



Position Paper: STANDARDS, TESTING AND THE WHOLE CHILD

New York State PTA recognizes the role academic learning standards play in setting educational goals. Standards can essentially be defined as descriptors of what students need to know, do, and understand in order to either move to the next level of academic attainment or into the global workplace. According to the NYS Academy of Teaching and Learning, the NYS Board of Regents approved the introduction of learning standards in order that “children may expect an intellectually powerful education no matter where they live; in which teaching, assessment, and the provision of supports for learning are to be closely linked; and in which schools and parents share the same high expectations of youngsters”.

Originally envisioned as learning guidelines or goals, standards consisted of objectives, tasks, and assessments. Under the federal mandate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), state assessments as prescribed by standards, have become the single indicator of achievement for federal accountability measures of student, school building and school district success. Through NCLB, standards have now taken on an even more vigorous meaning. NCLB has tipped the “balance” of objectives, tasks and assessments heavily toward standardized tests as the criteria for measuring a school’s annual yearly progress. When a dip, minor or significant, occurs in student scores and/or there is failure of a building or district to meet annual goals, the resulting consequences can have a profound impact on students, schools and the community.

In an effort to avert punitive consequences of “failure”, whether fiscal, operational and/or just negative media exposure, the pressure on school district staff to ratchet up the time spent on test preparation and remediation has sharply increased. According to a report by the Center on Educational Policy (CEP), school districts have needed to increase instructional time for English Language Assessments (ELA) and Math have done so at the expense of other subjects. Nationally, 44% of school districts have cut time from one or more subjects or activities at the elementary level, including science, social studies, art and music, physical education, lunch and recess. On average the cuts amounted to about 30 minutes a day. Overall, the decreases represent an average reduction of 31% in the total amount of instructional time devoted to these subjects. Additionally, media reports add that some administrators, feeling the pressure of increased testing requirements, can’t justify the time away from the classroom and curriculum and are either eliminating field trips or allowing only those that have a curricular connection.

Among the seven NYS Learning Standards is the Standard for the Arts. This provides school districts with direction and basic structure for developing curricula that will both integrate and advance arts education. Skills such as creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, memory, logic and social skills through communication, teamwork, and esteem-building are honed through the disciplines of music, dance, theater and visual arts. Research demonstrates that the interplay of these skills with core academics fosters heightened student achievement and growth in all areas.

Balance is critical when considering the needs of the whole child. A whole-child approach recognizes the importance and value of all developmental facets in children – physical, social, emotional and academic. While there needs to be some measure of instructional accountability, there seems to be a growing over-reliance on standardized tests as indicators of achievement. Preoccupation with test performance can undermine student interest in learning and teacher creativity in delivering instruction, diminishing motivation and confidence for both. Increasing amounts of time are spent to boost fact learning, test taking strategies or to remediate post-test through support services, such as Academic Intervention Services (AIS). These activities engage the logical, literal mind and limit time to develop the artistic and creative mind. Students who are subjected to “drill and spill” teaching are more likely to shut down to instruction than those who have access to differentiated instruction as well as to broadening courses of the arts, music, social studies, science, and physical education. Teaching a well-balanced curriculum, while allowing for physical activity and socialization, challenges and inspires learning and motivates everyone in the classroom, student and teacher alike.

There is a need to reshape or rebalance the concept of standards - what students need to know, do, and understand. Within NCLB exists a standard for the Arts. It can be said that this standard yields to the undertow of performance measures for English and math. There needs to be greater attention paid to this. The greater the pressure to raise achievement scores, the greater is the pull from subjects and activities that stimulate different pathways to learning.

Whether referring to art, music, foreign language, field trips or recess – these ALL contribute to preparing the whole child academically, socially and for civic participation.

Succeeding in the global marketplace requires skills that move beyond information storage to conceptualization. There will be an ever-increasing need to more creatively utilize the technology that exists. The combination of best classroom practices and supports for integrating disciplines provides for enriched curriculum which will promote both a balance and connection between content skills and conceptual skills. Instead of more test preparation to reach standards, standards need to be rebalanced to prepare students for life.

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