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So it all boils down to this. An entire year's work at Lafayette will be measured and evaluated by how our 3rd-5th grade students do on the DC Comprehensive Assessment System the weeks of March 31st and April 7th. Every time you get a group of principals together this is the hot topic of conversation. How everything a school does for an entire year is reduced down to its performance on one test. How much test prep are you doing? What will be the effect of so many snow days? Is it really possible to cover a year's worth of instruction in just three quarters? We are taking these tests two weeks earlier than last year and a full month earlier than the year the DC-CAS was first introduced. That is a lot of instruction to compress into a much shorter time period.

So what has Lafayette been doing to get ready? I am a firm believer that good instruction during the school year is what is most important in having good test scores. Yes, you can cram the night before for certain kinds of tests, and we have all done that, but those final semester exams usually took studying over the entire course. That is the way the DC-CAS works. It doesn't measure student retention of a bunch of little factoids. It asks the children to read a selection and answer questions about that passage. Some selections are fiction, some poems, some are a series of directions and others are non-fiction. Students need to find the evidence in the text that supports their choice of an answer. Yes, you need to know different literary terms and various vocabulary words, but the children do not need to know who wrote what book, when and where. The math test has some computation activities and lots of real-life application story problems. You need to know your basic arithmetic facts by heart. But no complicated formulas or equations. Those are actually provided for the students. We'll be spending four mornings next week taking these two tests.

Then on April 8th, the fourth grade takes a composition test and the 5th grade takes a science test, one of two tests that really is more fact centered. But it covers science from 1st grade on, so the real trick to doing well on that test is reading some good non-fiction in the sciences throughout the elementary school years. The next day the 5th grade ends the DC-CAS testing for the year with a DC mandated health test. We have really increased our library collection in

science and technology to give students a wide variety of materials and topics to choose from in this content area. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, more emphasis has been placed on non-fiction texts across the grades so reading these kinds of selections is no surprise to Lafayette students. But for the first time the science scores will count when determining school effectiveness next summer.

We have had three benchmark tests so far this year and have gone over the results with all students. We have had some small groups working with Mrs. Echave and Ms. Betz on some specific skill weaknesses. We have been looking at test items with students to help them figure out why they got some things right as well as why they got some things wrongs. The tests are untimed, so we have been encouraging everyone to work slowly, go over the answers, and not to say “I’m done” unless absolutely sure. Last year we introduced ST Math in grades 4 and 5 and our math scores took a huge leap. This year we added grades 1, 2 and 3. Practically every classroom discussion includes the phrase ‘cite the evidence’. We are as ready as we are going to be.

So encourage your children in grades 3-5 to do their best and take all the time they need. Help them get to bed early and eat a good breakfast. Let them know that you know they are going to do just fine because they have been working hard all year to get ready and are very well prepared. That slow and steady is how to take these tests. They are not in a race with their classmates to be the first one done. There will be one more set of benchmark tests in June. We have also been asked to pilot some of the math items that will be used on next year’s new test, the PARCC (Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers). Doesn’t that sound appropriate for elementary students? And then we will be done with standardized testing for the 2013-14 school year. How wonderful.