

Botched: Righting the Wrongness in NYS Education Opinion



By Bruce H. Crowder, EdD

A Turkish proverb warns: **“When you’re going down the wrong path and realize it, STOP!”** Oh, the power of proverbial wisdom. Oh, would the powers that be acknowledge where we are in education reform in New York.

The key features of wrongness will be examined in this article; however, fundamental flaws rest on wrongheadedness that believes that an annual, single test score captures half of an educator's expertise and that newly created learning standards may be assessed prior to their implementation.

Wrongness is further exaggerated by the extensive attention given to accountability when time for planning and curriculum development is needlessly pushed to the side. This goes further when school leadership is caught up in continuous negotiation. The belly of New York State education has surely been cut away. Education reform has been forcibly shifted to a bloated system of accountability.

Too much time has been lost and too much is at stake. At this time there are no winners. A recounting of events designed to improve education in the state is timely if the current conditions thwarting reform are to be corrected. An examination of these events brings forth a critical question: Can well-meaning politicians and bureaucrats develop harmful laws and regulations? Current evidence would support an affirmative answer. Let's begin with the knee-jerk action tied to the acquisition of U.S. Department of Education funding.

APPR

In May 2010, the New York State Legislature acted to secure federal Race to the Top (RTTT) funds by approving an amendment to Educational Law 3012-c regarding the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) of teachers and principals. Race to the Top stipulated that certain components of a teacher evaluation system be in place for approval of RTTT funding. The components required that the system needed to be rigorous and transparent, differentiate effectiveness levels for teacher ratings, conduct annual evaluations with feedback, employ clear measures of student achievement growth as part of the evaluations, and use the evaluations for compensation, promotion, tenure, certification, removal, and staff development. However, after two years of APPR implementation, 99 percent of

teachers were rated as effective or highly effective. This result appeared counterintuitive to the requirements delineated in federal and state policies, and therefore must be wrong. Could it be that the requirements did not acknowledge the complexity of the work educators do which does not lend itself well to quantification? In a seemingly over-the-top reaction to the disproportionate distribution of positive ratings, Governor Cuomo advanced some serious dimensions to the state's school reforms with major focus on the evaluation of educators. First of all, he would boost overall school funding by nearly 5 percent, but only provide the full increase if state legislators do what he desires regarding educator evaluation. He would require student standardized test scores to account for a full 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation, rather than the current 20 percent. Is the governor looking for an evaluation system that meets his desires, rather than one that portrays the reality of education?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards were launched in 2009 by governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia through their membership in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). State school chiefs and governors recognized the value of consistent, real-world learning goals and launched this effort to ensure all students, regardless of where they live, would graduate from high school prepared for college, career, and life. Common Core State Standards were introduced in the state in 2011. However, there was no plan for review and implementation. Initially, support for the standards was broad based; however, without a plan and SED guidance, implementation would stall and sputter. Implementation of Common Core would have to result in new curriculum with access to new content to address the major shifts in reading and mathematics. This has not happened.

COMMON CORE-BASED TESTING IN ELA AND MATH

The initial round of Common Core testing took place in the school year 2012-13. Students in grades 3-8 were tested in English language arts and mathematics. The results were disastrous as they were predicted to be. Such a prediction clearly spoke to the fact that students were being tested on new learner expectations not yet in place. To place new learner expectations into a learning context requires the development of curriculum. For some reason the curriculum connection with accountability appears to be lost. This could only happen in a politicized environment where a single, dominant focus does not permit a fulsome explication of the challenges of educating our youth.

OPT-OUT PARENTS

An opt-out movement has taken hold in the state and across the nation. In New York, 200,000 students have opted out of this spring's state tests. Some New York districts have had more than half of their students refuse to take the tests. Polling suggests that half of all New York voters say they support the families that have opted out of the tests. Such a tactic may have serious, long-term consequences not only for the loss of important student performance data, but also for an emerging deleterious effect regarding public perception of the value of testing. In a competitive world where education and the economy are hinged, there is the need to examine how well we are doing.

BOTCHING

Striving for federal funding has resulted in crucial consequences. In the case of New York, it was mandated accountability before the research and development of a comprehensive plan for public review was in place. What is clear is the politicization of the most important domain of a nation's or state's lifeline: the education of its youth.

In addition, the degree of misunderstanding of change process and the great challenges associated with educating our youth is

remarkable. The notion that learning is steady and smooth is untrue when in fact it fluctuates from year to year. Learning growth comes in spurts that emanate from influences in current and prior years. Therefore, learning accrued over time rests squarely on the contributions of many. How, then, is it reasonable to reward any one person because learning eclipsed on his or her watch?

UNBOTCHING: A REASONABLE ATTEMPT FOR CONSIDERATION

The recommendations that follow are based on a half-century of experiences through the myriad reforms that have found their way into American education with the intent of improving it. The constant striving for improvement is important.

1. While a measurement is important in providing a picture in time, it cannot and should not be a prime factor in determining the employment status of a principal or teacher. Allowing 50 percent of a teacher's performance to be based on one test is totally unreasonable.

Additionally, the governor prohibited the use of portfolios, surveys, and artifacts for use in the composite score. These, indeed, are the real tools of teaching and the items that provide a genuine opportunity for authentic evaluations. If life has taught me anything, it's that people want to be successful. So, any system of accountability needs to ensure that the tools for improvement exist within the enterprise. For education those tools begin with a clearly defined and articulated curriculum with embedded assessments and timely reporting within an integrated technology system.

Recommendation: Redraft or amend APPR with a central focus on the connection between curriculum and accountability.

2. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) deserve a public airing before the proverbial baby is thrown out with the bath water. If not Common Core, what? Education is a system that should be standards based from which curriculum is developed and prepared for delivery.

Administrators and teachers work within such a system as they contribute to its effectiveness through their talent and innovation.

Recommendation: Bring Common Core State Standards into the light of day within each school district in the state to be examined, discussed, and possibly modified.

3. Aside from the safety and welfare of students and staff, the curriculum is the foundation for learning within a school district. It provides learning expectations and rich content through alignment with standards that spiral from endpoints to support continuous learning and growth. Therefore, equitable opportunity for learning is reinforced across a school district and perhaps the state. It is the effective delivery of the curriculum that needs to be judged continuously.

Recommendation: Provide the resources and time for the development of a standards-based curriculum with the selection of appropriate, rich content with interim assessment measures and timely reports.

4. The time is at hand when English language arts and mathematics tests should be developed by NYS educators, as have Regents exams for the past 150 years. Just review the fine work done by NYS educators in test development. Why is this dimension of education given to an outside company when the expertise exists in the state? Testing needs to be transparent for review and use to ensure its appropriateness and not held closely by an outside company with intentions of using these test items for profit in other states. Recommendation: Provide the funding for NYS educators to develop appropriate assessments as a basis for measuring the annual status of student performance in English language arts



(i.e., reading) and mathematics for grades 3-8.

A WAKE-UP CALL

The state of education in New York is at a perilous moment. This is reflected in an abdication for learning by state officials. Political involvement has turned the most enlightening experiences for educators and students into a contentious nightmare. Without heeding the proverb introduced at the beginning of this article and recommendation, education in this great state may lose its sense of mission.

DR. BRUCE H. CROWDER is a senior researcher for Educational Vistas, Inc. He is a former NYS assistant commissioner for Quality Assurance and the Excellence and Accountability Program (EAP). Dr. Crowder may be reached at evibruce@aol.com.

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