

## Restoring Balance to School Improvement

By Jim Mahoney, Executive Director, Battelle for Kids

Recently, as I was sitting in a barbershop awaiting my turn for a haircut, I overheard another customer fervently explain to the barber that his wife, a fifth-grade teacher, was enormously stressed because 50 percent of her salary was dependent upon how her students performed on the state achievement test. The next day, I spoke with a teacher who recalled the concern of his colleagues during a meeting about administering the tests. One teacher asked, "Is it okay to tell children to do their best?" Another inquired, "If a student gets done early, can I suggest that they review their work in the time remaining?"

Welcome to the new age of teaching and learning where our emphasis on tests and results has led to misunderstanding about the law, anxiety, and a fear of taking common sense approaches to test administration. Someone once said that too much of a good thing is a bad thing. Why are teachers so anxious about student results? In some cases, 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation is based on student test scores. There is also an inordinate concern about administering the tests out of fear that they might be doing something wrong.

Think for a minute about your own past performance in anything. Was it improved when the heat was turned up so high that near panic set in? Teachers are a unique breed—as a whole, they care deeply, love children, and are rule followers. They want to do right by kids. However, we've now reached the point where things are so far out of balance that many teachers are beginning to detest their job out of the pure, unmitigated fear of losing it. We are ready to implement a new set of Common Core State Standards and new, more rigorous tests nationally with high stakes at the start. As educators make this historic transition, shouldn't there be a dress rehearsal first?

The Greeks probably had it right with the notion of stasis, where there is a sense of balance, of equal and opposing views. The importance of testing is misplaced when 50 percent of your contribution as a teacher is determined by one-time, standardized tests. We've made testing a weapon and no longer a tool for real improvement by giving results too much individual evaluative power. Does that mean we should retreat to the good old days of no accountability where you could teach the best and ignore the rest? Of course not.

It's time to consider that if we turn the heat down a little, we might actually improve student performance and teacher morale. There's a line from *Mr. Holland's Opus* in which Mr. Holland asks a struggling music student who tries too hard, "Is it any fun?" He shows her that music could be fun again if she just relaxed a little, stopped over-practicing, and worked on improving. We all want children to have the skills necessary to compete and thrive in this century. But if we don't pull back a little, we risk losing a lot more.