

The (mis) Measures of Academic Progress

There is a lot of talk in well-financed education reform circles about “closing the achievement gap” – the difference in academic performance between more affluent white children and underprivileged kids of color. Plagiarizing phrases from the Civil Rights movement, these politically-connected reformers talk of a “revolution” in education accountability and claim to be building a high-stakes testing “movement” to measure the needs of students who have traditionally been left behind.

Cribbing from these reformers, The Seattle School District, in its recent contract negotiations with the teacher’s union, the Seattle Education Association, pushed through a provision mandating the rating of teachers based on their students’ test scores.

But can these tests improve learning and teaching?

While there can be no doubt our schools need dramatic changes in order to meet the needs of all children, the truth about standard-

ized tests is that they are a better indicator of a student’s zip code than a student’s aptitude. That’s because the wealthier, and predominantly whiter, districts score better on tests. This is not a reflection of the intelligence of wealthier, mostly white students verses that of lower-income students of color, but of the advantages that wealthier children have—books in the home, parents with more time to read to them, private tutoring, access to test-prep agencies, coming to school healthy, well-fed and more focused, to name a few.

For these reasons, the *achievement gap* is better described as an *opportunity gap*.

As University of Washington education professor Wayne Au has written, “Looking back to its origins in the eugenics moment, standardized testing provided...ideological cover for the social, economic and education inequalities the test themselves help maintain.”

Standardized testing has from the very beginning been a tool to rank people, not to remove the barriers needed to achieve equality; testing cannot cure education any more than a thermometer can cure a fever.

Moreover, the recent experience of high-stakes testing in New York City—long considered the national model for improving student achievement by making test scores the cornerstone of school accountability—demonstrates just how broken a thermometer such test scores really are. With the late July release of the state test results for 2010, New York’s claims of making “historic gains” for children came crashing down. Results from the newly adjusted test showed the proficiency rate in English fell from 69 percent last year down to 42 per-



cent, while only 54 percent reached grade level in math, down from 82 percent. These wild fluctuations in scores reveal standardized testing as a profoundly inaccurate measure of student learning.

Ignoring what today is vast research showing the invalidity of standardized testing, the Seattle School District is quickly moving to remake our schools in the image of a production line where simple input-values are used to measure the workers’ (teachers) efficiency at producing commodities (students). Yet teachers, parents, and students know a holistic education includes teaching children creativity, civic courage, leadership, teamwork and social responsibility—skills that

Upcoming Events:

Achievement Gap or Opportunity Gap? Fighting Racism in Public Schools.

Thursday May 19th, 2011

Mt. Zion Baptist Church

Featuring: James Bible, NAACP

Wayne Au, UW

Jesse Hagopian, SEE

Riki Malone

Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, SU

Olga Addae, SEA

November 2011:

School Board Elections for seats held by

Steve Sundquist, Sherry Carr,

Harium Martin-Morris and Peter Maier.

can't be neatly quantified by standardized tests and will cease to be taught if educators' jobs and pay are tied to high-stakes tests. Moreover, in this era of economic recession and ongoing war, it would seem all the more urgent to develop students who can think beyond filling-in-the-bubble to come up with innovative ideas to big societal problems.

As teachers, union members, parents and civil rights advocates we offer an opposing plan to provide a quality education for all and to close the opportunity gap: fully fund and equalize school resources, reinstate the recently abolished "Department of Race and Equity" to help insure culturally relevant pedagogy and assessment, lower class size to provide the individualized attention that students deserve, and support the most effective form of assessment that has yet to be devised—one that can adjust to every child, evaluate results quickly, and make appropriate changes in instruction—the human educator.

The mantle of the Civil Rights movement does not belong to those who propose relegating students and teachers to the back of the education system with unscientific, curriculum narrowing tests, but rather to those who refuse to give up their position at the front of the struggle to eliminate the inequities that result in achievement disparities.

Jesse Hagopian teaches at Garfield High Schools and is a founding member of the progressive union caucus Social Equality Educators within the Seattle Education Association.



Social Equality Educators
is an organization of educators who also belong to the
Seattle Education Association.

We meet monthly

SEE's website:

<http://seattlesee.org/>

SEE listserv:

seattle-see@googlegroups.com

www.seattlesee.org

info@seattlesee.org

206-851-4963

Education News Websites:

Seattle Schools Blog

<http://saveSeattleSchools.blogspot.com/>

Seattle Education 2010

<http://seattleducation2010.wordpress.com/>

Survey

with each newsletter, SEE will run an online survey for SEA members

*The current Survey asks about your experience with the **New Evaluation System***

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/B2X7J52>

Picket CHASE Bank!

When: Saturday May 21st 11 AM

Where: CHASE Bank

1919 North 45th Street

Seattle, WA 98103

Why:

- CHASE pays NO state taxes at all through a loophole that allows banks based in WA to avoid paying taxes. Though CHASE is not based in WA, WAMU, whom they acquired during the bailouts, was and thus they still qualify *somehow*.

- CHASE acquired billions of dollars during the bailout at a zero % interest rate, money that they are now loaning back to the Government at a 5% interest rate. So not only are they paying little to nothing in taxes, but they are actually making money off taxpayers.

- Teachers in Seattle are already facing layoffs (RIFs) that are likely to increase as the state balances the over \$5 billion budget shortfall. In addition to this the legislature is considering a pay freeze for teachers.

- This is not a spending crisis. It is a revenue crisis that is caused when entities like CHASE and wealthy individuals like Bill Gates pay little to no taxes on their vast fortunes. The money is out there. This sacrifice is not shared and is not equal. Teachers are not the cause.