

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 221.

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.

Hello, my empowered leaders, and Happy Tuesday. If you're new, welcome to the podcast. My empowered principles. I love you guys. Hey, I'm going to cut straight to the chase and talk about test score anxiety. I want you to think about your thoughts about this test.

I just got off the phone with a client. I'm going to try to be as succinct as I can, but I felt very called to record this for you because you're in the thick of preparing for the test or perhaps you're already in the mix of taking the test. There is so much pain and stress and anxiety and pressure and fear around the standardized test. Whatever test your district or state takes, a lot of testing out there, there has been for decades.

So, I'm going to talk about the intense anxiety over these standardized tests and offer you some alternate thoughts to consider that will help you, help your teachers, and help your students reduce anxiety that creeps up this time of year. I will say that in order for you, as the school leader, to create a school climate where people stop freaking out so much about the test and see the test for what it is, you must first do this work yourself.

I've been working with most of my clients on their thoughts around this and around the test and what they make it mean about themselves, about their teachers, about their students, about their careers, about themselves as a professional. There's so much meaning we've wrapped up into these tests. We want to untangle that so you can see it for what it is.

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

What I have to say might not sit with you well at first. That's okay. I've had some time to think deeply about the fear that's been created around the test and the test scores. I can see things from a much larger perspective than I could when I was in the principalship like you are right now.

But I do want to take time to offer these thoughts to you and these ways of looking at the test and ways of thinking about the test and feeling about the test and about yourself and about your team and kids and the future, all of it. Because I do know it does provide relief when you can gain a different perspective.

So biggest fear as a principal. One of the biggest fears school leaders face is the dreaded test and the test scores and what those test scores mean. So, our biggest fear is that the test scores are going to go down, or that they're going to flatline. Okay.

So, the test score is a situation. It's neutral. It has no meaning. It is numbers on a page, numbers on a spreadsheet, numbers on the screen, okay. But our brain makes those test scores mean something very scary. So, what do we make the test scores mean? We have failed as a school leader. Teachers have failed as teachers. Students have failed as students.

Teachers failed their students. They didn't do enough. They didn't try enough. They didn't work hard enough. They didn't teach the right things. They didn't get through the pacing guide. They didn't keep students on track.

You feel like you failed your teachers. I didn't give them what they needed. They didn't have enough time. They didn't have enough resources. I didn't lead them right. I didn't create the vision. I didn't motivate them enough. You feel like you failed the district or the districts failed you depending on which way the blame is going.

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

A lot of times we blame ourselves as school leaders, but also we blame teachers or students for not trying hard enough. We don't blame a student, but we say things like they didn't put forth their best effort, or they're not motivated, or they don't seem to care.

Or we think teachers didn't do something that they were supposed to do. They didn't work well as a grade level. They didn't evaluate their tests, you know. Their midterm assessments or whatever. Like we have all these thoughts around the test. But we go from blaming ourselves and feeling lots of guilt and shame and humiliation or embarrassment or disappointment.

Failure also means, at this deeper level, right, we suck as a leader. We're incompetent. We're not capable. We think failure means we're not good enough. We didn't do enough. We didn't try enough. Teachers feel the same way about themselves. They're worried that you're thinking that about them, and, "Am I going to get fired?"

We put so much meaning into this test. We've made the test score mean we're good or we're not. We're competent or we're not. We're successful or we're not. Students are going to make it in life or not. They're going to get into college or not. We feel like we have failed students forever. They're forever scarred by this test.

Or we think they're never going to be successful. If they failed once, that's it. It's over. We have this very all or none approach about this test. What we make it mean about ourselves when test scores go up. I've talked about this in prior podcasts, but I'm bringing it up again because you're in the thick of it now, and I want you to see what's really going on here.

Ultimately, we're feeling like the school looks bad. Community's gonna judge us. This is the thing people do. People do judge the test scores because we've given the test scores all the power. We've given the test

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

scores the power, which means we've given the testing companies the power.

Testing companies, by the way, are a very for profit business. They make billions upon billions of dollars making money on tests and test assessments and how to assess the test and test prep. They're making billions of dollars based on our fear and our belief that this test is the end all be all, for students, for schools, for teachers, for principals, for districts, for the United States, right? We're comparing global scores.

Like we're under a spell with the test. We think that if we don't get our teachers and get our scores up, get our kids up, get our kids motivated, and teachers teaching and those scores going all the way up, that we're going to lose our jobs because people will see us as incompetent. There's this cancel culture, right. All of it.

