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One of the City Colleges of Chicago

4300 North Narragansett Avenue
Chicago, IL 60634-4229

Main Office, 773/777-7900; Admissions, 481-8200; Financial Aid, 481-8100;
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FCCCC President's Address
CCC Board of Trustee's Meeting
Thursday, July 3rd, 2003

Chairman Tyree, Chancellor Watson, members of the Board, Officers of the District, faculty, staff and all others present, Good morning.

I'll try to be brief this morning since I'm playing hooky from my NEH program and many of you are probably anxious to focus on the fourth of July weekend.

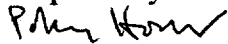
Today, I want to talk about a concern that the faculty expresses at almost every meeting of the Committee A and Faculty Council, namely, the concern about the possible conflation of standards and standardization at the City Colleges. To illustrate the difference between the two, I've xeroxed two articles recently published in the *New York Times*, one on the failures in the Regents Exam in New York, a standardized test, and the other, an example of the achievement of excellence (an academic standard, of course) without the employment of standardized tests. Clearly, I'm stacking the deck when I use these examples to show that standardized tests are not always the answer; we can find other examples where the standardized test does seem to work (for its specialized purpose). The exam to certify nurses is one possible example.

Let's say for the sake of argument that we teach to standards. As the second article suggests, teaching to standards is not easier than teaching to standardization, but in fact more difficult if done well. All kinds of questions and problems arise if we attempt to teach to standards. What do we mean by standards? And who decides the standards? Even with the standardized test for the nursing credentials, the test doesn't guarantee an excellent nurse, only that a nurse has the minimum knowledge to proceed as a nursing professional; he has the minimum knowledge to begin the apprenticeship of becoming an excellent nurse. For example, can he perform the mathematical conversions for the drug for a child while working under the pressure of a code situation? Does he really know how to insert and check a line so that the patient does get the appropriate cancer medication? Not too much or too little? Think of the nursing shortage and the increasing demands on nurses. You can fill in the blanks for what the standardized test does not assess.

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But I am going to be even more radical here. Parker Palmer in his book, *The Courage to Teach* (1998, 94) argues that “(G)ood education is always more process than product. If a student has received no more than a packet of information at the end of an educational transaction, that student has been duped. Good education teaches students to become both producers of knowledge and discerning consumers of what other people claim to know.” In other words, good education means that we teach, in addition to our ever-changing subject, the ability to assess critically that subject and the confidence to go beyond the received wisdom in order to make original and creative connections to new knowledge. By its very nature, the standardized test does not address this.

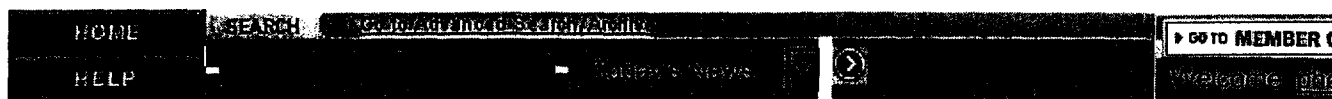
There is not one faculty member who supports shoddy or poor teaching and learning. But there are lots of faculty members who don't think standardization, whether it be the standardized test, or even standardized curriculum, adequately addresses the problem of attaining excellence in learning. And this, of course, is one of the reasons that the faculty have real concerns with the standardization of curriculum, the push for exit testing, and even standardization of prerequisites across the district. We are not convinced that this standardization improves teaching and learning; and we are absolutely sure that it does not address the diversity in learning styles and academic preparedness of our students.

Thank you,
Respectfully submitted,

Polly Hoover
President, FCCCC

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June 11, 2003, Wednesday

METROPOLITAN DESK

ON EDUCATION; Going for Depth Instead of Prep

By Michael Winierip (NYT) 1096 words

BOSTON -- IMAGINE a school where the principal hates tests as much as the kids do. Easy school, right?

"A lot of work," said Jonathan Howell. "I stayed up a lot of nights to finish my reports." Last year, as a seventh grader at Mission Hill elementary and middle school, Jonathan failed social studies on his first try. His oral presentation did not impress the school's adult assessment committee and he learned a hard lesson. "I learned it's good to use note cards," he said. "If you forget, you can look at cards and get back on track."

