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In a Standardized Era, a Creative School Is Forced to Be More So

By **MICHAEL WINERIP**

DURHAM, N.H. — Every spring, Linda Rief, who is in her 25th year of teaching English at [Oyster River Middle School](#), has eighth graders do a semesterlong “genre” project. They pick a subject area like mysteries, read masters like Agatha Christie, study the writer’s craftsmanship (“Explain how the author foreshadows doom”), then draft their own.

The school’s science students spend two weeks building an underwater robotic vessel. Social studies classes re-enact the Boston Massacre.

They have had time for these things at Oyster River. Students here do so well on state standardized tests — about 85 percent of them rate proficient — there has been little need for test preparation. Ms. Rief said she did 45 minutes — a year.

“The attitude was if we did good teaching and we were passionate and energetic, kids would learn and that would be enough,” said Ms. Rief, who is 67.

No more. Last year, the [No Child Left Behind](#) law, which calls for 100 percent proficiency by 2014, caught up with Oyster River. Under the law’s mandates for adequate yearly progress toward that goal, the school was one of 326 public schools in New Hampshire — 69 percent of the total — deemed to be failing.

This year, Oyster River got serious about test prep. In September the school announced a new motto, “Fill the Box.” Students have been told that their best chance for a high score on the state English test is to use all the blank space allotted for the essay. “You have to write as much as you can,” says Jay Richard, the principal. “People have studied these things.”

The idea that the largest amount of writing is the best writing has just about killed Ms. Rief. “Complete stupidity. We should be using our professional voices to speak up, but there is a fear in teachers and administrators I’ve never seen before,” said Ms. Rief, who in 2000 was named middle school teacher of the year by the National Council of Teachers of English. “A lot of faith we’ve had in ourselves as professionals has been turned aside by the tests.”

The intent of No Child Left Behind was to provide quality education for poor children, mainly in urban areas, but it has taken over everything. By next spring, 90 percent of New Hampshire schools are expected to be labeled as failing.

That may sound 100 percent ludicrous, but it has transformed the academic culture, even in prosperous towns that have long been immune, like Durham, where the University of New Hampshire is located.

The federal secretary of education, Arne Duncan, is a big fan of using state tests to evaluate practically everything — children, schools, teachers, principals — but he could see that matters had gone too far. This fall, he and President Obama invited states to apply for waivers from the most onerous provisions of the law if they adhered to the administration's education agenda.

Under the waivers, the 100 percent proficiency standard is to be eliminated, and most oversight would focus on the lowest-performing 15 percent of schools. In the law's present form, if one subgroup — like special education students — fails to make adequate progress, the whole school fails. Oyster River is a failing school because about a dozen of its 110 special education children did not score high enough. The waiver would give subgroup scores less weight.

New Hampshire officials said they did not know whether they would apply for a waiver, but even if they do, testing will continue to play a large role. Schools would be ranked by their scores (which have a way of turning up in newspapers), and teachers would be evaluated by those scores.

Mr. Richard was a special education teacher himself and has reorganized Oyster River's program in hopes of raising scores. The school used to mainstream the children all day, with a special education teacher working alongside the classroom teacher. Now the children will be pulled from class at times for more individualized instruction.

Will this be better or just different?

"I believe we can do better," Mr. Richard said. "We have to. This is the law."

Ms. Rief described Mr. Richard as "the most positive administrator I've ever worked with."

Even the new focus on test prep here pales compared with what happens in places like New York City and Florida, but the change has been felt in a school system where teachers have long been trusted and given autonomy.

"Suddenly at staff meetings we're talking about brain games," Ms. Rief said, "we're talking about healthy brain food. The week before, we're not giving homework so everyone gets more sleep and rests their brains."

There are posters to remind students of the 12 essential test prep words and posters to raise their Score: Strategies, Complete, Organize, Read, Energize. The test is the New England Common Assessment Program, and some fifth-grade boys are now calling themselves the Necap Ninjas.

While Mr. Richard has urged Ms. Rief to do more test preparation, he has not forced her. "I bug her about this," he said. "But I trust Linda to do what's best."

Ms. Rief said she was sticking to the annual 45 minutes.

Mr. Richard says no one in town has asked him why his school is failing. "Of course not," he said. "People get it."

They do want to know why, if Oyster River is failing, its eighth graders do so well when they get to high school. This year, Oyster River students averaged 1,670 on the three SAT tests, 111 points above the state average and 170 above the national average.

A failing school must form a committee to develop an improvement plan. Over the summer, Mr. Richard met with 10 of his teachers several times. Among the topics discussed were the little things that add up to a better score. "We realized our students weren't looking at the titles on the reading passages," he said. "The title tells you what the story is about; it's really important."

They studied past tests. "Several questions were related to the use of textbooks, and we're a textbook-free school," he said, explaining that his teachers' original lessons are superior to the packaged curriculums. "No wonder they had so much trouble."

While the school improvement committee was meeting, Ms. Rief and two other teachers attended workshops given by Navy engineers from the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. They learned how to build a robotic underwater vessel and will spend two weeks teaching students to build their own.

Ms. Rief worries that a new generation of teachers has been raised on standardized testing and thinks that is the norm. Ms. Rief fears that public schools where teachers are trusted to make learning fun are on the way out. Ms. Rief understands that packaged curriculums and standardized assessments offer schools an economy of scale that she and her kind cannot compete with.

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