But really, what we're worried about is the emotions that come with the failure. The humiliation of being fired or the embarrassment of the test scores being posted publicly and your school being the lowest score in the district. The disappointment that comes with putting forth effort and failing. The criticism that comes from the local newspaper or your boss. The judgment that comes from teachers thinking it's your fault or parents thinking it's your fault, or parents blaming teachers. There's all this blame going on, right? Criticism and judgment.

Then you feel ashamed. You feel terrible as a human being. Like you failed the human race because the scores weren't what we wanted them to be. Then we feel fear that we're going to lose our job or something terrible is going to happen to us financially, professionally, personally. There's a lot of sadness. We feel sad. We feel rejection because people are telling us we're not good enough. We feel isolated from the group. Like we feel like we get ostracized from the field of education if we're not always performing and reaching every goal we set in terms of test scores.

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

I'm going to say, these emotions do feel terrible to feel. Nobody wants to experience them. So, we do everything in our power as human beings to try and avoid them. But in the meantime, while we're so busy avoiding the emotions, we end up leading and living in fear of the test and the scores all year long.

I have a new client who just signed with me who said, "All I want to do is escape. I have this deep urge to escape." It's like yeah, of course you do. Because you wake up every day with all of this fear and anxiety about what could happen to you. You're in constant fight or flight mode.

You go to work and all it is is this barrage of how I'm not good enough, and I'm not doing enough, and people aren't behaving the way I want them to. I want to control everything. I'm so exhausted by wanting to control the test scores and the students and the teachers that all you can do when you go home is pass out. Of course, you want to escape that. That is a terrible life to live.

So, what we're doing is we're just feeling the yucky emotions ahead of time. We don't want to fail so we fail ahead of time. We feel the emotion of like not good enough, not good enough, not doing enough, not being enough. Got to pressure the kids. Got to pressure the teachers. We are feeling the fear and anxiety and stress that we want to avoid ahead of time.

We're putting pressure on ourselves and teachers. We're shaming and doubting and worrying and feeling guilty that we haven't done enough to get those scores where we think they should be or where other people think they should be. We experience all of those negative emotions all year long. Then we wonder why we don't want to stay in school leadership.

So let me offer this. I want you to step out of the position for a minute with me. Come along on a ride with me and look at this from 30,000 feet. Okay. When educators believe that increasing the test scores is the number one

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

goal, it's the priority, and the consequence of not achieving that goal is going to be career death or financial death or social death or professional death. That we'll be ostracized from the field of education.

Of course, the entire focus is going to be on that test. Everything we do from the time we wake up to the time we go to bed, from the time we start the school year to the time those test scores come back and then after that, all we're doing is living and breathing worrying about those test scores.

The way we know this is true is because of our actions. We don't want to believe that the test scores or the test holds this much power over us, but the way we know it does is by the way we are feeling and reacting to it. Our actions are a window into what we truly believe is the priority.

So, you know based on what you're actively doing all day long and all year long, that the test matters more. The test scores matter more. And that the test scores are what determine your worth as a school leader, your career advancement, teacher's career advancement. Whether or not you're going to keep your career, your job at all.

Then we worry about the kids and them failing and what it's going to mean in terms of their life for high school and college and beyond. When you feel a lot of anxiety and fear about the test, what it means is that your brain just believes that the test results matter more than the other accomplishments and goals that you are striving for.

So yes, SEL has been a big topic. It's a hot button right now. We say it's the priority. We say it's the priority, but we know the truth. Nobody's throwing out the test. Nobody's like you know what? SEL matters more than the test. It matters more right now than the test scores. No one's saying that.

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

If somebody is saying that to you, maybe they truly believe that, but do their actions reflect those words? We can say a lot of things, but our actions reflect our beliefs. So, when people are running around like their head cut off, all crazy because of the test, that's how we know they value the test.

I want you to know something. I want you to know that it's normal to feel this level of stress because you have been taught and you've internalized all of these horrible things that will happen if test scores don't improve. Principals and teachers, they get moved or they get fired. States come in and take over districts. Instructional minutes increase, or the school year, the number of days increases.

We have cut out recesses. We've reduced the time that kids are allowed to eat lunch. We've cut out art and music and PE programs. We've completely eliminated them. We think that students are going to drop out or fail high school or not get into college and that their lives are ruined forever based on these test scores. Can you see this? We have made the test mean everything.

The truth is that it doesn't mean everything. Life goes on when the test scores drop. Have you noticed? Kids are still living and breathing. Teachers are still teaching. Principals still have jobs even when test scores drop. Life also isn't perfect when test scores go up. When your test scores go up, you feel great for a hot minute. Then you're back to grinding it out about how you're going to get them up again because we value the test more than we value anything else.