One recent morning, Dennisse Rorie arrived at school and was given two hours to prepare an oral presentation on Eleanor Roosevelt as part of her final history grade. She was required to use at least two library books plus the Internet for her three-minute talk. The committee wants to be sure students -- not their teachers or parents -- can do research. Glancing at note cards, the seventh grader spoke expertly of Mrs. Roosevelt's work with the National Consumer League, her push to make labor leaders more receptive to blacks, her newspaper column, and it was easy to tell this was Dennisse's report. Asked how Mrs. Roosevelt had accomplished so much, Dennisse said, "She had great connections because her husband was president."

Dennisse also presented her three-month-long research paper on the women's suffrage movement, discussing Lucy Stone, the Grimkes, Elizabeth Stanton and, of course, Susan B. Anthony, who "had respect for herself, she carried herself as a woman, she didn't walk around like Christina Aguilera."

At Mission Hill, if teachers want to know how Catherine Taylor has progressed in reading, they have a more reliable measure than standardized test scores. There is a tape of Catherine reading aloud several times a year, starting in kindergarten on Sept. 20, 1997, when she cannot pick out a single word in "Caps for Sale," and progressing to November 2002 in fifth grade, reading "Johnny Appleseed" fluently.

This small, predominantly African-American public school in one of Boston's poorest sections, has the markings of a top-flight private school and is the latest master work by Deborah Meier, a past winner of a MacArthur "genius" award, founder of the Central Park East elementary and secondary schools in Harlem and one of the more original thinkers in American education. Children here are pushed to examine topics in depth, whether it is ancient Egypt, social justice or the moon. And when

it is time to assess whether they are ready for high school, a committee of teachers and community people questions them as if they are middle school doctoral candidates.

How do you make Susan B. Anthony as real as Christina Aguilera? You go deep and give it your all. In January, a blue, plastic, footwide Nile River appeared along the 400-foot main hallway (emptying into the Mediterranean by Kathy Clunis's kindergarten) and for the next three months, every grade studied ancient Egypt, according to its ability. For the social justice unit, Matthew Knoester's class researched famous African-Americans, then turned themselves into a wax museum, that included 11-year-old Grace Zutrau with a fake mustache in a freeze pose, as Thurgood Marshall. To understand the moon, a teacher, Joyce Stevens, took small groups into a dark closet (the universe), spun them around in a swivel chair (the rotating earth) and shone a flashlight (the sun) on a foam ball impaled on a skewer held over their heads (the moon), and thus helped Walter Pultinas, a seventh grader, finally grasp why people never see the dark side of the moon.

Priscilla Rorie, a parent, who has two daughters at Mission Hill, believes it is a major improvement over the Agassiz, a Boston public school that the girls attended through fifth grade and where Ms. Rorie is a teacher. "Everything at the Agassiz is teaching to the state tests," she said. "It's deadening for teachers and kids. They follow the state testing curriculum block by block."

This is what Ms. Meier, 72, is fighting, "top down standardization," bred by state testing programs that she sees as pushing public education toward mediocrity. She is offended that many politicians leading the standardized testing charge, including President Bush and his brother Jeb, the governor of Florida, (graduates of Phillips Academy in nearby Andover, Mass.), are products of private schools that are exempt from state testing. "It's like they're saying a safe, mediocre education is good enough for public schools. After 35 years, I'm not willing to settle for that. We can make city schools as good as good private schools."

In the mid-1990's, she almost got her shot. In the wake of the "genius" award, plus her Central Park East fame, she was given an office by New York City officials and a mandate to open a network of small schools that would create their own assessment systems and serve 50,000 students. But before she could get it off the ground, the tide changed, there was a new city chancellor, Rudy Crew, and a new state education commissioner, Richard Mills, both big testers.

Today Ms. Meier is back where she was in 1974, principal of a small urban school. She still gets out the word, through her latest book, "In Schools We Trust." Hundreds of educators visit each year to see how it is done. She lives next door to the school and does what she can to protect it -- from the state tests. While Massachusetts has one of the most aggressive testing programs, Ms. Meier has studied the law, concluded that elementary and middle schoolers do not have to take the test, and so only those children whose parents want them to take the test, do (about half). The school does virtually no test prep.

Still, if there is one thing they learn at Mission Hill it is that just because you are not prepping all the time, it does not mean you cannot get smart. Every year from a third to half of the eighth graders pass the city exam for the elite public high schools -- including Jonathan Howell and Julie Rorie this year. As Julie says: "At my other school, we prepped like crazy, we'd take the test and forget it. Here, we always take a step back and look at the work we did. We just don't throw away the history we learned last year. We bring it back."

