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"To sting people and whip them into a fury,  
all in the service of truth."

## The PARCC Test: Exposed

 [May 18, 2016](#)  [stevenmsinger](#)  [Accountability, Close Reading, Common Core, Corporate Education "Reform", Data, Education, Opt Out, Politics, protest, Schools, Standardized Testing, Teachers, Toxic Testing](#)   
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*The following article comes from Prof. Celia Oyler's blog (<https://celiaoyler.wordpress.com/2016/05/07/the-parcc-test-exposed/>). In it, she reprinted an anonymous teacher's critique of the 4th grade PARCC exam. Since the piece includes three live test questions from the exam, the article has been repeatedly taken down under threat that it violates copyright. I hold that this is a spurious claim and am re-posting the article in-full as an act of civil disobedience. The public has a right to know exactly what questions are on the standardized tests they're paying to be produced.*

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## **The PARCC Test: Exposed**

***The author of this blog posting is a public school teacher who will remain anonymous.***

I will not reveal my district or my role due to the intense legal ramifications for exercising my Constitutional First Amendment rights in a public forum. I was compelled to sign a security form that stated I would not be “Revealing or discussing passages or test items with anyone, including students and school staff, through verbal exchange, email, social media, or any other form of communication” as this would be considered a “Security Breach.” In response to this demand, I can only ask—whom are we protecting?

There are layers of not-so-subtle issues that need to be aired as a result of national and state testing policies that are dominating children’s lives in America. As any well prepared educator knows, curriculum planning and teaching requires knowing how you will assess your students and planning backwards from that knowledge. If teachers are unable to examine and discuss the summative assessment for their students, how can they plan their instruction? Yet, that very question assumes that this test is something worth planning

for. The fact is that schools that try to plan their curriculum exclusively to prepare students for this test are ignoring the body of educational research that tells us how children learn, and how to create developmentally appropriate activities to engage students in the act of learning. This article will attempt to provide evidence for these claims as a snapshot of what is happening as a result of current policies.

### **The PARCC test is developmentally inappropriate**

In order to discuss the claim that the PARCC test is “developmentally inappropriate,” examine three of the most recent PARCC 4th grade items.

A book leveling system, designed by Fountas and Pinnell, was made “more rigorous” in order to match the Common Core State Standards. These newly updated benchmarks state that 4th Graders should be reading at a Level S by the end of the year in order to be considered reading “on grade level.” [Celia’s note: I do not endorse leveling books or readers, nor do I think it appropriate that all 9 year olds should be reading a Level S book to be thought of as making good progress.]

The PARCC, which is supposedly a test of the Common Core State Standards, appears to have taken liberties with regard to grade level texts. For example, on the Spring 2016 PARCC for 4th Graders, students were expected to read an excerpt from *Shark Life: True Stories about Sharks and the Sea* by Peter Benchley and Karen Wojtyla. According to Scholastic, this text is at an interest level for Grades 9-12, and at a 7th Grade reading level. The Lexile measure is 1020L, which is most

often found in texts that are written for middle school, and according to Scholastic's own conversion chart ([http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/guidedreading/leveling\\_chart.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/guidedreading/leveling_chart.htm)) would be equivalent to a 6th grade benchmark around W, X, or Y (using the same Fountas and Pinnell scale).

Even by the reform movement's own standards, according to MetaMetrics' reference material on Text Complexity Grade Bands and Lexile Bands (<https://lexile.com/using-lexile/lexile-measures-and-the-ccssi/text-complexity-grade-bands-and-lexile-ranges/>), the newly CCSS aligned "Stretch" lexile level of 1020 falls in the 6-8 grade range. This begs the question, what is the purpose of standardizing text complexity bands if testing companies do not have to adhere to them? Also, what is the purpose of a standardized test that surpasses agreed-upon lexile levels?

