

FOLLOWING MARYLAND'S FRIGHTFUL FOOTSTEPS

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It is hard to be hopeful about the future of American education when every month brings with it either a new study documenting the failure of our schools or a new proposal by some state education department that will maintain or exacerbate that failure, or both.

For understandable reasons, all such recent studies are conducted, and all such proposals are made, under the shadow of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

In particular, the proposals made by state school superintendents typically are passed off as concessions demanded by compassion and a desire for equity. In actuality, they are mechanisms for gutting the one positive legacy that the otherwise ill-conceived NCLB has bestowed: accountability.

The state of Maryland has become the vanguard of this destructive impulse. Our national legislators and other state leaders so far only have discussed such proposals. Maryland has become the first state to enact one, and we should be careful that Georgia does not follow suit.

In a press release by the Maryland State Department of Education, issued—appropriately—on Halloween, it was announced that the state board of education had enacted a modification of its testing requirements for high school graduation.

Until now, Maryland has required as its High School Assessments (HSAs) a battery of four end-of-course tests in English 2, mathematics (algebra), biology, and social studies (government). Each test is taken at the end of the designated course. So, tests that are pitched only at the 9th or 10th grade level are required for high school graduation.

To earn a diploma, a student had to pass all required courses through 12th grade and pass all four of the tests. Still, the board felt that too many students were failing (and that more could be expected to fail in the future). These students were failing even after taking one or more tests multiple times, and even after receiving extensive remedial tutoring. Therefore, the state board has reauthorized the requirement with a modification called the “Bridge Plan.” According to State Superintendent of Schools Dr. Nancy S. Grasmick, this is a “courageous decision” based on the state’s commitment to raising standards.

The Bridge Plan is a way for students who have failed a test to graduate “by completing a rigorous Academic Validation project.” I have seen such alternatives used in individual classes in the different school districts in which I have taught. To use the words “rigorous” or ‘academically valid’ to describe such projects is ludicrous. It is absurd to suggest that a student who cannot demonstrate minimum knowledge of a subject on a test can construct an academically equivalent “project.” Typically, such a project is a poster or videotape or other audio/video presentation that may be aesthetically pleasing, but demonstrates no more knowledge than how to plagiarize and assemble.

In my own teaching, whenever a student asked me if he or she could submit a project instead of, say, an assigned essay, I told the student that I would accept such a project only if the student wrote an accompanying essay explaining how the project fulfills the assignment. No student ever took me up on the offer. The student who asked for this was usually looking for the kind of easy way out that other teachers were only too glad to offer. After all, teachers frequently (and unfairly) are judged by the number of students who fail their classes, and it is easier to look at a poster than to read an essay carefully and critically.

Maryland has institutionalized this loophole. In addition, it has eliminated the requirement that students have to pass each test separately, and has substituted a four-test average score that allows a student to fail one or more tests and still pass the group.

Furthermore, “altered test items are being developed for...students with disabilities.” Moreover, “The State Board of Education is currently reviewing the 2007 HSA results to determine...if additional alternative means of testing should be developed for students who have difficulty with traditional tests.” These additional concessions will only add insult to injury, piling loophole on top of loophole.

In short, in the name of boldly elevating standards, Maryland has eviscerated them and has immunized itself against accountability. I predict that soon Maryland will be reporting graduation rates approaching 100 percent. This will allow Maryland to exploit the factor of graduation rates that congress is considering adding to the NCLB criteria.

This is an injustice to the students who are being misled about their accomplishments and to the society that has to absorb them and assume the expense of reeducating them.

Nonetheless, other states, including Georgia, surely will follow Maryland, and our public schools will be graduating more students unprepared for college and work than ever before.

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