

SCOTT MANDEL

IMPROVING TEST SCORES

REVIEW ONLY

School Administrator Issues & Concerns
Datebooks

*How Do I Raise My School's Test Scores
and Still Maintain My Professional Credibility?*

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ADMINISTRATION

HOW CAN I ESTABLISH A SYSTEM FOR ADMINISTERING THE TESTS

THAT GETS THE MOST OUT OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS?

In today's educational society, on-site administrators probably have the most thankless job of all. You have to raise your students' scores enough to satisfy your District bosses or face sanctions or a possible transfer. You have to demonstrate to the local community your the school's scores are improving. You have to keep your teachers happy to ensure a positive school atmosphere. And you have to accomplish all of this even if you are at a school with traditionally low-performing students.

So what can you do? You have limited control as to who your teachers are, how they teach in their classrooms and the quality of students that they teach. Yet, you are the one most accountable.

There are a few areas where your decision and actions will both directly raise the scores in your school and how those scores are interpreted. Here are some ideas:

Staff testing assignments, especially in middle and high school, have a direct relationship to your school's scores. Too often, these assignments are made based on convenience—homeroom teachers, or first period teachers administer the tests. However, there are serious repercussions to this practice:

- **Some of the most experienced (and best) teachers do not have homerooms and are therefore not assigned students. This group often includes department heads, coordinators, and union representatives.**
- **Teachers whose subjects are nonacademic (such as physical education) and who therefore have little or no experience in giving academic tests in a testing atmosphere are often responsible for administering the tests. (This is not to say that these teachers are incapable of correctly and efficiently giving the tests. However, the majority of them have little experience in this area, and for that reason alone, they may not**

do as good a job as teachers who are accustomed to giving tests that are similar to the standardized tests. Ultimately, why would any school want to take this risk when the stakes are so high?

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Another variable is highly subjective, but very important. Every principal knows that there are some teachers who do very well in testing situations and some not so well. If you know a teacher who does so well (either they put in little effort, have a negative attitude, or they constantly do the wrong tests, etc.), make sure that they are giving an assignment other than the direct testing of students.

The choice of who administers the tests should be based on quality, not on clerical concerns. This change alone will directly raise your school's scores.

CREATING A POSITIVE TEACHING STAFF

Positive and negative teacher morale and job satisfaction directly affects student achievement. Numerous studies have shown this. This is a critical variable. If your teachers are not happy, or actually depressed during the testing period, chances are more than not their attitudes will be projected onto your students. The result—lower scores.

It falls upon the principal, as the educational leader of the school, to take responsibility for maintaining high teacher moral. This is entirely logical. Teachers are the ones in primary contact with students. They must prepare and motivate students to succeed on the standardized tests. Administrators are the ones in primary contact with teachers. Although your primary responsibility is to in-service them as to how to administer the test, one too-often overlooked variable is your responsibility to motivate them and keep up their morale so as to obtain their best effort in raising the school's test scores.

Here are some quick areas to consider. These fall into the areas of acknowledging teachers' perspectives and raising your staff's morale. (For a detailed explanation of each of these, see Test Scores, pages 85–91):

Acknowledging Teachers' Perspectives

Teaching has changed dramatically in the last couple of decades. Raises and benefits have been reduced, class sizes and class work demands increased, a national recession has hit, and the ills of the classroom and most recently, a huge increase in accountability based on nothing other than standardized test scores. The job is not as enjoyable or fulfilling as it used to be. It's no wonder that "teacher burn-out" is at an all-time high. By acknowledging their perspectives, you can help them feel better about their positions and raise their morale. Here are some ideas:

Be human/be honest with your staff. When you "force" the teachers to go over their scoring data the fifth time, or they have to attend another in-service session on raising scores, let them know why. Often they do not realize that you have superiors that insist on these activities and that you must show proof that they were implemented. In today's testing society, the higher up the "chain of command," the more they care about only test scores. Let your staff know the position you are in, and that you may not like it either, but together you all have to endure it and work as one team.

Acknowledge teachers' accomplishments and limitations. Let your teachers know that you know how stressful and unpleasant the entire testing experience can be. Let them know that you know:

- **Their daily schedules are altered during this time**
- **They probably did not cover everything that is on the test**
- **Not to worry about personal repercussions based on their students' scores (this is especially true in the minds of new and inexperienced teachers)**
- **That many of their English Language Learners cannot read much less comprehend the tests they are in**
- **That there are other factors in which they have no control (i.e. low scoring students from feeder schools who did not come in as prepared as you would like)**

Each school and community has extenuating circumstances that should be publicly acknowledged. It lets your staff know that you know they are doing the best job they can in the circumstances that they are in.

¹See Black, S. 2001. *Morale matters: When teachers feel good about their work, research shows, student achievement rises.* *American School Board Journal* 188(1):40-43.

Raising Your Staff's Morale

There are a number of things that you can do to create an atmosphere where the teachers want work at their highest potential and make the testing experience as successful as possible. Here are some ideas:

Know your staff. One thing that teachers despise is having to listen to the exact same material on testing year after year. In their eyes, it becomes insulting and a waste of their time. Have two separate in-services, one for new, inexperienced teacher where you go through everything in detail, and one for your experienced staff where you review old procedures and concentrate on only new items.

Be as positive as possible. Accentuate the positive as much as possible. Let your staff know how well they are doing raising your school's scores. Even if your school's percentile in relation to other schools does not go up, concentrate on how much the students' raw scores have raised². This is very much a psychological issue. If you see that teachers for their work, they are more willing to buy into the entire process. If data shows there are many areas which need improvement, select two or three for the entire staff to key in on during the year.

Make teachers' lives easier during the testing period. There are a number of little things that you can do in this area:

- **Allow for planning time for the teachers to meet with their peers to review and discuss various issues involving the tests.**
- **Provide extra personal time, especially if teachers need to use a portion of their break to return testing materials. Extending nutrition by ten minutes during testing goes a long way in making your staff happy during this period.**

- **Provide attendance incentives for teachers. A teacher who hates the testing season is more apt to take sick days, thereby causing the entire school environment to be disrupted with substitutes. Have some sort of prize to be raffled off for the teachers with perfect attendance during testing weeks.**
- **Feed them. This may seem trivial and insignificant, but a simple gift of food, such as donuts on the counter, goes a long way towards having your staff start a testing day in a great mood.**

Treat teachers as partners throughout the process. This is the most respectful thing that you can do with your staff. Consult your teachers throughout the testing process as to the testing schedule. This means more than simply having the administrative staff make decisions and then present them to the teachers for input. Teacher representatives should be included throughout the process to determine alterations in the daily schedule, in-service decisions and anything else associated with the testing experience. The more you include your staff in the key decisions, the more they will buy into it, take ownership and work towards having the most successful testing experience possible.

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- ◆ **Be as positive as possible**
- ◆ **Make teachers' lives easier during testing period.**
 - **Allow for planning time**
 - **Provide extra personal time**
 - **Provide attendance incentives**
 - **Feed them**
- ◆ **Treat teachers as partners throughout the process**

² The entire area of reporting scores as percentiles ensures that low-performing schools will always be reported as such regardless of how much they improve. For a full discussion on how principals can promote the real achievement of their schools, see *Improving Test Scores*, pages 71-79.