

By Bill Husfelt

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As I'm sure you are aware, the state-mandated testing window is just around the corner (begins April 4th) and so I thought I'd take a few minutes this week to share some suggestions and ideas about how we can all work together to support our students during this time.

First of all, if you have a student in school please know that we've emailed you the testing windows established by the state. Each school works within those windows to establish specific testing schedules for students so if you have questions about your child's tests, please just reach out to his/her school.

Additionally, we want you to know that we don't have any local flexibility when it comes to this testing. Testing is mandated by the state and there are pretty severe consequences for districts and schools if the schedule isn't followed. We know testing is stressful for students and staff and we know, better than most, what an incredibly stressful school year we've already had. Nonetheless, the state has mandated the usual round of testing and we must comply. We do know that changes to this process are coming from the state (starting next school year) and as soon as we have those details we will share.

That being said, I really hate the stress this testing puts on our students and staff and I wish I could just wave a magic wand to end that. It makes me sad to see students stressed out about the required testing and I am equally distressed to hear stories of teachers and administrators who are worried about the impact of testing on their students and on themselves.

So, let's talk about the few things that are in our circle of control and how we can help support our students and our staff during the testing season:

1. If you're a parent/guardian or grandparent, please check the testing schedule at your child's school to ensure you're not scheduling school-day appointments for doctors, dentists etc. It's incredibly challenging to find time to make up missed testing so we need all students present every day and on time.
2. Please do all you can to help your students, and any other children in your lives, have calm, peaceful mornings on testing days and please help them by ensuring they have breakfast whether it's at home or at school. Some of the testing sessions can be quite lengthy and we're not allowed to stop them for snacks or unscheduled breaks. Hungry students definitely can't focus on the task at hand so healthy meals are a critical component.
3. You can talk to your child, or the children you know, about the importance of taking the tests seriously BUT also reinforce for them that there are lots of other ways to demonstrate success and mastery as well. We all know people (perhaps even ourselves) who have gone on to become incredibly successful in life despite not having stellar school academic records. The state-mandated testing is ONE WAY, albeit an important one, the state measures student growth but we can also measure that by the amazing artwork we see, by the incredible sports performances we see, by the drama productions and choir shows we see and by the smiling faces of students who know they are achieving their goals. We are not defined by testing and our students should not be either!

If you know a child who is suffering from extreme test anxiety, please don't hesitate to reach out to the child's school for assistance. Between our school counselors and members of our Triad Teams, we have a plethora of trained experts who can help calm nervous students and give them effective strategies for getting through the testing season. We're working with ALL of our students on those topics right now but we know that some students will need some additional one-on-one attention and we're happy to provide that.

Please also know that our schools are doing all they can to prepare students for this testing (without stressing them out). Teachers are working with students to literally build their endurance for sitting still and focusing on one task (hard to do if that's not something you're used to doing) and are doing everything possible to set students up for success. Getting ready for testing is sort of like training for a marathon ... no one just runs out on day one and performs a personal best time ... doing your best takes practice, commitment, time management and endurance!

Our students, staff and families have been through so much this year ... it's been yet one more difficult year in a four-year series at this point ... and the testing season is one more challenge we need to work through together. Please be extra kind to our school staff during the next six weeks and know that they are all doing EVERYTHING possible to support our children through whatever testing is required in their grade level or subject. If our stakeholders will do their part (ensuring students are present every day and on time) we will be well-positioned to have a great testing season with above-average results.

As a reminder, we've emailed the state's testing schedule to all parents/guardians for whom we have email addresses and we encourage ALL parents/guardians to contact their child's school to get more specifics about which tests are being given on which days. If you have ANY questions about the tests required for your student, you can find the state's list here:

<https://www.fldoe.org/accountability/assessments/>

Thank you for all you do to support our students, our staff and our schools.

Stay safe and God Bless!