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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## ANSWER SHEET

# Parent to Obama: Let me tell you about the Common Core test Malia and Sasha don't have to take but Eva does



By Valerie Strauss

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I get a lot of e-mail from parents and teachers who wonder if President Obama, whose children go to the private Sidwell Friends School, knows what is actually going on with all of the standardized testing in public schools. Here's an open letter to Obama explaining what he is missing, written by Rebecca Steinitz, a literacy consultant in urban high schools, a writer and an editor. She was previously director of the High School Program at Lesley University's School of Education and an English professor at Ohio Wesleyan University, where she ran the Freshman Writing Program. Steinitz is also a parent, as you will see when you read this post of hers, which also appeared on Huffington Post.

Dear President Obama,

We have something very important in common: daughters in the seventh grade. Since your family walked onto the national stage in 2007, I've had a feeling that our younger daughters have a lot in common, too. Like my daughter Eva, Sasha appears to be a funny, smart, loving girl, who has no problem speaking her mind, showing her feelings, or tormenting her older sister.

There is, however, one important difference between them: Sasha attends private school, while Eva goes to public school. Don't get me wrong, I fully support your decision to send Malia and Sasha to private school, where it is easier to keep them safe and sheltered. I would have done the same. But because she is in private school, Sasha does not have to take Washington's standardized test, the D.C. CAS, which means you don't get a parent's-eye view of the annual high-stakes tests taken by most of America's children.

I have been watching Eva take the Massachusetts MCAS since third grade. To tell you the truth, it hasn't been a big deal. Eva is an excellent student and an avid reader. She goes to school in a suburban district with a strong curriculum and great teachers. She doesn't worry about the tests, and she generally scores at the highest level.

So when I saw that practice tests had been released by the PARCC consortium (which is designing new Common Core tests for 16 states, including Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia), I thought Eva would be a great test case for the test.

I should mention that my interest in PARCC is professional as well as parental. I am a literacy consultant in urban high schools, where many of my students struggle to pass the 10th grade MCAS, which is a graduation requirement in Massachusetts. I support the Common Core State Standards, which hold teachers and students across the country to high expectations for deep reading and writing. As Massachusetts moves to the new standards, I am already seeing tangible improvement in my students' skills, as well as in the quality and rigor of Eva's schoolwork. So I was anxious to see what these new tests would be like, and Eva was eager to try one out.

Here are a few of the things Eva said as she took the seventh grade ELA test: "These are such weird questions." "This test is crazy." "This is a stupid, impossible test." "This question just is a stupid awful question. It makes no sense."

Wouldn't you be concerned if you heard these reactions from Sasha?

I'm sure one thing you'd wonder is whether the questions really are "weird," "stupid," and "awful." We both know that seventh graders can be a tad melodramatic and slightly prone to exaggeration.

So here's one essay prompt:

*You have learned about electricity by reading two articles, "Energy Story" and "Conducting Solutions," and viewing a video clip titled "Hands-On Science with Squishy Circuits." In an essay, compare the purpose of the three sources. Then analyze how each source uses explanations, demonstrations, or descriptions of experiments to help accomplish its purpose. Be sure to discuss important differences and similarities between the information gained from the video and the information provided in the articles. Support your response with evidence from each source.*

Eva's comment on this question: "It's impossible, and there's like 15 parts." Just as I feared, she exaggerated. There are only four parts. But take a close look at those parts. Can you figure out what you're supposed to be doing here, President Obama? And could you have done it in seventh grade?

I know a lot of seventh graders. They know how to compare and contrast, and they know how to provide evidence, but I'm quite sure that unpacking this prompt, let alone accomplishing it, would feel pretty "impossible" to most of them.

Overall, Eva felt the test was "really complicated, hard, and unclear." And her score bears out her impression: she got ten of 45 multiple choice questions wrong. Here's what she had to say about that: "Something is wrong. I should not be getting in the C range in this test."

Just to be clear, Eva was not complaining about doing badly on the test; she was concerned that if the test was so difficult for her, it would be even more difficult for many of her peers, and thus would not provide an accurate picture of what seventh graders really can (and should) do.

Like Sasha, I'm sure, Eva is empathetic. She spends a lot of time helping her classmates with their work, and she was worried about them: "Doing multiple choice and a few open responses one day and an essay the other day [as in the MCAS] is totally different from doing really hard multiple choice and then doing an essay. This is hard. For me it's faster because I'm typing [the PARCC tests are on computer, while the MCAS is paper], but for some kids it's going to take more than a day, because writing essays is hard, and typing is hard for some of them."

You may wonder whether a seventh grader is the best person to assess a seventh grade test. I actually think seventh graders are great people to assess the tests: they've been taking them for years, and they generally know what's what. But if you want a professional opinion, I can provide that too.

I have a Ph.D. in English, I've been in college and high school classrooms for over 20 years, and for much of that time I've trained and coached high school English teachers. I was shocked that the ninth grade test included an excerpt from Bleak House, a Dickens novel that is usually taught in college. I got seven out of 36 multiple choice questions wrong on the eleventh grade test. And I had no idea what to do with this essay prompt on the third grade test:

*Old Mother West Wind and the Sandwich both try to teach important lessons to characters in the stories. Write an essay that explains how Old Mother West Wind's and the Sandwich's words and actions are important to the plots of the stories. Use what you learned about the characters to support your essay.*

Would Sasha have been able to figure this out in third grade? And, more importantly, is there any reason a third grader should have to figure out an essay prompt this broad and abstract?

Just as you do, President Obama, I want America's children to learn and succeed. I want every classroom in the United States to have great teaching and a rigorous, challenging, engaging curriculum. I believe the Common Core State Standards could help make this happen.

But the standards won't succeed if the tests used to assess them are confusing, developmentally inappropriate, and so hard that even good students can't do well on them. Setting high standards and effectively teaching them is a fine route to success; setting children up to fail because of ineffective tests is not.

Eva, Sasha, and all of America's children deserve better.