

Superintendent's Communication
January 2009
New Year's Resolutions

February 3, 2009

The obvious irony in this posting is my long standing ability to justify procrastination. Apparently I'm not trying hard enough to get the answer right, in the right time frame...or maybe I'm just measuring the wrong thing.

The business of education children and our accountability standards are much like my resolution list; are we really performing poorly or are we measuring the wrong things? We are likely to get the cure wrong if the diagnosis is wrong.

Marion Brady is published in Education Week (January 28, 2009) with an article called "No Dog Left Behind." No, he is not referring to our precious children as dogs, instead he using the training of dogs as an analogy so that we might see the ridiculous nature of narrowing the curriculum to one-size-fits-all. Brady asks us to examine the skills of a border-collie herding sheep, or the German shepherd that sniffs drugs at the airport. Each animal has in innate ability that prepares them to excel with their unique talent. Training all dogs the same set of skills; denying their innate abilities; needlessly reinforcing disengaging activities...does it sound familiar yet?

Each child we serve in Hereford ISD brings a unique personality and perspective to school. It is our responsibility to meet the student where they are; to support and enhance the basic skills that we all should carry as citizens of this great nation, state and community. Specifically, students must be taught skills that underpin our ability to function in the world: Reading, Math, Citizenship, Critical Thinking & Problem Solving, Communication, and Team work. Additionally, we must provide the opportunities for students to appreciate the fine arts, the fruitfulness of hard work and a sincere work ethic, and an appreciation of our differences. Our present level of accountability is represented by student performance in the areas of reading, math, science and social studies.

The real challenge occurs to us when we determine just how much of these narrowly measured skills do any one student need. Let's take math as an example. The current system of "top down" accountability requires that all students who entered high school in 2007-2008 receive four years of mathematics. This course of study includes once class beyond Algebra II which is traditionally Pre-Calculus. (I don't know about your career preparation, but as the superintendent of schools in one of the finest districts in the nation...I was not required to take Pre-Calculus.) How much sense does it make to run every kid in America through the same math regimen, when only a small percentage has enough mathematical ability to make productive use of it? How much sense does it make to put a math whiz in a Pre-Calculus classroom with 20 or 25 aspiring (and likely successful) lawyers, dancers, automatic-transmission specialists, social workers, surgeons, artists, hairdressers, language teachers? In doing so we disintegrate the positive self esteem of children whose talents are not measured by "the test". How much sense

does it make to label hundreds of kids as failures, and potentially put them out on the street because they can't jump through a particular math hoop?

As educational leaders we must look not only at the curriculum and the corresponding assessment: Do they align? Are quality staff, materials, technology being employed? Are children prepared academically, physically, socially, and emotionally for this new accountability? But, as educational leaders we must ask, are we measuring the right things. If our diagnosis is off, our recommendation for the cure will be just as distorted. We have worked on the children, the teachers, the curriculum, the test...perhaps it is time to look at the system. Let's take a step back to see if we are sending the world her leaders, her thinkers, her doers...her citizens. This cannot be a mandated cure; it will take time and an effort that requires dialogue and sustained effort. **Are we worth it?** There's no justification for procrastinating on this question. **Hereford students are worth it!**