

teaching standards being dumbed down

If educators aren't held accountable, students suffer.

By William Kashatus

The Pennsylvania Board of Education is making a serious mistake in its effort to eliminate content tests as a requirement for teaching middle school students ("Pa. moves to waive some teacher tests," June 19). If implemented, the regulations would affect veteran seventh- and eighth-grade teachers with elementary, or general, certifications who teach math, science, English and social studies.

Not only will the action result in a decline in teaching standards across the commonwealth, but they will dilute the knowledge base of the current generation of students.

Currently, middle school teachers must have earned at least a baccalaureate degree, completed an approved program of teacher education, and passed subject-matter Praxis tests for their certification area. To maintain an active teaching certificate, educators must obtain six credits of collegiate study, six credits of continuing professional education courses, or 180 hours of continuing professional education programs, activities, or learning experiences every five years. In education circles, this is known as the Act 48 requirement.

The board's rationale in eliminating the subject-matter tests is that experienced teachers will have the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise in other ways. Credit will be given for past teaching experience, the publication of articles in professional journals, attendance at professional development sessions, taking or teaching college courses, tutoring, and winning teaching awards. It's another way of reinforcing the Act 48 requirement.

So what's the problem?

Accountability. The testing requirement, which is mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, makes those teachers accountable to a statewide curriculum in the subject they teach. But since nearly one-quarter of all the state's middle school teachers who took the test failed it (and more than half the teachers in Philadelphia alone), they and their unions complain that it "demeans the cer-

tification process." Instead of making the teachers accountable, the board is going to cave in at its meeting in November, believing that the Act 48 requirement is a sufficient demonstration of a teacher's knowledge base. It is not.

Having spent 15 years teaching middle school students and six more working for a historical society that provides the exact kind of professional development opportunities that Act 48 requires, I know that too many loopholes exist in the system to make teachers accountable to the subject matter.

I've seen teachers receive professional development credit for taking college courses that are not even tangentially related to their subject area. I've watched in disgust as some teachers walk out of a professional development symposium I've created after signing in to record their attendance and maybe sitting through the first session. I've also come to realize that most teachers are either uninterested or consider themselves too overburdened to explore ways to improve their teaching through service learning or other outcomes-based approaches that have a special appeal to middle school students.

My point is that for every teacher who takes the Act 48 requirement seriously, there are at least three or four others who laugh at it by manipulating the system.

Pennsylvania cannot afford to keep those kinds of teachers in its schools.

Testing for content as well as teacher training and professional development have a serious impact on the education of the students themselves. If a teacher doesn't understand the subject matter, how can we expect the student to master it?

Testing teachers to make them accountable to the curriculum is an important check against apathy in the classroom. While it should not be the only barometer for retention, testing is certainly a critical vehicle in ensuring that we are building knowledgeable and competent citizens for our society in the future.



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The Philadelphia Inquirer

MONDAY, JUNE 28, 2004

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