

Using the FCAT...

Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.

Henry Ford

Our school district, like all the other districts in the state, evaluates student progress by using the FCAT as a measuring tool. Because emphasis placed upon the test has clouded the purpose for teaching skills, “the tail has begun to wag the dog.” By that expression, I mean many educators become so entangled in teaching to the test that they deny students the opportunity to learn the skills.

You have read that even as an administrator, I have continued to teach. With pride I can say, every student I have continued to teach and tutor has passed the FCAT. **Never** do I teach to the test. Instead, I teach the skills. Consequently, students pass the test because they have learned the skills that were being tested.

I am reminded of a story about two farmers, Ed and John, who lived on adjoining farms. Each farmer bought a steer to raise and sell at the annual county fair. Both the farmers’ steers were approximately the same weight when they were purchased.

Ed was careful to feed his steer a carefully selected blend of grains for his particular breed. He insured that his steer had access to clean water and a place to get out of the elements during bad weather.

John, on the other hand, fed his steer any feed that was on sale, let the steer drink out of a polluted farm pond and did not have a shed to shelter the steer from the elements. But he expended a hefty sum of money to purchase an automatic scale. He put that steer on the scale daily, carefully weighing and recording the steer's weight. Sometimes he looked across the fence and looked at Ed's steer, which seemed to be looking healthy and rapidly gaining weight.

"Only one thing to do," he thought, "I will weigh my steer *twice* a day."

The weighing took so much time that John sometimes forgot to replenish the feed in the trough. Many days John's steer did not eat enough to maintain his weight, much less make any gains.

When time for the county fair rolled around, John had daily detailed weight records for his steer, which would make an auditor proud; but he was disappointed that the steer weighed only

six hundred pounds and did not win a ribbon.

Ed's steer, however, won the blue ribbon, weighed over nine hundred pounds and was sold for two dollars more per pound than John's steer.

Obviously, Ed had done what he was supposed to do, but John had spent both his time and money on the wrong thing.

So it is with the FCAT. We have become so obsessed with giving the test that we have forgotten the purpose of the test, which is to measure the skills of the student. **If we teach the *skills*, students will learn. If we teach the *test*, students may not learn the *skills*.** By teaching the skills, teachers are empowered and become free to employ creative tools that make learning fun and relevant.