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June 25, 2003

A 70 Percent Failure Rate?

By MICHAEL WINERIP

LONG BEACH, N.Y.
TAKE another tissue, Kim," said the guidance counselor at Long Beach High School, Patricia Kronick. "It's going to be O.K., sweetie."

It was Monday afternoon, and Kimberly Rollman could not stop crying. Ms. Rollman, a senior, had just found out — three days before graduation — that she had failed the state's Mathematics A examination and would not be receiving a diploma. Now a reporter was sitting before her, asking what it felt like to have worked so hard in high school and be denied that diploma based on a single state test, and Kim could not speak. She was crying too hard.

"Kim, take another tissue," said Ms. Kronick, who began to speak for her.

"Kim is not a student who does the minimum," Ms. Kronick said.

Kim had passed the state tests in global history, American history, earth science, biology, chemistry, English and Spanish. Because she is not good in math, she took a special prep class for the Math A examination created by the high school, which also gave her a personal tutor.

"Kim, take another tissue," said Ms. Kronick. Kim had passed all her courses, including math. And though she does not have an easy life — she was left by her parents to be raised by her grandparents — she always managed to make it to school. Everyone from her principal, Nicholas Restivo, on down felt that she had earned a diploma. And now a reporter wanted to know how she felt.

"I don't know how to describe it," she finally whispered.

For days, reporters have been asking students like Ms. Rollman how it felt. It was not hard to find them. The state's Council of School Superintendents estimates that 70 percent of those who took the state math test failed. Seventy percent! Education Commissioner Richard P. Mills is constantly bragging about what a great testing system he has created, about all the scientific field testing for the tests before release. Indeed, Dr. Mills has been a leader in the national testing movement, mandating that New York students pass five state tests to graduate.

And so you can imagine, when such a crackerjack testing operation creates a test that almost everybody flunks — not to mention all those crying students — it is a big political problem. After days of being bombarded with complaints, Dr. Mills said yesterday in a press release that he was throwing out the test for juniors and seniors. His statement was intended to sound contrite.

"This situation is unacceptable, and we are taking action now to protect the children," the release says. But it is crucial not to lose sight of what the children needed to be protected from: Dr. Mills's testing program. Dr. Mills even came up with a novel solution — let students' math grades determine whether

they passed math. And he promised to assemble a panel of independent experts to review what went wrong with the math test.

But as Assemblyman Steven Sanders of Manhattan, chairman of the Assembly Education Committee, says, this is a "seminal moment" in the state testing program.

And it is not just the math test that needs to be scrutinized. Physics teachers across the state say they have had failure rates on the June test that are even higher than the disastrous results on the widely criticized physics test last year. In June 2002, 39 percent of the students failed the test, compared with 11 percent in 2001. The students who take physics are the smartest in the state. How did they suddenly get stupid? State officials ignored their own consultants hired to scale the test and, at the last minute, changed the scale to make it harder.

Robert Marx, a physics teacher for 11 years at Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn, says it is even worse this time. Through the years, Murrow results have mirrored the statewide pattern. Typically, 90 percent of its students passed the physics Regents until June 2002, Mr. Marx said, when 60 percent passed. This year, 40 percent passed, he said, noting that all those years Murrow has had the same teachers.

School districts are losing confidence in the tests. Last fall, for the first time, the superintendents' council wrote college admissions officers to urge them to disregard the results of the physics test, which the council termed "suspect."

William Johnson, superintendent in Rockville Centre, an upscale suburban Long Island district, did not have his students take the physics test this year, because he does not trust the scoring. In Long Beach, scores on the Regents usually count toward 20 percent of a final grade in a subject. But even before Dr. Mills threw out the math results, Long Beach officials had concluded that the math and physics scores were too unreliable this year to be trusted in calculating grades.

It goes on and on. Last year, the state was widely criticized for sanitizing literary excerpts on its English test, including removing references to Jews and gentiles in Isaac Bashevis Singer's work.

For Kim Rollman, yesterday's news was great. Her guidance counselor, Ms. Kronick, tracked her to a hair salon, where Kim was preparing for the prom. "Thank God," she said.

But for Dr. Mills, the news was not good. A state testing system that produces a test with what appears to be a 70 percent failure rate is way out of kilter. Something is radically wrong. This is not just about Math A. It is time for a rigorous, truly independent review of New York's entire testing system. Dr. Mills and his band of adults who have been so certain about the value of standardized tests to assess children need to be rigorously assessed themselves.