

One Point Short

Let's not define students by their test scores

BY LAUREN SEYMOUR

I GREW UP IN CALIFORNIA and attended the public schools there. In 2006, when I was a high school sophomore, the state had recently introduced the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) as a requirement for graduation. I knew little about the test, but I wasn't worried. To attain a minimum passing score of 350 in each section, I only needed to know 60 percent of the 10th-grade English curriculum and 55 percent of the 8th-grade math curriculum. I passed easily.

Eight years later, as a high-school math teacher in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), I found myself experiencing the CAHSEE from a different perspective. For many OUSD students, passing the exam presents an immense barrier to getting a diploma. Although in theory I believe all students should have to reach the basic academic levels required by the test, in reality these goals are unattainable for some.

A student I'll call Anna was a senior during my first year of teaching. She was enrolled in my Math Credit Recovery class, a course designed for students who repeatedly fail math and need an alternative way to earn their credits. Anna was guarded. She rejected all my offers of support and clutched her work tightly to her body when I tried to look at it. I soon discovered that Anna loved to read and write but hated math.

Why math? It's difficult to say. Students like Anna often have gaps in their basic skills. It's possible that when Anna was younger, she missed a key concept in class, such as addition. She might have been sick for a couple of weeks, experienced trauma that disrupted her focus, or had a teacher who overlooked her. However such gaps develop, they persist and grow over time. Math starts with a basic foundation, and without it, students find it increasingly difficult to acquire new skills.

Here I was, a first-year teacher dealing with a senior who couldn't pass the math CAHSEE, arguably through no fault of her own. Math so overwhelmed her that she shuddered whenever I, her math teacher, approached her.

What could we do to help her? Our team began to intervene both academically and emotionally, trying to break down her walls and build her confidence. She received one-on-one math intervention in both basic operations and CAHSEE prep.

Anna took the CAHSEE again in the spring, and failed by a few points, and then again in June, missing by just one point.

On graduation day, Anna did not walk the stage. She did not receive her diploma. The one point she needed to pass that test had effectively deemed her 13 years of education worthless.

But later that summer, Anna passed the math CAHSEE with a 350 and received her diploma. She enrolled in community college, began working for a grant writer, and wrote a proposal that got our school new computers. When the computers arrived, she returned to campus to speak to the student body about her journey and all the times she had wanted to give up.

Anna inspires young people and contributes to the world in ways that many high-school graduates don't. And she almost didn't get that opportunity, because of a test—a test that despite its worthy goals could have robbed her of her future.

What does Anna's story tell us? Let's first recognize what it doesn't tell us. It doesn't tell us that California has bad elementary education, or that exit exams are useless, or that we should lower our achievement standards for high school graduates. Instead, Anna's story tells us that no person can or should be defined by a test score. Without the CAHSEE, Anna would not have worked so hard to acquire the minimum math skills necessary for graduation, and likely would have received her diploma without mastering 55 percent of the 8th-grade math curriculum. However, no matter how well a test is designed, it cannot tell us everything about what someone has to offer the world.

As our country continues to embrace high-stakes testing, and the conversation sometimes veers too far from children to test scores, let's all try to remember students like Anna. I've moved on from the classroom and into the world of education policy, where I am inevitably detached from the lives of the children we "quantify" each day. But I will remember Anna, and I will remember the others who didn't raise their 349 to 350 in time.

Lauren Seymour received a master's degree in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She is currently a data specialist at New Beginnings Family Academy in Bridgeport, Connecticut.



Without California's high school exit exam, Anna would not have worked so hard to acquire math skills.