So, right out of the gate, 4th graders are being asked to read and respond to texts that are two grade levels above the recommended benchmark. After they struggle through difficult texts with advanced vocabulary and nuanced sentence structures, they then have to answer multiple choice questions that are, by design, intended to distract students with answers that appear to be correct except for some technicality. Finally, students must synthesize two or three of these advanced texts and compose an original essay. The ELA portion of the PARCC takes three days, and each day includes a new essay prompt based on multiple texts. These are the prompts from the 2016 Spring PARCC exam for 4th Graders

along with my analysis of why these prompts do not reflect the true intention of the Common Core State Standards.

## **ELA 4th Grade Prompt #1**

**Refer to the passage from “Emergency on the Mountain” and the poem “Mountains.” Then answer question 7.**

**1. Think about how the structural elements in the passage from “Emergency on the Mountain” differ from the structural elements in the poem “Mountains.”**

**Write an essay that explains the differences in the structural elements between the passage and the poem. Be sure to include specific examples from both texts to support your response.**

The above prompt probably attempts to assess the Common Core standard RL.4.5: *“Explain major differences between poems, drama, and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems (e.g., verse, rhythm, meter) and drama (e.g., casts of characters, settings, descriptions, dialogue, stage directions) when writing or speaking about a text.”*

However, the Common Core State Standards for writing do not require students to write essays comparing the text structures of different genres. The Grade 4 CCSS for writing about reading demand that students write about characters, settings, and events in literature, or that they write about how authors support their points in informational texts. Nowhere in the standards are students asked to write comparative essays on the structures of writing. The reading standards ask students to

“explain” structural elements, but not in writing. There is a huge developmental leap between explaining something and writing an analytical essay about it. [Celia’s note: The entire enterprise of analyzing text structures in elementary school – a 1940’s and 50’s college English approach called “New Criticism” — is ridiculous for 9 year olds anyway.]

## **The PARCC does not assess what it attempts to assess**

### **ELA 4th Grade Prompt #2**

**Refer to the passages from “Great White Shark” and Face the Sharks. Then answer question 20.**

**Using details and images in the passages from “Great White Sharks” and Face to Face with Sharks, write an essay that describes the characteristics of white sharks.**

It would be a stretch to say that this question assesses CCSS W.4.9.B: *“Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text.”*

In fact, this prompt assesses a student’s ability to research a topic across sources and write a research-based essay that synthesizes facts from both articles. Even CCSS W.4.7, *“Conduct research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic,”* does not demand that students compile information from different sources to create an essay. The closest the standards come to demanding this sort of work is in the reading standards; CCSS RI.4.9 says: *“Integrate information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.”*

Fine. One could argue that this PARCC prompt assesses CCSS RI.4.9.

However, the fact that the texts presented for students to “use” for the essay are at a middle school reading level automatically disqualifies this essay prompt from being able to assess what it attempts to assess. (It is like trying to assess children’s math computational skills by embedding them in a word problem with words that the child cannot read.)

### **ELA 4th Grade Prompt #3**

- 1. In “Sadako’s Secret,” the narrator reveals Sadako’s thoughts and feelings while telling the story. The narrator also includes dialogue and actions between Sadako and her family. Using these details, write a story about what happens next year when Sadako tries out for the junior high track team. Include not only Sadako’s actions and feelings but also her family’s reaction and feelings in your story.**

Nowhere, and I mean nowhere in the Common Core State Standards is there a demand for students to read a narrative and then use the details from that text to write a new story based on a prompt. That is a new pseudo-genre called “Prose Constructed Response” by the PARCC creators, and it is 100% not aligned to the CCSS. Not to mention, why are 4th Graders being asked to write about trying out for the junior high track team? This demand defies their experiences and asks them to imagine a scenario that is well beyond their scope.



Clearly, these questions are poorly designed assessments of 4th graders CCSS learning. (We are setting aside the disagreements we have with those standards in the first place, and simply assessing the PARCC on its utility for measuring what it was intended to measure.)

Rather than debate the CCSS we instead want to expose the tragic reality of the countless public schools organizing their entire instruction around trying to raise students' PARCC scores.

