

True test comes after exams as schools struggle to keep focus on learning

By [Ana Ribeiro](#)
Ana.Ribeiro@StarNewsOnline.com

Published: Friday, June 11, 2010 at 12:41 p.m.



Photo by Ken Blevins

Chris Flood and Charles McIntyre work with Kristy Carter on kite projects Thursday, June 10, in her fourth-grade class at Codington Elementary School.

Fourth-grader Michael Fowler got so nervous over his end-of-grade test that he felt sick to his stomach.

"I worked hard on the first test, and I didn't want to do it again," said Michael, who attends Codington Elementary School in Wilmington. His teacher, Kristy Carter, said children know the state-mandated test is important and put enough pressure on themselves, so teachers at the school don't feel the need to constantly remind them about it.

But on Thursday, with the test weeks behind them, Michael and his classmates were relaxed, building three-dimensional kites out of straws, strings and tissue paper. Fifth-graders in a nearby class laughed hard as teacher Richard Kortan wore a chicken costume, keeping his promise to do so if at least 90 percent of his students passed the test.

The pressure is off, the curriculum is wrapping up, and students can now kick back. The flip side of that is the challenge to keep them motivated and busy during the school days left before summer.

For middle and elementary schools, the state allows regular students to be tested within the last 22 days of the school year, said Lynda Fuller, spokeswoman for N.C. Public Schools. The testing window is smaller at high schools – usually the last 12 days of the course, she said.

Schools don't give the tests the last day of classes because they need time to prepare and retest students who didn't pass, calculate the results and send them to the state, Fuller said.

A lot of parents have concerns over how that post-exam time is spent, said Cindy Bennett, the state schools' director of curriculum and instruction. She said it's up to local school systems to decide the best use of that time, although the state does suggest activities upon request, often dealing with preparing students for the next grade.

Schools such as the year-round Codington Elementary have to fill a particularly long gap. As at other elementary schools, its students take end-of-grade tests in mid-May – but their classes don't end until June 15, a week after the rest of New Hanover County schools..

That schedule provides for the state-mandated 180 days of instruction, interspersed with three-week breaks and a monthlong summer vacation, Principal Budd Dingwall said.

Carter said she and her colleagues help each other come up with ideas and plan ahead to keep the time after exams fun but also educational.

“You have to have some kind of structure, or else they'll think it's summer,” the fourth-grade teacher said.

Without the obligation to prepare students for end-of-grade tests, teachers have more time to give them hands-on activities, Carter said. She ties the students' post-exam activities – such as making kites and budgeting for and building a mini-golf course out of recyclable materials – to geometry and other subjects that will be explored in fifth grade.

Sixth-grade teacher Leah Barnello says she tries not to give her students any downtime after they take the state tests in late May.

When asked if it's hard to keep students motivated for those two weeks before summer break, the Murray Middle teacher replied, “For me it's easier than having to deal with behavioral problems.”

Bob Grimes, who has been principal in both New Hanover and Brunswick counties, said he found it a lot tougher to keep students engaged in middle school than in high school after the tests.

“No matter what we did, we got criticized,” said Grimes, who was principal at Shallotte and Trask middle schools before moving on to high schools. He said teachers would try to introduce the middle-schoolers to the next grade's topics. “That went over like a lead balloon,” he said. “They did not see the sense in that.”

He said at North Brunswick High, where he is currently principal, students can just drive home when they're finished, but middle-schoolers don't have such autonomy. Also, at local high schools, students take the state tests in early June, a lot closer to the end of the school year than at middle and elementary schools.

Barnello said she managed to get a positive response from her middle-school students during this year's post-exam period, and even got them interested in seventh-grade algebra. She assigned them everything from math puzzles to writing poems in chalk on the basketball court, and made sure those who passed the test were occupied listening to a book on tape while others reviewed to take the test again.

“They did not have a moment to breathe,” Barnello said.

Ana Ribeiro: 343-2327

On Twitter.com: @newswriterana

Copyright © 2010 StarNewsOnline.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.