The reason we value the test more than we value anything else is because we're told to. We have been taught to. We've been conditioned to believe that the test is everything. I could get into a whole thing about who's making that happen, right? Your belief that the test matters most is a way of controlling you, a way of having power over you and your thoughts and your teachers and schools, right?

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

Testing companies want schools to believe that the test matters more than anything else. They're gonna give you all kinds of data to prove, oh well, kids who do better on the test do better in life. You can find any kind of data to support what you want people to believe. But I want you just to step out for a second and see could it be true that I'm being sold that the test matters so much more than it really does?

There's all kinds of reasons for that, right. Testing companies want us to believe the test matters because we spend billions of dollars in test prep, in test assessments, in testing, the test itself. Then they sell us how to analyze the test, how to interpret the test, how to get ready for the next test. There's always something. The technology that goes into this stuff. Like so many billions of dollars go into this test. Of course, they cannot afford for you not to believe everything in this test.

But the truth is, the test doesn't mean everything, and it also doesn't mean nothing. The truth, the reality of our lives in education, is that kids take tests, and those scores impact whether they get into certain universities or colleges or trade schools. What kind of private schools they can get into or not. There is some relevance to these tests. There are some trends worth noting. Yes, there is a significance to the test, but we have made it mean everything.

So, what we tend to think is this all or none mentality where we think either the test means everything and everything rides on the test scores, or who cares about the test? It doesn't mean anything. It's just a moment in time, and we blow it off. The truth is that there is an and here. This is the goal, to see the and. The test has meaning and it doesn't. We've been conditioned to fear the test. What we've done is given the test all of the power.

So, our job is now to take that power back. Our mental power, our emotional power, the power of our actions, us deciding the priorities, us seeing that the way we raise test scores isn't through fear and intimidation

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

and negative feelings. It's through empowerment and enlightenment and inspiration and motivation and energy and enthusiasm and curiosity and belief in ourselves, belief in our kids.

Belief is what raises test scores. Positive energy and emotion raises test scores. We all do better on tests when we feel good about ourselves and what we're doing. Our job has to be, as school leaders, is to take back control, ownership of what we're thinking and feeling and how we're approaching the test and how we're approaching leadership. And teaching and learning and what we're making it all mean.

We have become a prisoner of these tests. I picture us like we're in prison as prisoners, and the test is the prison. We want to release ourselves from that and release ourselves from the fear, right?

Let's look at it this way. There are so many millions of people in the world who do not participate in tax fraud because of their fear of going to prison. So, there is a fear that holds them back from participating in tax fraud. There's a lot of reasons not to participate in tax fraud, like you just don't want to do it. It's immoral, right. But there are some people who are just like really, I'd kind of do it except like I don't want to go to prison. Right?

So, there's fear. There's an appropriate level of fear that keeps people from breaking laws that harm the greater good or harm themselves even. But think about this. There's so much fear about going to prison. There are lots of people who are incarcerated unfairly. There is a huge fear about going to prison, right? We don't want to go to prison. We'll do anything not to get into prison. Oh my god, that would be the worst thing ever.

Then for some people, it happens. Their worst fear comes true. They go to prison, and now they're imprisoned. They have all kinds of fears and thoughts, and they feel terrible. They are processing all the emotions, and they're in prison, and they're constantly feeling the fear and the anxiety and

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

the stress and the discouragement. All of that, right, all of the negative feelings.

If you've ever watched the movie *Invictus*, it talks about how you can only be a prisoner in your mind. This is what I'm offering to you. You do not have to be imprisoned by this test and be locked down in fear over those test scores. You can choose to show up and lead your school and lead your life without fear of what's going to happen to you, what's going to happen to kids. You have to trust kids are going to be okay. You have to trust teachers are doing the right thing. You can go into school and believe things are going well regardless of what the test scores say.

I asked my client, what do you want to think and feel about the test? She said, "I wanted to believe that either way, everybody's going to be okay." Yeah, she wants to feel proud of the work she's doing, the effort she's putting forth, and the effort of her team, her staff, her students. She wants kids to feel safe, to try their best, to put themselves on the line, to push and go all in and be motivated to try. She wants them to feel safe enough to be able to show their best effort.

A lot of kids don't try because they're afraid of the consequences that come if they put themselves out there 100%. They tried their best and they failed, and then they get criticized for that. They're not going to do it. They're going to be like, "Whatever, I'm just going to mark all C's. I'm not even going to try because that way, nobody has to see what I really know and what I don't." Sometimes that happens with teachers too.

