

MEANINGLESS GRADUATIONS

BOB ZASLAVSKY

Recent high school graduation statistics from Texas and California confirm my direst predictions of the consequences of the current misguided attempts to improve our education system.

Texas has been the flagship example for those who champion the No Child Left Behind Act. The concept originated there in the early days of the Bush-Spellings political connection. Claims of positive results were trumpeted, and only a few scholars saw behind those claims what they called the “Lake Wobegon” phenomenon—namely the inventively deceptive use of statistical reporting methods designed to make things look hunky-dory.

The facade of progress was achieved by designing a set of unintelligible curriculum standards with little specific content. This was paired with a test (TAKS: Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) for high school graduation that was based largely on pre-high school material. On top of that, the passing mark was set appallingly low.

Although the test has remained substantially unchanged over the last decade, the score required for passing has been slowly raised. For the Texas class of 2007, the passing score required for each of the four sections of the test (English, mathematics, science, and social studies) was *raised* to 60 percent. In other words, in 10 years, on an unchallenging test, the passing score has been set at what in my school days would have been a D-minus.

The Bush-Spellings education legacy in Texas is bitter indeed. With the increased passing criterion, graduation rates fell to a record low. Over 40,000 students—students who have been passed through all their high school courses—did not make the grade. That was a failure rate of 16 percent, higher among blacks and Hispanic students.

Most of those who did pass this sham of a test will find that they have been ill-prepared for either college education or challenging work.

When Texas State Education Commissioner Shirley Neeley presented the results, she said, “We know that it is heartbreaking for students to miss . . . commencement activities, but students also need to keep their eye on the ultimate goal—earning a high school diploma.” This is typical and revealing. It shows that high school graduation has come to be regarded as little more than a social activity in which pieces of paper called diplomas are distributed. The responses to the graduation rate results—from teachers, administrators, and legislators—all mentioned the trauma of not receiving a diploma. Not one mentioned the crushing impact of not receiving an *education*.

Graduation should be a solemn recognition of education completed as a beginning (commencement) for more rigorous education or serious workplace responsibility. Instead, graduation has become a charade in which inept administrators bestow meaningless diplomas. There is not the *gravitas* of graduations of yore and, at the ceremonies, students typically behave raucously and inappropriately.

In Texas, the social nature of the event is emphasized by a policy that allows a school district to permit students who have not passed the test to “walk across the stage” with their class and be given a “certificate of attendance.”

Meanwhile, Texas legislators—in the grand Bush-Spellings tradition—are scrambling to pass laws that will make the test either go away or become nonbinding.

On the same day that the Texas results were announced, California’s Department of Education posted statistics showing that even with a required “basic skills,” test and after a decade of massive financial investment in education, state high school graduation rates fell to a ten-year low of 67 percent.

John Affeldt, an anti-test lobbyist (and attorney), rightly stated, “The state has not yet earned the right to impose this exit exam penalty on them.” What he did not say—and never would have said—is that this should not mean that students should be given a free pass out of high school.

Until this situation is put right, we must face the hard reality that the pain of systemic reform is vitally necessary, and the pain of students—possibly social, hopefully personal and professional—must accompany it.

What does all this have to do with Georgia? Simply this. Georgia has started later on the same path already traversed by Texas and California. Their catastrophic results of this year will be Georgia’s catastrophic results in two to five years unless Georgians wake up now, face the music, and pay the piper before it is too late.

Bob Zaslavsky is a retired teacher of our much-neglected humanities.