

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Testing merry-go-round

Last week, Gov. Tom Wolf announced the state will reduce the time school districts must spend next spring administering the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test (PSSA).

Testing will be reduced from three weeks to two weeks, and moved to later in the spring.

Keystone exams, which were originally administered to high school students as a graduation requirement, are being delayed.

For decades, Pennsylvania has been immersed in the nationwide testing obsession that has reduced learning to a narrow set of goals reflected in multiple choice questions.

And none of the state tests have been given consistently enough over the years to measure anything worthwhile.

In the 1970s it was the EQA test — Educational Quality Assessment.

In the 1980s it was TELLS — Testing for Essential Learning and Literacy Skills.

The PSSAs started in the 1990s, and became far more onerous with the passage of the 2001 “No Child Left Behind” federal law, with the chimerical goal of making all children proficient in reading and math by the year 2014. It didn’t happen, of course.

“No Child Left Behind” was re-

placed in 2015 by a new federal law called “Every Student Succeeds,” which gave more decision-making power about testing back to the states.

Meanwhile, all these wonderful titles make it seem like the government is reforming education, when it’s just wasting time and money.

Standardized tests are a valid measure of some kinds of achievement, but not others.

Vitally important qualities such as the ability to think creatively, work with others, and solve problems in real world situations cannot be quantified in a paper or computer exam.

Courage, decency, honesty, compassion — all essential to a life well lived — don’t show up on a standardized test.

For all the time our school districts spend fretting about PSSA test scores, there is only one credible test that has measured student achievement consistently since 1970 -- the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The results of this test, from periodic national samplings, show students have done the same or only marginally better in reading and math than they did 40 years ago.

So let’s keep testing in perspective. As sociologist William Bruce Cameron wrote, “not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”



Commentary by
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