So, we want to create a culture of pride and effort and motivation and certainty. The way that you create this culture within your school cannot be based on fear, pressure, intimidation. It can only be created when people hold the belief systems that generate the emotions of pride and effort and motivation and certainty. You want people to feel safe. You want people to feel assured and supported that they're going to put their best effort out

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

there into the world, which is being very vulnerable. We're going to see it for what it is.

I love watching like the *X Factor*, all these people who come out and sing. They have no experience singing, most of them, and they get up on a stage with thousands of people watching them, and they put their hearts on the line. Some of them are amazing, and some of them aren't. Some of them move on, and some of them don't. Some of them fail and some succeed, you would say. But the vulnerability required to put your allness out there and show the world what you've got, that's a scary thing.

If we don't have a safe space for kids and teachers to do that, nobody's going to put forth their best effort because they're afraid the best isn't going to be good enough. So, we have to create a space of safety around your best is good enough. When you go all out, you get to feel the pride that comes with putting yourself out there. Even when you fail, we've got you. We love you. We care about you. It's okay. You get to try again.

There's never a finish line. We're just going to keep trying and keep going until you cross it. Then we're going to go to the next race, and we're going to work on that. We're going to jump all the hurdles until we get to the next finish line. That's what life is. You're running around the track, jumping hurdles, going around obstacles, falling, scraping your knee, taking a break, getting some respite, getting some Gatorade and then keep going. Race after race after race. That's what this is about. The test isn't the end game. It's just one of the hurdles.

So, I asked my client, what do you want kids to feel about the test? She said, "I want them to know that either way that it's okay. Whatever the test score shows, they are okay. They're good. We love them. We accept them for who they are." She said, "I want them to do their best, and I want to know that their best is acceptable. Even when they fail at trying their best, that's acceptable too."

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

I said what's in it for them to try their best? We have to understand how humans are motivated. You know, children are just small humans. They are steer cycles going on in their minds too. We have to look at what is a student who's highly successful, what are their thoughts? What do they feel on a regular basis? What did they think about school and teachers and learning and themselves? What actions do they take?

We want to look at kids who are struggling. What are their steer cycles? What are they thinking? What are they feeling? What are they doing? How are they showing up?

Look at the difference between the two thoughts, the sets of thoughts, the sets of emotions, the sets of actions. Then we want to work towards bridging the gap. And we have to know that there's no one right way. Like ideal students are doing it their way that works for them. That doesn't mean that way is the only one right way, but it does get give us insight to what kids are thinking and how they're feeling and why they're behaving the way they do.

The steer cycle is brilliant when it comes to understanding student behavior because we get to understand how are they feeling and why are they feeling it, which is simply their thoughts. So, when kids aren't trying their best on the test, we want to understand why. What don't they believe in themselves, or what are they thinking? Maybe it's just like, it's not cool to do good on the test. We don't know. We have to ask them. We have to find out what kids are thinking.

So, we have to know that because we want to help kids see what's in it for them. They don't care in fifth grade whether or not they get into college. Most kids don't. So, the elementary and middle school kids, they're not thinking about getting into their preferred college. They're thinking about what they're going to do after school, or what their friends are going to think about their test scores. Or they're thinking that their parents are going to kill

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

them if they don't do well on the test, or they're getting grounded or whatever, right?

They're thinking about their immediate life right now. So, we have to think about that in terms of what are kids thinking and feeling, and what's in it for them to do well and put forth their best effort right now? We want to sell them on the idea that there's pride in trying our best. There's pride in that accomplishment, in knowing you're the only one who knows if you did your best. We want to create a culture where it's safe to try your best and fail and not make it mean something's wrong with you.

So, at the core of this, all humans are driven by the basic emotional human needs. I took these from Tony Robbins, but I shifted them into the emotion. So, he calls them certainty, spontaneity, love and belonging, importance, contribution, and growth.

I broke those down into kids want to feel certainty. They want to experience certainty in their lives. What does it look like? It means feeling safe, assured, comforted, supported, confident. They want spontaneity. It's almost like the opposite. We want safety and certainty. We want to know what to expect. We also want spontaneity. We want that feeling of excitement, engagement, intrigue, captivated, curious, the unknown. It's very dramatic, right. Our brain likes that. We buy into that. We feed off of that.

