

Ep #214: How to Raise Test Scores



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Ep #214: How to Raise Test Scores

Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 214.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*, a not so typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Well hello my empowered leaders. Happy February. Can you believe we're a month down already in 2022? How fast does that happen? It's amazing. So let's talk school. I have been talking to school leaders throughout the month of January, and they have been telling me all of their worries and stresses about dun, dun, dun, testing. Testing. You came back from the holidays and your brain started panicking about testing. This is the time of year. Tests are on their way this spring, right?

Okay. Let's talk about it. Here's what my clients have been offering me. This is what their brains have been thinking. They're coming back from the holidays. Kids have been out sick. Teachers have been out sick. People have been in quarantine. Thank you COVID. Thank you Omicron virus variant. There are many, many circumstances that your brain are going to tell you are a problem. Especially this year with everybody so behind.

It's been two years. Maybe you guys had to cancel school for a couple of weeks to mitigate some of the spread. There's a lot going on with this virus and this pandemic. Teachers are exhausted. You're exhausted. Kids, parents. We know. We get it. It is not easy, and I'm not diminishing the hard work that you are doing.

Your brain is going to always find something to be a problem. I just want to point that out and let you know that that's not a problem that your brain is worrying about the test. It's natural that you're worried about the test because everybody makes such a big flipping deal about the test.

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So I'm going to talk about one of my clients. She was sharing with me. She's a first year principal. By the way, I'm going to have her on the podcast in the future because she's so amazing, and I can't wait for you to hear her story. As we were talking the other day, she was saying to me, "I can't believe how smooth the first semester has gone. Everything's going great. I feel confident and calm considering it's my first year."

More on her story later. She really enjoyed her holiday break. She'd followed the take a real break process that I was teaching back in December. Now that we're past the holidays and into the new year, she has several testing series that are coming up in her school district starting in February and going throughout March and maybe into April even.

She started worrying. She's worrying about the testing and the test scores, and I asked her why. She said, "I don't feel that as a new principal that as a new principal I've had time or from now until the testing window," which is for her just a couple of weeks now. "I don't have enough time to create enough change or momentum to impact the test scores." Her brain was offering that there's so much out of her control. How could she possibly be in control of test scores?

So she's worrying that the test scores are out of her control. The teacher's ability to teach for the test is out of her control. How much effort and energy the students put into taking the test is out of her control. Her thoughts basically were, "I don't have full control over the test scores. I have to figure out the balance of what I do have control over and how much I push teachers and put emphasis on the test."

Also in the background of her brain she knows her superintendent values the test, but because she's new she was saying, "I'm not quite sure to what degree the person feels that the test is important." So I just want to notice. If you're panicking thinking about the test and the test scores right now.

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And I know there are some superintendents who are very generous and patient and understanding and loving and forgiving. They have perspective around the meaning of the test. Other people are all about the test score. If you don't get the score, you're out. So I get there's a full spectrum of the way that superintendents handle testing and test scores, but we're here in the Empowered Principal podcast to talk about how you're thinking and feelings and what you do have control over. How to reframe your thoughts around the test so that you can approach it without utter panic. Okay?

So in my clients case, her brain was offering her thoughts that were fear based. I don't have control. I need to pressure teachers. I need to get higher test scores. I don't know the degree of importance the superintendents place on the test scores. I don't know what will happen to me.

Your mind is going to offer you all kinds of thoughts that generate anxiety and fear and panic and urgency and worry and doubt. When you're spending time feeling this way about test scores, you're going to react to those emotions by panicky actions. You're going to rush around, making everything urgent, pressure yourself, pressure the teachers, pressure the kids. Get through the pacing guide.

You're going to overwork yourself and your staff. You're going to try to start controlling other people. You'll see yourself do this. You will start judging teachers if you don't think they're doing enough or getting through the material quickly enough.

This approach does not work. We have tons of evidence to prove it doesn't work because we've been out there for the last 20 years since standards were invented and created and written for kids, by adults by the way. We've decided what they need to learn and when and how and at what age. All of a sudden we put all of these parameters on learning.

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Then we pressure the kids to learn it. We pressure the teachers to teach it. We pressure the principals to get everybody on board. We see that it's not working for all kids. We have proof. Yet, again, year after year this is how we continue to approach testing. Please I invite you to you consider not buying in to that approach.

So I asked my client what do you believe changes test scores? I want you to stop and ask yourself the same question. All of you listeners out her, listen to me. Stop and answer the question. What do you believe changes test scores? I want you to sit down and write answers down. What do you believe changes test scores? What causes them to increase? What makes test scores go up? What makes test scores go down and decrease?

