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Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade

Linda Perlstein

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The pressure is on at schools across America. In recent years, reforms such as No Child Left Behind have created a new vision of education that emphasizes provable results, uniformity, and greater attention for floundering students. Schools are expected to behave more like businesses and judged almost solely on the bottom line: test scores.

To see if this world is producing better students, Linda Perlstein immersed herself in a suburban Maryland elementary school. The resulting portrait -- detailed, human, and truly thought-provoking -- is marked by the same narrative gifts and expertise that made Not Much Just Chillin' so illuminating.

The school, once deemed a failure, is now held up as an example of reform done right. Perlstein explores the rewards and costs of that transformation, through the experiences of the people who lived it. Nine-year-olds meditate to activate their brains before exams and kindergartners write paragraphs. Teachers attempt to address diverse needs at the same time they are expected to follow daily scripts, and feel compelled to focus on topics that will be tested at the expense of those that won't. The principal attempts to keep it all together, in the face of immense challenges.

Perlstein provides the first detailed view of how new education policies are modified by human realities. Tested will be talked about, thought about, written about -- and will almost certainly play an important role in the national debate as the federal education law come up for renewal.

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