

## GYPPED: THE OVERPRICED TRAGEDY OF ATLANTA'S SCHOOLS

BOB ZASLAVSKY

Hardly a week goes by in Atlanta without some event that casts lurid light on phenomena that are unappreciated as symptoms of the mire of failure in which our schools and students have sunk.

In one week last month, the report that Atlanta's eighth grade student science scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were the worst major urban scores in the nation was followed by the announcement of the lavish bonuses that were awarded to Superintendent of Schools Dr. Beverly Hall for the improvement to which she has led the Atlanta schools.

Dr. Hall's bonuses, that garnered her a total compensation of approximately \$350,000, are tied to a system of criteria for improvement in test scores on a school-by-school basis. Hall's score of about 72½ percent here, a C minus, entitled her to a bonus of over \$50,000. The goals embedded in these criteria are so minimal that even Dr. Hall's lackluster performance entitles her to compensation for reaching them.

There is something obscene about a school superintendent's compensation's being virtually equal to the salary of the president of the United States, but if that superintendent were providing high quality education for all students, such a salary might be palatable to the citizenry. All that Dr. Hall has delivered—and she is not unique among urban superintendents—are sham claims of educational improvement (which seem to grow in credibility proportionally to their hollowness in actuality) based upon marginal gains in student performance on woefully unchallenging tests.

Her "success" is an example of what education researchers have called the Lake Wobegon phenomenon, in which "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." This is the result of avoiding reality, fraudulent reporting practices, and teaching to the test (while failing to educate students properly). The Atlanta compensation policy is misguided because linking compensation to results is productive not of achievement but of falsification.

However, the NAEP cannot be falsified. On the eighth grade science NAEP, nationally—and this is enough of a disgrace—only 57 percent of students scored at the level of basic or above in science. In Atlanta, less than one-quarter of the students scored at that level, while nearly eighty percent were rated below basic. Such an abysmally low performance can mean only that virtually no genuine scientific content is taught in the Atlanta public elementary and middle schools. Since this is the first time that the NAEP science test has been administered, Atlanta students are, in effect, starting at zero, and they have nowhere to go but up.

Predictably, there are those who are clamoring for an emphasis on science education analogous to the post-Sputnik science and mathematics push in this country that produced such stunning positive results in the fifties and early sixties. The analogy is not apt because something was characteristic of education in the middle of the last century that is no longer present. Then pedagogy in the language arts was based on the notion that the study of language and literature required rigor and objective standards.

Students were trained so solidly in the mathematics and science of language that when they needed to master the language of mathematics and science, which we too often forget are also languages with their own grammatical and syntactical principles, students had the preparation that they needed to succeed.

Since the language arts curriculum is the foundation of all other curricula, if that curriculum is not challenging, any attempt to strengthen any academic subject is fatally compromised.

The root difficulty of our system is precisely its unwillingness to implement a challenging curriculum (and *meaningful* teacher and student accountability) from kindergarten up and to abjure the infantilizing of students that allows them to make paper progress through a pedagogical vacuum.

To correct this would involve confronting the state head on because the Georgia standards are vague and vacuous, filled with formulaic jargon and empty of specified mandatory knowledge. The authors of the standards boast of this defect as if it were a virtue: "Performance standards go into much greater depth than *the content standards used in the previous curriculum . . . which simply told the teacher what a student was expected to know.*" (*emphasis mine*) This is so obtusely erroneous that one's jaw drops in astonishment.

We must also challenge the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The only thing laudatory about the Act is its name. It has no meaningful substance. It establishes a system of accountability (something to be desired), but it fails to specify the curriculum for which students and schools should be held accountable

Only if we reform the curriculum in K through 8 will we be able to give all students the first-rate education that they deserve. Ideally, this curriculum must be a nationally mandated and coherently uniform content that is free from the whims of local control.

Such reform represents a formidable task. But until we undertake it, the Atlanta public schools will lack discipline at all levels, and—lest we forget—the word "discipline" derives from the ancient Latin word which means "learning" (*disciplina*).

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