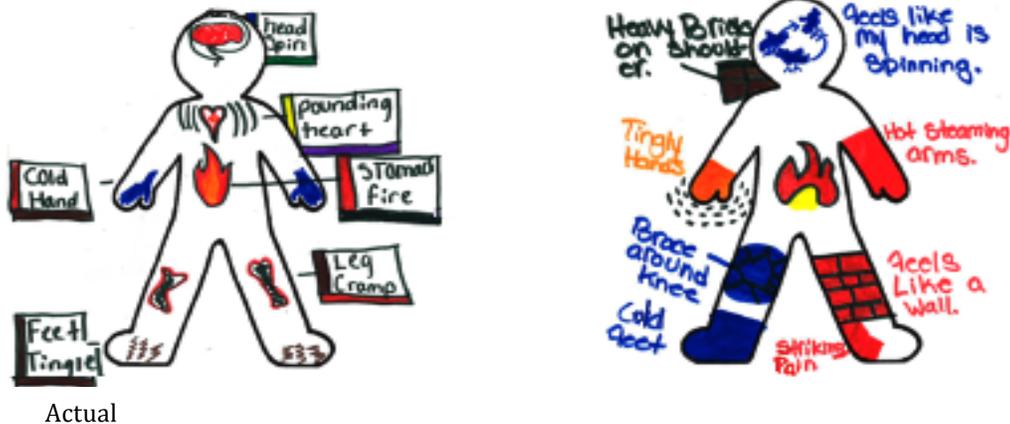# Real Stories, Real Kids

Presenting Issue: - Students in Chicago Public Schools are now taking a respite from an intense standardized testing regime that challenges them academically, mentally and emotionally. Unfortunately, this rigorous testing can take a toll, especially when many schools cheer students on to be part of a "winning" school.

Actual

Background - Students flood the halls of their middle school. It's what appears to be a regular Thursday morning – the bell rings for students to grab their books and head to class; a student gets a drink of water; there are posters on the walls stating "You Can Do It!" Yet one little girl hides in the bathroom crying.

"I just can't. It's too much pressure. Testing, it's just too much," Jessica, a third grader, screams to her friend Tomika on the other side of the bathroom stall door. Jessica's hands are hiding her reddening eyes as tears roll down her cheeks behind the locked stall, making it difficult for another student, Ashley, to see her, let alone hug her.

"I feel scared too," Ashley says, "This test is a really big deal. I know that I've been too worried to even think about it, let alone take it!

This situation is all too common – students feel overwhelmed but lack a supportive forum in which to share their worries and receive necessary support from a trained and caring adult. With budgetary cuts common across public schools in Illinois, few mental health professionals can be found in Chicago Public Schools, despite schools' continually asking for them. Ashley's words ring true, and ring loudly: "I wish I had someone to talk to about it."

Schools rightly focus on preparing students for standardized tests, but how are student's anxieties about sitting for tests being addressed? JPA's Test-Taking Anxiety program provides an answer to this striking question.

Intervention - This program enables a trained JPA therapist to engage with a classroom and really hear what 's on students' minds, what their worries are; it also enables the therapist to get a feel for the classroom's unique socio-emotional needs. Then, in conjunction with their teacher, JPA's therapists tailor a curriculum that incorporates what they hear from students with teaching them how to cope with their anxieties.

As part of JPA's Test Anxiety Program, JPA's therapists worked with third graders at Jessica's school, directly addressing Jessica's fears. For instance, students shared that they didn't know that it was "alright to have difficulties testing" and that they thought they were "bad for being worried about the test." JPA therapists normalize this experience, teaching students that it's typical to have an array of feelings about testing. After the course was completed, Debra, her therapist, remembers how Jessica ran up to her, grinning. "Jessica introduced me to the friends around her as her 'anxiety teacher' and said that she 'loved me.'" Jessica shared how great it was to be able to anonymously write down her specific fears about testing on a piece of paper, alongside her class, and to give it to Debra for a response. She wrote down "i'm bad for thinking I would fail."

Outcome- Jessica said she had been taking the NWEA MAP test that past week and "had started to feel nervous." However, instead of shutting her booklet and putting her head down, she shared something important.

"I remembered what we had talked about in the Test Taking Anxiety program and it worked! I remembered to take deep breaths and that what I was going through was normal. I scored 8 points higher!"

Debra praised Jessica's determination to work hard, identify her needs in a difficult situation, and use the inner strength she's built up. Jessica gave Debra a hug and ran off saying, "I did it, yo!"

This example highlights the unlimited inner strength and resolve that can be tapped into when children's feelings are listened to by adults – and when adults have the social-emotional tools to support their students

(Note: All names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the individuals involved.)