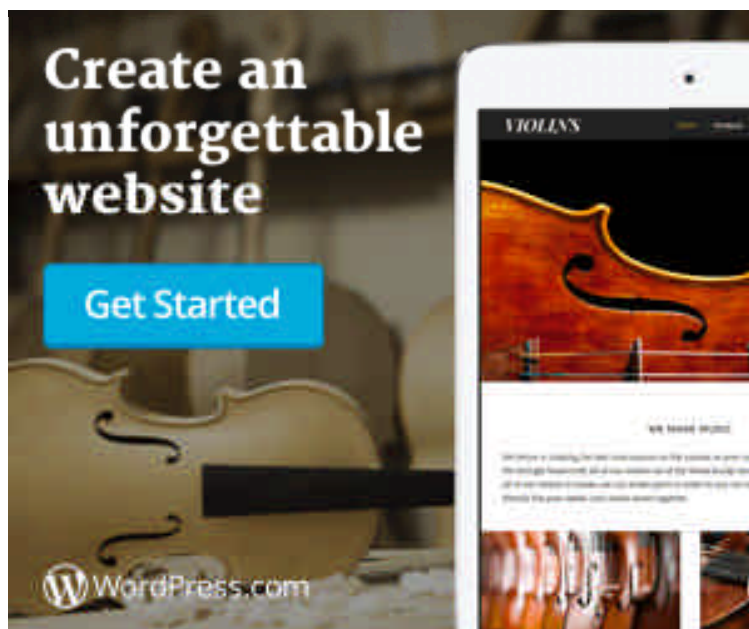
Without naming any names, I can tell you that schools are disregarding research-proven methods of literacy learning. The “wisdom” coming “down the pipeline” is that children need to be exposed to more complex texts because that is what PARCC demands of them. So children are being denied independent and guided reading time with texts of high interest and potential access and instead are handed texts that are much too hard (frustration level) all year long without ever being given the chance to grow as readers in their Zone of Proximal Development (pardon my reference to those pesky educational researchers like Vygotsky.)

So not only are students who are reading “on grade level” going to be frustrated by these so-called “complex texts,” but newcomers to the U.S. and English Language Learners and any student reading below the proficiency line will never learn the foundational skills they need, will never know the enjoyment of reading and writing from intrinsic motivation, and will, sadly, be denied the opportunity to become a critical

reader and writer of media. Critical literacies are foundational for active participation in a democracy.

We can look carefully at one sample to examine the health of the entire system— such as testing a drop of water to assess the ocean. So too, we can use these three PARCC prompts to glimpse how the high stakes accountability system has deformed teaching and warped learning in many public schools across the United States.

In this sample, the system is pathetically failing a generation of children who deserve better, and when they are adults, they may not have the skills needed to engage as citizens and problem-solvers. So it is up to us, those of us who remember a better way and can imagine a way out, to make the case for stopping standardized tests like PARCC from corrupting the educational opportunities of so many of our children.



## 3 thoughts on “The PARCC Test: Exposed”

1. **The First Rule of Test Club is We Don't Talk About Test Club | gadflyonthewallblog** says:

May 18, 2016 at 3:37 am

[...] the article reproduced three live questions from the exam, Oyler received a threatening email from PARCC CEO Laura [...]

Reply (https://gadflyonthewallblog.wordpress.com/2016/05/18/the-parcc-test-exposed/?replytocom=3926#respond)

2. **Re-blog: The PARCC Test: Exposed | The Running Grammy** says:

May 18, 2016 at 4:41 pm

[...] https://gadflyonthewallblog.wordpress.com/2016/05/18/the-parcc-test-exposed/  
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Reply (https://gadflyonthewallblog.wordpress.com/2016/05/18/the-parcc-test-exposed/?replytocom=3945#respond)

3. **Lisa L** says:

May 18, 2016 at 4:44 pm

Re-blogged on https://runninggrammy.com  
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[/18/the-parcc-test-exposed/?replytocom=3946#respond](#)

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