

Standardized Testing and Math-U-See

It is true that I don't teach to the standardized tests. Most mainstream math curricula changes regularly to meet the demands of the latest test. It is the tail wagging the dog. Math skills in America are usually placed at the bottom of the industrialized world, a fact known to everyone. Why should tests, which are driven by the same education establishment, be the standard for the math curricula?

Another result of the test mentality is that American programs, tend to cram more and more into their curricula, especially in the early grades. Instead of doing a few things well, they end up overwhelming the students by trying to teach too many concepts at once. I had a call from a mother in California asking if I would put "probability" in the first book. I thought it was ludicrous. When would a first grader have an opportunity to use that skill. But because it was on the new state standardized test I was asked to add it to Math-U-See. This is the mindset. If it is on the test, it must be in the text.

In true education, tests are primarily an indicator to show whether a child has learned the material or not. A parent who is teaching their children should know what their students are accomplishing. In the home school, there is very little need for a general standardized diagnostic exam. The main justification for standardized tests today is to determine how one student compares with other students taking the same tests. They serve as indicators for college admissions, not as a reflection of how much a student knows. (On a personal note, I have 2 students in college, neither of which received my love for math or my math genes. But both did quite well on the standardized tests and received academic scholarships.)

I have many testimonies of students who finished other math programs and never knew what they had learned. One in particular illustrates this. A teenage young lady had been in one program through Pre-Algebra. She had done all of the homework, and done well on the tests. She went back through MUS, from the beginning, because she didn't have a clue what she had "learned". She later reported that she now understood math for the first time. It is possible to do well on tests without understanding the content. Many of us can attest to that.

I have always wanted to create our own test for MUS students and the public at large to show how much our students know that is never tested on the standardized exams. I hadn't thought of it until I was talking with a teacher from a small Christian school who had been using MUS. After the test she asked her students how it went, because she noticed they were somewhat despondent. They replied that it had been very frustrating. They weren't given a chance to show what they really knew.

Another reason home educated students often do not test well is because they are not test taking machines. They have been encouraged to get the answers correct instead of doing it in a particular time. Accuracy is the top priority, not doing well on the "test". I know of many students who, when given the same test, with a few more minutes, aced it.

Standardized tests should not be driving curriculum development. Neither should they be consulted as an accurate tool for determining what a child knows. Parents are the best teachers and the best diagnosticians as well.

Steve Demme, author of Math-U-See