

# My Life with Tests

by Sidney Trubowitz

It was Friday, test day. I sat still behind my bolted-down, wooden desk, hands folded, legs pressed tight against the iron supports as Mrs. Cusack prepared to distribute the white, blue-lined paper that would reveal what we had retained from the week's lessons. She stood before her large desk in the same black dress she wore each day, her hair pulled back in a bun from which a few stray hairs sought to escape, and began the test ritual in a voice that commanded attention: "Remember, points off for an incorrect heading. Points off for poor handwriting. And don't forget—neatness counts."

I waited expectantly as Mrs. Cusack placed an exact number of papers on the first desk of every row. Each child took a sheet and passed the remainder back. As I listened for the signal to start I focused on times tables, the capitals of states, and the correct spelling of "believe" and "receive" and blocked out all thoughts of Mary Vaccarella, sitting two seats in front of me with her dark brown eyes and clear olive skin.

Mrs. Cusack loomed over us, big and shapeless, tight-lipped, the punisher who put boys in the girls' line for talking and yelled at those who failed to keep the places in their books when we read out loud. She didn't like us, the sons and daughters of East European immigrants. We ate different foods. Our parents spoke with accents and, she suspected, we came from families ignorant of good health habits. Each morning she issued the same order: "I'm coming around the room to check your fingernails. Fold your hands. Keep your eyes straight ahead, your elbows in, and when I come to your desk, show me your handkerchief."

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In teacher-training school she had learned to make children conform. No smiling, no emotion, no deviation from routine, neatness, and frequent tests. Tests controlled, order maintained, uniformity established, obedient children created.

I took our weekly tests seriously. Mrs. Cusack told us that the marks were inscribed on cumulative record cards that followed us to the grave, and for one hour Friday morning nothing mattered more than getting the right answers.

Every April citywide tests descended upon the school. The word "citywide" carried an ominous heaviness. I imagined men loading cardboard boxes with tests printed in far-off places like California and Iowa to be distributed to schools in New York City.

The booklets, which arrived in sealed containers, were opened at a precise time by every school principal throughout the city. At exactly 10 a.m. a special silence hung in the air as the teacher gave us our test booklets. "Clear your desks. Make sure your pencils are sharpened. Keep your eyes on your own paper."

I knew test scores were important. Every year children were moved from one class to another based on the citywide results. My friends Paul Goldberg and Lenny Rosen were no longer with me in 6-1 but had been placed in 6-2. The ones who didn't do well on tests were segregated in small classes where they learned to sew, cook, or do handicrafts. I envisioned a machine that sorted apples—grade A, spotted, poor—but instead of apples, children were separated and siphoned into different rooms.

The regimen of tests continued through all my school days. Every Friday I was obliged to regurgitate facts, and in my last year in junior high school success in doing so earned me a civics medal. School authorities decided that high scores on weekly tests made me an exemplar of good citizenship, leadership, imagination, wisdom, community service, and creativity.

In high school small blue paperback books with the words "Regents Review" printed in bright golden letters on the cover controlled our lives. Every minute of class was given to preparing for the Regents examinations. Homework involved going over items in the review book; in class we discussed the homework. Fridays we took tests based on Regents questions.

School was suspended the last two weeks of January and June for the examinations. For days before a scheduled test my friend Walter and I walked the streets, sat on stoops, and visited each other's homes going over possible questions. Index cards listing items to be memorized accompanied me on bathroom visits and subway trips.

The possibility that I would do poorly upset me. Would I be scolded? Would people continue to think well of me? Was I nothing but the achiever of high test scores? I dream I come to class unprepared for an examination and panic overwhelms me as I spin down a bottomless hole.

I had a vision of the Board of Regents as kingly characters who closeted themselves in a massive, high-ceilinged, chandeliered room where, surrounded by thick volumes, they prepared tests allowing them to rule over the lives of principals, teachers, and students. Success was judged by how many passed the examinations. In honors classes the goal was to score over 90 percent on every test taken. I got 98 percent on the geometry Regents; today I know only that two sides of an isosceles triangle are equal and a right angle is 90 degrees. In modern history I scored perfectly, with the result that today I recognize the names of Bismarck and Metternich. A 94 percent on the chemistry Regents allows me to identify NaCl as salt.

In my modern-history class I sat wordless for almost an entire semester in the back of the room. I was occupied with my own thoughts and fantasies, uninterested in volunteering answers, just one of the 175 pupils Mr. Falkenheim saw each day—until I received 100 percent on the Regents examination. As if by magic, I became more than a card in an attendance book. The day after the test scores became public my history teacher greeted me as though we were meeting for the first time.

I have another dream. On a test I'm obliged to draw a map of the United States. My ability to draw is weak. The map is sloppy. All I get are fragments I can't put together. I feel frustrated and try



harder. It doesn't come out right. Everything in school seems separate from what I think and feel.

Tests followed me into my adult life. I became a teacher and started on a series of license examinations—substitute high school English teacher, teacher of common branches, guidance counselor, assistant principal, and principal of the elementary school. I moved from one exam to the other, no sooner passing one than starting to study for the next. The examination for principal left the deepest mark.

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For two years I attended a coaching course run by principals familiar with the examination process, met with friends to review possible questions, spent summers to practice writing responses to typical problems, used every waking minute to study lists of curriculum objectives and to learn new vocabulary. My mind became crowded with the letters of the alphabet as we were taught the mnemonics ("COWBIRDS"—courses, observation, workshops, books, intervisitation, resource people, demonstration lessons, semi-

nars) good for teacher-training questions. I became a repository for discrete bits of knowledge—the winner of the Nobel prize for literature, the differences between “torpid,” “turgid,” and “turbid,” the meaning of “caryatid.” Music, movies, and books disappeared from my life.

Coaching-course caveats stayed with me: “Don’t forget to time yourself.” “Not too much time on any one question.” “Write fast and get down as many points as possible.” I went to bed with questions in my head and in my sleep I played back the answers.

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In a dream I am lost in a school with dull brown walls, undecorated bulletin boards, cold floors, bare electric bulbs. I can’t find my way to the room where I’m to take the test. I press the wrong button on the elevator. The test is to start at 9 a.m., and it’s one minute before the hour. There is the smell of emptiness and coldness. I finally reach my destination and a faceless proctor wordlessly hands me my examination paper.

The day of the first actual principal’s test came and I went to Brooklyn Technical High School, a massive structure five stories high, occupying a full city block. I found my assigned room, sat behind a desk, and wrote for three hours. My hand became numb as my head reached for ideas. Mnemonics edged in but I pushed them aside to think.

Two years later I had finished all parts of the examination. Each day I searched the mail for reports of test results. After many trips to the mailbox I learned that I had passed with the sixth highest score in the city.

Three months later I was appointed principal of a Harlem elementary school. In my time there I worked with families struggling to deal with poverty and deteriorating housing. I helped beginning teachers to learn, to become more confident and secure. I dealt with the bitter wounds resulting from a teachers’ strike. As I faced each problem, mnemonics were useless and my test notes had long since disappeared. All I had was myself, my knowledge, my creativity, my skills, my instincts.

I look back at a lifetime of exams, tired of taking tests. I see myself a child of immigrants, an adolescent struggling to know himself, an adult trying to be an effective professional, and I wonder: why so much attention to meaningless facts and so little time for the person?