



Education at the crossroads

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Columnist

— Throughout the past decades, the American school system appeared to have operated at cross purposes. It managed to foster a work force capable of sustaining technological changes and at the same time restricted social change to very narrow limits, particularly as related to low income, minority groups and the poor. For centuries schools have supplied the workforce needs for an industrial economy that requires lower unskilled workers, middle class technicians, and managerial elite capable of performing the caretaker functions in corporate enterprise. Focusing on such goals appears to be somewhat inappropriate for workforce requirements for this century. To be prepared for today's workforce, students must be able to understand the complex world.

Reliable studies suggest that the education that many students receive today in science, mathematics, and technology is not adequate for a world that is being transformed by scientific and technological advances. People have to be familiar with the basic concepts of science, mathematics, engineering, and technology to think critically about the world and to make informed decisions about personal and societal issues.

To test or not to test? That is the question

The State of Texas has once again focused its attention on testing and alternative education.

The Board of Trustees of the Houston Independent School District approved a resolution and voted to ask the Legislature to replace the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills with end-of-the course examinations (Huntsville Item, 4-9-2007).

At least two bills are currently being considered by the Texas Legislature suggesting that TAKS being discontinued. As I listened to news reports and examined the rationale used to justify discontinuation, I was reminded that the basic argument used is not new.

Prior to public school integration, little emphasis was placed on standardized tests beyond measuring student progress in the interest of remediation and student placement. Tests were not used as one of the planning tools for strengthening students' capabilities.

Instead, tests were designed to assess the knowledge base; overall "teacher" effectiveness; and how well a student measured up in competition in relation to their academic counterparts in other schools, cities and state. If weaknesses were discovered, teachers recommended additional work to prepare you for college and the world of work.

With the onslaught of school desegregation, irate parents and community leaders from the North and South along with majority group school administrators appeared to be convinced that "integration" would lower standards in previously all-white schools. As a result, a "school testing market" was born. Some were convinced that testing students and segregating them according to their performance on standardized tests like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and State teachers examinations would protect the integrity of what they called "quality education" and maintain racial purity by using the results to sift and sort minority students for the hidden purpose of isolating what they perceived to be "students with problems or deficits."

As the process began, fewer and fewer white students were placed in classes with African-American/minority group children. Reliable data indicate that, as a result, a generation of children,

particularly African-American and Hispanic students, were placed in special and/or alternative education classes.

In a national dropout study in which I served as one of the researchers, our findings revealed that the stereotyping of these children, in many ways, changed not only their status but the course of their lives. All of the efforts put forth by African-American educators to motivate and educate many of the victims were in vain because with the closing of African-American schools, many children entered school settings where they were re-segregated or treated differentially.

Black educators insisted — time and time again — that the practices imposed by majority school systems destroyed the positive self-concepts of millions of minority group children. Yet, in 2007, school administrators have suddenly experienced “out-of-body” experiences that suggest that testing is only one phase of broad-based assessment. Other measures must be included in the equation before comprehensive assessments can be made.

Alternative education and its impact

In years past, children placed in alternative education classes would have had the advantage of dedicated and sympathetic teachers who understood their lifestyles; teachers who worked with parents and community organizations to help them find their talents and places in the educational/workforce hierarchy.

If you visit any small town, rural/suburban school systems, African American/Hispanic teachers are as rare “as the one-room school.” Why?

Minority group educators and organizations have consistently warned that the tests were “not only culturally biased” but incapable of assessing students’ academic capabilities or accurately measuring a student’s progress and full potential. They called into question issues of reliability and predictability. Now, reliable studies are finding that African American educators were not just “whistling Dixie.” They understood then — as now — how best to tap the human potential to ensure that “no child would be left behind.”

In Texas Assessment of Basic Skills was first administered in 1980, followed by the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills, and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in the early 1990s.

For a while, the achievement trends were promising until the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) — a campus report card — were put in place. Then, there were reports of cheating and “teaching the test only;” thereby robbing the students of more broad-based, innovative teaching — combined with motivational relevance.

The Texas Appleseed Report published by the Houston Chronicle (4-9-2007) revealed some startling statistics on the “school-to-prison” pipeline.

Students from some Texas School districts are far more likely to end up in alternative schools or other disciplinary programs, especially if those students are minorities or have learning disabilities. Sarah Viren wrote: “Critics say many of these alternative schools, which have five times the dropout rate of ordinary campuses, have become holding pens for difficult kids.”

More than 100,000 students per year are sent to Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs. Even more disturbing were findings that suggest “Children who have just entered school are young offenders.

An estimated 600 Pre-K and kindergarten students and more than 3,000 first graders have been sent to DAEPS over the past five years. If these statistics are accurate, we are gambling with our children’s future. Schools today stand at the crossroads, unsure of what direction to take to restore innovation and creativity to the educational process. Former Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education John White’s notion of the value of education remains relevant today. “The children of rich and poor, of the honored and unknown, meet together on common ground.

Their pursuits, their aims and aspirations are one — In the competition, the defeats and successes of the classrooms, they meet each other as they are to meet in the broader fields of life before them; they are taught to distinguish between the essential and true, the fractions and false, in character and condition. A vast and mutual benefit is the result.”

A recent report by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, and the National Research Council (2007) outlined educational imperatives for the 21st century: “The challenge facing education today is more varied than those in the past. It encompasses the rapidly increasing diversity of the nation’s population, the growing internationalization of commerce and culture, the explosive development of information technologies, and other great technical and social transformations.

“There is no simple prescription for success. But a focus on high standards for all, coupled with recognition of the need for versatility in the face of change, can help prepare all students for the demands of the 21st century.” Given these imperatives, no child should be left behind.

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