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NCLB 'drills and kills' the spirit of education

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A while ago, I sat in the Easton Area Middle School auditorium, watching and listening to the fifth grade band and chorus perform their winter concert. The auditorium was packed with parents, relatives, siblings, and friends. According to Principal Dr. Charlene Symia, the turnout for the sixth grade concert two nights earlier was almost as great.

The fifth grade concert was outstanding. The band, under the direction of Tara Ohl, played crisp, clear notes. The 60 young musicians entertained their audience with enthusiasm and gusto.

The chorus, directed by Jessica Alercia, sang next. Two hundred singers all clad in red shirts sang their hearts out. They made the auditorium's walls resound with hearty notes and words about the season.

As I listened to the music, I thought "later this school year these kids will take the PSSA tests in reading, writing, mathematics, and science." I would not utter this thought aloud for fear of spoiling a wonderful evening.

There are many outstanding qualities of a school that the PSSA doesn't measure. This article is not about Easton Middle School alone; it is about every school in the nation that is subjected to the forces of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation.

NCLB expects that by 2014 all kids will be able to read and compute on grade level, which means, for example, that all fifth graders shall be able to read and compute at a fifth grade level. All is the key word! However, now only 30 percent of our nation's children are reading at grade level.

For many educators and their students, NCLB has taken the spirit of learning out of education. Today teachers and their students are subjected to a drill-and-kill curriculum. Day after day students complete worksheets that prepare them for the PSSA or whatever the test is called in other states. The curriculum is quickly becoming an inch deep and not much wider. Learning is no longer engaging, fun, exciting, and above all profound. Worksheets won't cut it in today's world where students need to be taught creative problem solving!

In an attempt to allocate more time for test preparation in one state, teachers were told not to teach poetry. Other schools have cancelled recess and special activities periods. High school students have fewer electives.

For many students music and art are the highlights of their school day. Some may not be the best readers, but they persevere. They try to work hard even if the results are not the best. When I taught high school students, I frequently had those kids who came to school and stayed in school because of a subject or activity that turned them on and gave them a sense of place, accomplishment, and success.

This year NCLB celebrates its fifth birthday and is now up for reauthorization by Congress. The NCLB report cards for public schools in Pennsylvania are primarily the students' scores on the PSSA.

NCLB is a threat. Educators are told do well or we'll shut down your school, or the state will take it over, or your good students will be transferred to a better school, or your principal will be fired. Yes, some schools might be failing their students. But on the whole this is not the case. Many schools are struggling to do their best.

Academic assessment is a key to measuring student success. However, assessment should not be seen as a threat but as a method of revealing strengths and weaknesses.

NCLB needs serious revision. Legislators must listen to educators who are in the schools day in and day out. Assessment must begin to chart individual student academic growth over time. We cannot continue to compare the same grade levels year after year. We must begin to acknowledge that students who live in poverty, who have special needs, or who are English language learners present unique educational challenges. Funds must go directly to the schools to hire more teachers and establish effective instructional programs, particularly in reading. Schools must strengthen their ties with parents because all parents must realize the importance of academic success for their children. Congress must fund social programs for low-income children. Outreach specialists must be placed in every impoverished school. The schools alone cannot do it.

Teachers regulate the heartbeat of their school. They know what is needed and what to do. They know that some kids need extra help; some need a favorite class; yet others can succeed alone. The primary focus of the new NCLB must focus on the realities of education. Like a good teacher, the revised NCLB legislation must have a positive philosophy where multiple types of assessments are used to improve education.

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