

3/10/14

Dear Legislators,

We are at a crossroad in the future of education. I am most concerned about the effects of high stakes testing on students. Throughout my 30 years as a teacher I have learned that assessment drives instruction. The current trend that we have to tie teacher evaluation to high stakes standardized testing may have a very detrimental effect on student outcomes and may have negative consequences that may not be readily apparent.

When a high percentage of a teacher's evaluation is connected to standardized testing, you can be sure that the type of instruction delivered will be in line with increasing those scores. On the surface that may seem logical and desirable, but inflexible mandates issued from sources far from students in the classroom can have the undesired effects of focusing on minutia found on standardized tests. In addition, sometimes those tests have only a tangential connection to a subject's content area. For example, my husband is an eighth grade science teacher, a large portion of his evaluation is focused on STAR testing data and the skill of summarizing. While summarizing is an important skill, it should be an integrated part of instruction, not the focus of science instruction. The focus of science instruction should be hands on inquiry and should allow students to follow the scientific questions being considered. Instead, science instruction under our current evaluation system is book driven and focused on the ability to summarize text, because that is what is being tested. Teachers are being forced to teach in ways that are not effective in order to "pass" their evaluations.

I am a reading intervention teacher in a different district than my husband. While STAR testing is more in line with the type of instruction I provide, it still does not match my teaching for the lowest achieving students. My students made adequate growth on the testing, but I feel that there is little connection between what my students need and what the testing tells me. Teachers should be able to work with administration to determine the most effective way to evaluate teachers based on what students need. Ask any teacher what their greatest need is, and they will tell you time. We cannot afford to waste time on high stakes, standardized assessments that do not adequately inform instruction on what is best for our students.

I am of the opinion that it should not be nearly impossible to remove bad teachers from the field. Any teacher who is committed to students agrees. Neither, however, should it be too easy. A system needs to be in place to protect students from poor teachers, as well as to protect teachers from arbitrary administrators.

The current evaluation system does not accomplish this. In fact, it may have the unintentional consequence of driving good teachers from the field, because they do not feel that they can do their job well and meet the needs of the students in their care.

Sincerely,

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