

'UNCONSCIONABLY LOW STANDARDS'

BY BOB ZASLAVSKY

Maxwell Smart (Agent 86) is alive and well, and living in the Atlanta Public Schools. After all, this is the time of year when local newspapers and television newscasts are rife with tearful stories of unfortunate students who did not pass the Criterion-Referenced-Competency-Test (CRCT) that is required for promotion to the next year. Inevitably, the student or a surrogate will be saying the equivalent of "Missed it by that much!"

Sad to say, such stories serve no useful purpose and only contribute to exacerbating the deficiencies of the current system. They make it seem as though having a standardized test (and using it as a criterion) is both stressful and unfair. Nothing could be further from the truth.

First, tests do not cause stress. What causes stress is lack of appropriate preparatory knowledge. Indeed, when a person is adequately prepared for a challenge, that person faces the challenge eagerly, not anxiously.

Second, far from being unfair, standardized tests are our only guarantee of fairness. Only a standardized test can transcend the subjectivity and self-interest that biases so many local judgments of students.

Therefore, a standardized test is not in itself a problem. And only such a test can lay bare what the problem or problems actually are. Yet school administrators and teachers and parents (and even the community at large) are unable or unwilling to see the problems thus laid bare. Instead, the alibi mentality, which already underlies so much of the existing educational bureaucracy, kicks into high gear.

This is especially distressing when one considers that the CRCT is an embarrassingly unchallenging test with unconscionably low standards for passing. For example, on the third grade reading test, one needs to achieve a score of only 55 percent (up from 42.5 percent last year) to earn promotion to the fourth grade. The inadequacy of the CRCT's content and passing requirement become shockingly apparent when one compares the proficiency of Georgia students on that test to their proficiency as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). On the NAEP, only a quarter to a third of Georgia students performs at the proficiency level.

Such results tell us that the fault is not in our tests but in ourselves. The system is broken (and has been to an ever-increasing degree for forty years or more). The system must be fixed so that when it comes to education, we make progress, not alibis. What can be done to fix it? A good start toward reform would involve the following:

1. State standards and school curricula must be properly re-formulated to establish and assess a clearly defined knowledge base.

2. School administrators and teachers must have proper academic and scholarly training—something that even the four potential candidates, both Republican and Democratic, for State Superintendent of Schools do not have.

3. Parents must demand a proper education for their children rather than mere progress through an empty system with the reward at the end of a meaningless diploma (which, as Bill Clinton suggested in his 1999 State of the Union Address, many graduates cannot read).

4. Education must be seen properly in terms of responsibilities and knowledge rather than in terms of entitlements and feeling.

If all this were put into practice, students would test well as a matter of course, without special coaching. Keep in mind that the only reason that we need to "teach to the test" is that we do not teach the basic knowledge-rich curriculum that would render standardized tests merely routine.

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