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Goal-Global Competitiveness

Lillie G. Jessie

“Our goal for students is not for them to merely be doctors, scientists, businesspersons, teachers or lawyers ... but rather doctors, scientists, businesspersons, teachers or lawyers *who will change the world!* (Paraphrased from the Equity Commitments of Stults Elementary School, Richardson Texas)

The Committee

The Governor’s Standards of Learning (SOL) Innovation Committee has provided the Commonwealth with its first interim report. As you know Virginia Governor McAuliffe approved a non-partisan committee of educators, parents, members of the General Assembly and community to participate in a two-year appointment to review and revise the SOL test. This committee was appointed and is under the direction of the Secretary of Education, Anne Holton. I was fortunate to be one of the twenty-eight appointed. Two other members are representing Prince William County, Meg Gruber, a teacher with our system and Virginia Education Associations President and a local parent, Dr. Tarannum Lateef of Manassas. The committee also consists of four members of the House of Delegates and two Senators.

I have presented the interim recommendations to principals and will follow up with teachers. Dr. Lateef and I will also present the recommendations to Superintendent’s Parent Advisory Council. As I prepared for this article I thought the opening quote used in a previous article bear repeating. We were reminded during the past few weeks of the power of 21-century technology skills when the entire movie industry was brought to its knees by what is presumed to be another country’s skills in this area. The Governor, Secretary of Education and those of us on the committee know that our students must be prepared to think critically and globally if we want them to be competitive. We also know that the education of our kids has to be a top priority and thus a non-partisan issue. The last statement in Stults Elementary’s commitment is ...“Who will change the world!” The way I see it, the world will change. The question is whether the Commonwealth of Virginia and America will “respond” to the change of others or be in the forefront “initiating” the change. If it is the latter, it begins with how and what we teach our students.

The Terminology in Laymen’s Terms

As we review the twelve recommendations, you will find that the committee and Secretary Holton frequently use words like, “authentic assessment, project-based learning and alternative assessments.” The Legislature has already responded to the request to reduce the number of SOL by eliminating

five SOL tests: Grade 3 History, Grade 3 Science, Grade 5 Writing, U.S. History to 1865 and U.S. History: 1865 to the present. School divisions, however, are required to develop their own alternative assessments. For example, some are planning to assess writing while teaching other content.

Project-based learning and authentic assessments are similar but different. The research and our own common sense tells us that we enjoy and learn more when we are actively engaged in learning. I have often used the analogy of building a house. Would a student be better able to respond to questions on building a house by teaching using numerous worksheets or by actually building a house physically or electronically? Do we learn to drive a car by worksheets listing all of the events or by driving the actual car? Authentic means relevance to what they will see in the actual workforce. In some countries, teachers are allowed the luxury of actual working under the guiding eyes and tutelage of a committee of experts before entering the profession.

Authentic teaching can begin at home. During the holidays my family and I did something that was so simple yet meaningful when it comes to authentic learning. This year a friend of my daughter's took us on a guided tour of Marjorie Merriweather Post's Hillwood Estates where he works. In addition to the Cartier jewels and Faberge Eggs there were numerous sets of hand-designed, delicate dinnerware from all over the world including 1860 demitasse cups from Japan. All were encased behind glass and not to be touched. It occurred to me that my husband and I had a small collection of demitasse cups and other china pieces from his now deceased "Cousin Adelaide" who we found at age 99. She died at the age of 107. Much like the display in the Post mansion, no one was allowed to touch it in my home. After the Hillwood visit I made a decision to have what I called a "Legacy Dinner" for Christmas. We used Adelaide's china and shared my husband's history of finding Adelaide who held on to his deceased mother's 12-piece ornate silverware for more than forty years in a shoebox under her bed. We had never shared this story with my visiting family. I think this experience has a better chance of staying in the memory banks of our family than showing them pictures and a worksheet or housing it in a cabinet for viewing only. For learning to be effective it must have meaning and staying power! To have staying power it must be hands on and relevant.

The Recommendations

The committee also understood the importance of using research-based practices in our schools. During the first meeting training and information on the status of what works and how we compete as a nation was presented by Dr. Linda Darlin-Hammond, world renowned educator, author and researcher. There are sub-committees for elementary, secondary and accountability. The recommendations below represent the first interim report. This committee will continue to make recommendations during its two-year tenure. Members of the public are invited to sit in on meetings.

Input is welcomed by Secretary Holton, as are they by those of us representing PWCS. Now that I have provided you with background information listed below are the recommendations:

The recommendations are grouped into four overarching principles regarding the purpose of the SOL Tests:

Principle I- Accountability (5):

1. Schools recognized for making “progress” towards accreditation benchmarks
2. An appeal process for schools not making accreditation
3. Flexibility in how often schools are accredited
4. Retest opportunities that demonstrate growth from the beginning of the year until the end
5. Retest opportunities for middle and elementary students, similar those given to high school

Principle II-College-Career Readiness (3)

6. Alternative ways of accruing credits outside of traditional seat time (apprenticeships-shadowing and other “authentic/project-based opportunities). Other ways of obtaining verified credits instead of SOL tests
7. Expansion of verified credit opportunities through an alternative assessment

Principle III-Global Economy (2)

8. Attention to skills important to college success (Problem-solving, communication, creative thinking)
9. Re-structured schedule that give school divisions more time to incorporate the new curriculum
10. Interdisciplinary assessments (assess across content areas, ex. writing while teaching science)

Principle IV-Authentic and Alternate Assessment (2)

11. Funding Initiatives for Professional Development at the state/local level-Alternate and Authentic Assessment
12. Dissemination of best practices in the use of alternative and/or authentic assessment

Now that you know the goals of the committee, how it was formed, and an introduction to some of the terminology the next item of discussion is what this all means and next steps. What’s in it for teachers? The caveats, where do we go from here?

- The elimination of the 5th grade writing is concerning to many of us because it would not be formally assessed again until 8th grade. We

have already eliminated the 4th grade writing assessment in PWCS. Systematic writing assessment across content areas is great but requires professional development and support personnel at the elementary level.

- Authentic and project-based assessments are also a professional development issue as teachers need training but once done they will see that a deeper or power standard approach will reduce the number of small often insignificant assessments given.
- Giving localities more flexibility and use of locally developed assessments takes some of the pressure off teachers and a propensity to teach test instead of the curriculum. Developing tests requires a skill set teachers must be trained to do.
- Common Core versus SOLs: Virginia has decided not to use the common core assessment. Although there is much discussion, some political, having a listing of common standards nation-wide makes sense for a highly transient population of students who move from State to State, such as those in Virginia. Having the same standards has allowed teachers to share lesson plans and other ideas nation-wide. Nationally instructional materials are designed with the common standards in mind.

However, Virginia does have high standards. State Superintendent of Public Instruction, **Dr. Steven R. Staples Superintendent of Public Instruction** assures us that we will maintain that high level of assessment. Additionally, the Principles' major focus is on critical thinking, problem solving, global competitiveness and career college readiness. This aligns with the national focus. At the end of the day when you change how you test you also have to change how you teach. You cannot hold teachers accountable for changing practices without adequate re-training.

Persons seeking more information may participate in Secretary Holton's meeting or provide input by going to her website. Minutes of each meeting are also available at her website.

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