I'm going to share her answers with you, but I want you to pause before you listen to them and answer it for yourself. What do you think creates test scores? What makes them increase? What makes them decrease? All of the variables. Give it to yourself. List it all down and then tune back in. Okay. I want you to do this so that you can personally weed out your thoughts, not my client's thoughts.

When I asked my client this question, and I caught her on the spot. So she just rattled off a few things. She said, "Well first of all, good instruction." So she was thinking teachers need to provide good instruction. Students need to try and give out their best effort. Then she shifted and she said, "You know, a school needs a really good strong culture and climate around testing. There needs to be a culture of belief. Belief in kids, belief in students, belief in teachers. Everyone has to want to put in their best effort.

I said yes, you're onto it. I pointed out to her. I want you to notice how everything you listed are all based on emotions. How teachers feel, the way they think and feel about themselves, about their classroom, about the curriculum they're teaching, impact their quality of instruction. If they believe they have plenty of time or if they believe they're rushed. If they're

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spending their time planning lessons or they're spending time complaining. It all depends on how they're feeling.

The effort that students put forth on the test and throughout the school year while they're learning is impacted by how they're feeling. Culture and climate is all about how people think and feel. About school, about testing, about learning, all of it.

I want to point out something. Notice what she didn't say. What my client did not say. She didn't say what improves test scores are curriculum, pacing guides, standards, instructional minutes, report cards, observations, site plans. Notice that.

Now I'm not saying that those pieces aren't a part of the puzzle and they're not indirectly impactful. Maybe some can be found highly correlated. But when you think about it from the principal perspective, the truth is that we as humans young and old perform at our best when we are feeling our best. When we feel physically rested and prepared. When we have sleep, when we've had movement and exercise. When we have food in our belly, when we're well hydrated.

Those physical attributes that help us feel rested and prepared we have control over for the most time, at least for ourselves. We can encourage others to manage it, and we can offer it to kids who might not have the food or the rest or the hydration that they need. We can sometimes be able to provide some of that for them. So physically we can be prepared.

Then, of course, when we are cognitively and mentally prepared, when we have been intellectually prepared with the material and the types of questions and testing strategies and the content, which that's the circle. The sphere of which we call teaching, right. Teacher and learning. It's all about that intellectual preparation and mental cognitive preparation.

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Of course, when I go into a test, I feel much more prepared when I have had access to information. When I know, when I understand what I'm going to be tested on and why and how I'm supposed to answer and the way in which I'm supposed to answer. When I have familiarity with the testing process itself, all of that is definitely a part of successful testing, for sure.

We want kids to be cognitively prepared with our instruction. It's like driving a car. We want kids to feel prepared for the test and with the content so that it doesn't feel like it's the first time. It's awkward. When I think about when kids drive cars, in the beginning everything feels new. All of the buttons and sounds and lights and beeps and signals. All of the things going on outside of the car and inside of the car. The kid just feels overwhelmed when it's the first time. It's very distracting, and it makes you unless comfortable, less prepared as a driver.

Then once you've done it for a while, you've driven the same car on the same route many, many times, you start to relax. You start to relax. You start to feel comfortable. You start to know what to do and feel more confident. We want to do that with kids. We want to take them on test drives with the curriculum, with the content, with the tests.

Most importantly we need teachers and students to feel emotionally prepared. We want them to feel confident, secure, assured, engaged, interested, eager. We want to think carefully about the emotions that help us as adults perform at our peak. When we're at our best and we're feeling confident and assured and we're doing really well in life or in leadership, there's always that confidence but it comes with this little edge of anticipation or eagerness. Have you noticed that?

Like when you're about to take a test and you've studied, you feel prepared, you feel confident, but you still have got that vroom, vroom. That revving going on in your body. Like you're on alert, but it's in a good way.

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We want teachers on alert but in a good way. Kids on alert but in a good way. Excited, energized, confident, ready. Let's tackle this. Let's do this.

We understand and value the importance of the test and the test score without making it mean everything about us. That, I see, is the problem. I think the problem with testing is that we've made it mean everything about us. It went from not having testing to only being concerned with tests. We have allowed scores to define our school, our school communities, our districts, our cultures, our teachers, our students, and ourselves.

We're at the whim of the test. If the scores go up then we're a good leader. Teachers are good teachers. Students are applying themselves. They're putting forth their best effort. But if the scores go down, now we're not leading to our potential. Teachers aren't effective. Students aren't putting forth their best effort. We hang our entire educational identity on test scores.