We also want to feel love and belonging. We want to feel loved and accepted and appreciated and welcomed and wanted. We also, on the flip, like we want to feel this like group mentality, but we also want to feel important and significant. We want to stand out in the crowd. We want to feel valued and unique and special. We want to contribute to the world. We want to feel valuable and smart and insightful and helpful and needed and competent. We want to show people we have something to offer the world.

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

We also want to grow as humans. We want to feel empowered and knowledgeable and strong and resilient and brave and capable and accomplished.

So, students behave the way they do because they're attempting to meet one of these needs. So are teachers. So are parents. So, when someone's coming at you sideways, you can think what basic human need are they trying to meet? When it comes to test scores, there's so much anxiety wrapped around it. We've got to allow ourselves.

Number one, it's okay to feel a little bit anxious and a little bit nervous. That feeling, I'm thinking like athletes or performers. Like there's a little bit of anxiety or fear that comes with I hope I do well. I want to perform at my best, and I'm revved up, motivated to go. I've got all that energy and my tummy's kind of tickly, right? That's not a problem. Those emotions aren't a problem.

The emotions that become a problem are when they're coming from the thoughts that I'm not good enough, and if I fail, I make it mean I'll never succeed. I'll never win. I suck. I'm terrible. There's something inherently wrong with me.

You've heard Brené Brown say this. There's a difference between shame and guilt. Guilt is when you feel like you've done something wrong and you feel bad about it versus there's something wrong with me inherently. We don't want kids feeling shame. We don't want teachers feeling shame. I certainly don't want you feeling shame. But the test has created this culture of shame around the scores and what we make the mean about ourselves inherently.

So, I created a list of thoughts that might help promote success when it comes to this test and empowerment. Here's the secret. You don't need the test scores to tell you it's okay to believe these thoughts. You can think

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

them with or without the scores. You just get to choose to believe them. So why not? Let's try this.

Okay. I'm good at this. I know what to do. Even if I don't know everything, I'm still going to do well in my life, right? I'm going to be okay. Even when I fail, I'm gonna brush myself off and try again because I'm smart. I'm resourceful. I'm resilient. The test isn't everything. It's a big deal, but it's not a big deal. There's that and right? I want to do well. I want to show what I know. It's safe to show what I know. I like school because I'm good at it. I have friends. It's fun. My teacher likes me. I'm happy here. It's a safe place for me.

We want to instill those thoughts into our school climate, school culture, who we are. This is how we think. This is how we feel. If not, what's creating the dissonance? For kids who are struggling, they're thinking things like I suck at this. I don't know what to do, and it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter how if I try it all, so why bother? I'm dumb. Everyone makes a big deal about this test, and I don't know how to do it.

They're thinking, you know, even though the test is a big deal, I don't care because I might fail, or it's gonna make me look even more stupid. It's just for smart kids, and this isn't my thing. I fail at this thing every year. It makes me look bad. I want to do well, but I don't think I can. I don't want to show what I know because it might show what I don't know. It might show the truth of what I know and don't know, and that would be embarrassing or humiliating.

I hate school because I'm not good at it. I don't have friends. It's not fun. My teacher doesn't like me. I don't like her. I'm not happy here. It's not a safe place for me. These are struggling thoughts versus successful thoughts. We want to think about what kids are thinking. We want to think about teachers are thinking and feeling, but it starts with us. What are we thinking and feeling?

Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

When you're thinking the test is everything, I promise you, you're pressuring students and teachers. When you can reconcile that you're going to be okay no matter what those test scores show, you can decide to show up with certainty and create safety for yourself, safety for your students, safety for your teachers. Your entire energy on your campus is gonna come down around the test. The beautiful result of that is when people feel calmed and certain and assured that they're okay no matter what, people actually perform better on tests when they feel safe and calm.

Here's the last thing I'm going to say. It could be true. You might lose your job. Teachers might get moved around. Kids might fail out of school. All of those things are reality. We're not denying that that is an outcome, a potential outcome. We're not saying the worst case things never happen. I'm not saying that at all. That's equally true.

What I am saying is we're only looking at that and not at the positive potentials. Not on the other side of things. There are times when we fail, and we're okay. There are times when we succeed, and we still feel terrible. I just want you to see the balance of that. Take the wind out of the sails of the power this test has over you and your thoughts and your body and your emotions.

Teach that to yourself, and then share it with your staff. I hope this has been so helpful. I will talk with you guys next week. Take good care of yourselves. Have an amazing week. I love you all. See you next week. Bye.

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Ep #221: Test Score Anxiety

dash-with-me to learn more. I'd love to support you in becoming an empowered school leader.

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