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# Bad test scores not a yardstick

## Underachieving culture, not teachers, is the problem

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We all know there are many things that need to be changed with the way we run our schools and our government. Many of Gov. Chris Christie's reforms are right on.

However, once in a while he is dead wrong.

How can an intelligent, reflective person think it is appropriate to base teacher performance on test scores? The use of student test scores to determine whether a teacher is promoted or retained is inappropriate. It is placing the blame at the feet of the wrong people.

It is true that some teachers are not as effective as others, but my 46 years of teaching have revealed that good students learn in spite of bad teachers.

Likewise, bad students have poor test scores in spite of good teaching. Poor test scores are an indication of an underachieving culture, but there are many factors contributing to that.

Parents should look first at their role in creating a learning culture before they blame the teachers. Parents who do not insist that their children do their homework contribute to their poor performance.

Christie recently was quoted as saying, "You saw their report cards, you saw their test scores, you had an idea whether there was a good teacher or a bad teacher in the front of the room."

Anyone who makes a statement like that does not understand the complexity of learning. It is the underachieving culture that is causing poor test scores. Poor teachers may be part of it, but they are not the only, nor the most significant, factor.

As a community college teacher since 1966, I have witnessed the failures of New Jersey public schools. Since 1966, on average two-thirds or more of the students who enroll in a community college

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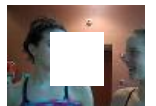
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need to take remedial courses.

Some who are enrolled in them have been out of school for several years and have simply forgotten the skills required to place in college-level courses.

However, the vast majority of students placed in remedial courses have never acquired the skills needed to take college-level courses. Some of the high school classmates of the underachieving students have gone on to graduate from highly respected universities and colleges.

So were the underachievers a product of poor teaching or a product of an underachieving educational culture?

Over the years, my colleagues and I tried many different teaching techniques to have our underachieving students reach their potential. We had countless workshops, seminars and informal meetings on how to improve student performance. Nothing we tried seemed to make a difference.

One thing we all came to realize was those who want to learn will learn and succeed. Those who do not care or are not willing to work hard enough will usually have poor test scores.

I have had many students with documented learning disabilities perform at a high level of success because they were motivated to do so. On the other hand, I have had many more students who had the ability to achieve fail for refusing to work hard enough to pass.

Recently, out of frustration, I asked my math class, "What can I do to get you to do what you need to do to pass this course?" One student replied, "You can't do anything. If we don't want to do it, we will not do it." That statement reflects the underachieving culture.

How do we change the learning culture? The will and the desire to learn must start at home. If parents hold their children accountable for learning, the children usually will learn.

Peer pressure also is responsible for the underachieving culture. Friends who think it is "not cool to learn" are contributing to it.

Uncaring teachers and administrators who have given up the fight to succeed also may be contributors. They need to find another line of work.

Teachers need to be evaluated. Classroom performance is most important. Caring about their student's academic achievement is essential. Having a strong sense of responsibility is crucial. Having a pleasant personality is helpful. However, some of the most respected teachers I have had are the ones I feared the most.

There are many reasons for poor test scores. Academic achievement has been and will always be the responsibility of the student. Academic programs that enhance the learning experience

are the responsibility of school administrators.

Good teachers must facilitate the learning process. Academic success, however, will only be achieved by changing the learning culture. We need to create a culture of learning outside of the schools as well as within the schools.

Find a logical way to evaluate teaching performance. But, do not use test scores as the sole criteria. Such a method of evaluation is unfair. And it is wrong.

**Al Leister is professor emeritus at Mercer County Community College.**

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