I'm not saying completely disregard the test. Not at all. It's a fact of life. It's a circumstance we have to deal with. We've got to put it in the STEER cycle and say what do I want to think and feel about the test? How do I want to approach this test? What do I want to make it mean about myself and other people and my school and my students and my teachers.

What I'm suggesting is that we stop trying to raise the test scores out of fear and pressure and focus on what actually does raise test scores, which is how people are thinking and feeling. The people that play, teachers and students. How teachers think and feel will impact how they teach and how they administer that test, and what they make that test mean about themselves as a teacher. Their efficacy as a teacher.

The same thing's true with students. What do students think and feel? What's in testing for students? What's in this for them? The little ones, it's too far of a gap. They don't say like, "Oh I'm in the third grade. If I perform

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really well on this test, I'm going to get into a really good college. Then I'm going to get a really good job and I'm going to make a lot of money." No. They're eight years old. What's in it for them in that moment has to be something relevant.

We have to think about that. What's in it for kids? What is the value of a test for a nine year old? How do we create meaningful purpose for them that isn't fear based? That's not based on, "I'll give you extra recess if you work really hard on this test."

We have to think about how our community thinks, how our community feels about the scores and what they're making it mean about them, about you, about the school at large. What we as principals think and feel about the test and how it impacts us. How we talk about it with others, the way we teach, the way we prepare for it, the way we prepare our staff members for it. The way we interpret the scores after the testing is completed. There are so many thoughts around tests that impact us.

What happens is when we make the test mean something about us as leaders or us as good people or bad people or good teachers or bad teachers, we're going to be very fearful when that number comes out onto the screen or onto the paper. We've got to reframe the way we're thinking about the test and what we're making it mean.

The more confident that teachers feel and students feel, the more fun they're having, the more abundant they're feeling, the more they're thinking about what is working and what they do know and what is going well and how capable they are. And the less they are spending time thinking about getting reprimanded or judged or fired, the more likely they're going to be willing to work towards success.

Yes, you can have baseline standards for teachers and for principals. There should be. We should have a strong set of standards,

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accountabilities for our teachers and ourselves. In my work with school leaders all across this nation, I don't see a pattern of incompetence or indifference or disregard in school leaders. I see leaders who've been overly concerned and who are overworking, over pressuring themselves and others, and becoming physically incapacitated at the stakes that other people have created related to this test score.

So what can you do? I'm going to give you some ideas. You can write down, I call it a brain drain. Write down all of your thoughts about the test scores. What do they mean about you? What do they mean about teachers, students, the superintendent, the world? What does it mean?

What's the purpose of the test in your eyes? What's the purpose of the test for teachers? What's the purpose of the test for kids? What does it mean if scores go up? Go down? What if the scores are neutral? What if you get to believe that your school is awesome and your kids are awesome and your teachers are amazing no matter what the score said? What would it be like to not make the test scores mean so much?

When you fear or you worry or you get that sense of a lack of control about test scores, how does that make you want to approach leading your school? You're going to notice. You're going to feel urgency, panic, pressure, overworking. You're going to try and control more things. We know that doesn't work.

What do we know works? We know that the way people feel will impact the way they perform. So what do teachers think and feel? What do they have to think and feel in order to raise test scores? How about students? What do you want parents thinking and feeling? Offer those thoughts and perspectives in your newsletter.

Here's the best part. If you can buy into the belief that thoughts and emotions are one of the highest contributors to increased test scores and

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you get to believe than any thought is true. If you can believe that thoughts and emotions impact test scores and you also believe that you get to choose whatever you want to think and think of it as truth then what you do is you look at what you and teachers would be thinking and feeling if the test scores were exactly what you wanted them to be. What would you be thinking and feeling if test scores were at 90% or above?

Just think those thoughts now. Think them no matter what. No matter what your test scores come out to be. You can think things like I'm doing a great job. My teachers are successful and effective. Kids are learning. This is fun. We're making a difference. You get to just choose to believe those thoughts are happening right now regardless of what the test scores are today in this moment or next year or the year after that.

When you lead from the belief that you're amazing and that kids are learning and that teachers are effective, you will lead from a much more inspirational and powerful energy. Which as you know is going to have an impact on everyone around you. It's going to ripple throughout that school.

The test matters and it doesn't. It's completely neutral. The question becomes what do you want to make it mean? Think about that and let me know. Have an amazing week. I'll talk to you next week. Take care. Bye.

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