active competition between the students and the test itself.

In the late elementary grades (5–6 grades) and junior high grades teachers need to create an environment where the students feel that they are being challenged by the state test. Not simply an academic challenge, but a challenge of commitment, responsibility, focus and hard work. This challenge should begin the first day and be reiterated and utilized throughout the school year, even after test day.

The teacher will need to assume a new role: coach. The students will also assume a new role: team. Just as a football team or a baseball team needs a coach the newly formed team that is your classroom needs a coach. Teachers will now be responsible for motivating the students to crush their biggest rival, the state test.

Start the year off with a challenge to the students. Tell the class that they need to defeat an enemy, an enemy that exists to expose their weaknesses. An enemy that exists to challenge their ability to focus and do quality work. Explain to them that this particular enemy is one that they have met many times before...and will meet again this year. Challenge your students to beat the state test.

How does a student “beat” the state test? Simply put, the student beats the state test by performing at their peak. Achieving the highest score that they are capable of achieving is beating the state test. Each student needs to be put into the mind set that unless they do the best possible job that *they can do*, the test wins.

Challenge the students to reflect upon their past performances. Why did they perform the way they did? What worked well? What did not work well? What will they do differently the next time? These reflections should be written down and compiled into a list of behaviors to repeat, and behaviors not to repeat.

Utilizing the list generated the students will be guided to create a personal plan for "beating" the state test. The plan will be hand written and signed by the student. The teacher should then also sign the plan and laminate it. The laminated plan should then be kept in the classroom where the student has access to it. From time to time the students need to be asked to reflect upon the plan and see if it needs to be revised, redone or simply followed more closely.

The teacher will use the challenge issued to the students along with their personal plans to guide the students toward being mentally and academically ready for the test itself. A sense of confidence and commitment will rise from the students as they realize that hard work is the key to their success.

Using this method of student motivation will inherently change the dynamic of the classroom. The traditional role of teachers and students as adversaries will be abolished. A team work mentality in which the teacher (coach) and the students (team) work as a whole to achieve success for each individual will become the new classroom norm. The teacher will no longer be an adversary, but the guide that leads the team to success. Naturally, a drop in classroom management issues will ensue.

It is only by preparing our students both academically and emotionally that we as teachers will be able to change the dismal nature of school state testing results. Preparing your students in the manner prescribed will yield not only outstanding state test results, but also outstanding results for the climate and culture of your classroom.