

Toughening Up for Tests

By [DAVID M. HERSZENHORN](#)

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Stressed. Scared. Nauseous. Sick. These were some of the words that the 9- and 10-year-olds at Public School 3 in Brooklyn used on Friday to describe how they felt about the state fourth-grade reading test that they will take over three days beginning today.

But that was before social workers introduced them to a Test Monster, an art project designed to exorcise fears of standardized tests. Markese Taylor, 9, took one look at the Test Monster he was given - an outline on paper of a beast that looks like a cross between Bart Simpson and a Muppet - and brandishing a purple marker, declared, "Ooooh, I am going to hurt you!"

This week, New York State for the first time begins administering an expanded testing regimen to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind law. Unlike in prior years, when only fourth and eighth graders were tested in two subjects, English and math, exams now run from the third grade on, with additional subjects in various years.

And while many local districts, including New York City's, previously gave their own reading tests in third grade, most of those were strictly multiple-choice. The new state test will include essay questions in every grade.

As the federal law and local policies like Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg's](#) promotion rules sharply raise the stakes of standardized exams, children, parents and educators all face mounting pressure.

"Oftentimes you have kids who just fall apart during the test; they just start crying or having a temper tantrum," said Barbara Cavallo, clinical director for Partnership with Children, a nonprofit group that works in the city schools.

Ms. Cavallo, who created the Test Monster in the 1990's, said that interest in the program among school officials had increased recently. "Through the years there has gotten to be much more pressure on the children, and there has been lots more pressure placed on schools to show performance," she said.

That is true across the nation, as officials seek to reverse decades of lackluster results in schools by setting higher standards, as measured on tests, and by imposing penalties that get more severe over time if schools keep falling short.

"Certainly every teacher that we talk to, every principal, is screaming that it's getting worse," said Rollin McCraty, the research director of the Institute of HeartMath, a California-based research and education group that recently completed a survey of test anxiety among students in eight states.

Educators say that easing pressure is not just compassionate. Because anxiety hurts academic performance, too much stress can reduce scores - not a good result when schools that fail to make progress face federal sanctions.

In addition to the English and math tests in grades three through eight, fourth graders in New York State take a science test, fifth graders take a social studies test and eighth graders take both science and social studies exams. There is also a test for students learning English as a second language. In all, the state will give about 3.5 million tests this year at a cost of about \$6.5 million.

To ease fears, city education officials this year urged teachers and principals to teach strategies for test-taking and effective use of time. Gym teachers were advised to teach isometrics, yoga and other relaxation techniques. Parent coordinators were told to spread the gospel of a good night's sleep.

Guidance counselors were advised against reminding fifth and eighth graders that they might not graduate to middle or high school if they failed. Parents were warned to avoid saying that failing could ruin the family's summer vacation.

"First of all, tell your kid you love them no matter what. 'I think you are a great kid, this is just one more test,' " said Deputy Chancellor Carmen Fariña, the city's top instructional official. "A little stress is good," she added. "It just has to be balanced out."

Ms. Fariña said that extra services offered to struggling students, including Saturday classes, had eased the anxiety somewhat. But she acknowledged that the stakes in testing had gotten only higher

Still Ms. Fariña and others said that the testing was not without a higher goal. "We have raised the stakes, but I don't think it has been all bad," she said. "I think it has said, 'All children can learn.' Therefore it means there are no excuses."

Officials say that aside from the mandates in federal law, the testing provides crucial data. "The purpose of this is to change instruction," said James A. Kadamus, the deputy New York State education commissioner.

Mr. Kadamus said that in prior years, teachers in grades other than fourth and eighth might not have felt responsible for test results. With exams in all those grades, he said, teachers must pull together.

"It's up to the teachers to say we have got a coordinated program across every grade level," he said.

Still, the added pressure has increased demand for techniques to manage it. Charles D. Spielberger, a research professor of psychology at the University of South Florida in Tampa, said that in recent years there have been more requests to use his Test Anxiety Inventory, a 20-point measure of test stress that he developed more than 20 years ago.

"At least in this part of the world, test anxiety seems to be increasing," he said, referring to Florida.

The Institute of HeartMath sells a CD-ROM with strategies for controlling test anxiety.

At P.S. 3 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the students in Class 4-321 were offered a "special friend" on Friday to help ease their fears: the Test Monster. Using the outline of the beast, students drew in features, often ferocious and ugly, and wrote down their fears. Then they crumpled the drawing and locked it in a cardboard box.

Lamar Butler, 10, drew red eyes, a purple tongue and dark green fangs. On the monster's belly, he wrote: "scared." Shakima Daniels, 9, drew a butterfly in her monster's stomach.

Their teacher, Erin Dempster, said she had urged the students to close their eyes and visualize getting the highest score on the test. She said many students were worried about having to attend summer school, and that she was worried for them.

"I need a Test Monster, too," she said, "because there's so much pressure."