

Superintendent's Message

The New Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR): My Perspective

The new nationwide push to evaluate teacher and principal effectiveness by using numerical scores does not bode well for our profession or our students and their futures. There is no doubt that effective instruction is of primary importance and should be at the top of the list of every educator, whether teacher or administrator. But trying to quantify effective instruction by using test scores and other numerical ratings completely ignores the real essence of what quality education is all about. What would Francis Parker say about this? How about John Dewey?

When I was in sixth grade I had a very dynamic teacher. His name was Nathan Drut. I couldn't wait to go to school every day that year. Mr. Drut opened new worlds for his students to explore. He was a great facilitator and motivated each of us to learn through discovery and exploration. He was a true Constructivist. He introduced us to classical music by teaching about Napoleon's invasion of Russia using Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. That lesson stayed with me for life. When I became a sixth grade teacher I did the same. About three years ago I received a call from the principal of Hillside Grade School in New Hyde Park where I taught. She invited me to be a surprise guest in a sixth grade classroom where one of my past students, who is now a medical doctor, would be speaking to students. When I arrived, Dr. Albert Villarin was telling the students how he gained an appreciation of classical music because his sixth grade teacher used the 1812 Overture to teach about Napoleon's invasion of Russia! When he realized I was in the room he couldn't believe it. I had a great sense of pride and worth knowing that I had such a positive impact on the life of a child. So, where is that on the rubric? Should I have gotten 10 points or 20?

I'm certain that our teachers all have similar stories. As educators we know that if we nurture our students they will indeed grow academically, socially and emotionally. As educators, we know the importance of involving students in pursuing their interests by allowing them to design their own projects, create new meaning from their own knowledge and pursue intellectual exploration. We also know that "one size does not fit all." Students learn differently and we cannot ignore their individual differences. By the way, the movement to nationalize standards does the opposite. These "more rigorous" standards ignore the fact that individual differences among students do indeed exist. That's why we must keep a watchful eye on this "movement." We must facilitate more student-driven, in-depth learning. Raising scores on norm-referenced, skills-based, "paper and pencil" tests, prepared by outside testing companies who decide what gets taught, will not improve student learning. Nor, are these tests reliable indicators of teacher effectiveness. Student test scores are not strong predictors of

teaching quality.¹ I am not suggesting that test scores aren't important. However, they are just one component of a much more comprehensive set of factors to determine teacher effectiveness.

We should all be concerned about the unintended consequences of the new APPR. It is untested and with such high stakes, there is the danger it could result in too much "teaching to the test." The enrichment that students receive in areas that are not tested, such as the arts, could be diminished by more "skill and drill" exercises, thereby diminishing the breadth of the curriculum. Teachers may not be so open to teaching high need students for fear that they may adversely impact their evaluation scores. We may also create an atmosphere where we are reluctant to challenge certain students to higher level work such as AP courses for fear that they may not achieve as well as they would at lower levels and therefore negatively impact evaluations.

The untested, new APPR initiative should be postponed so that educators have an opportunity to provide greater input into developing a process that can be piloted and adjusted, if necessary, to ensure reliability. We must first pilot any new initiative to ensure it does what we intend it to do. The primary focus of any teacher evaluation process should be to improve instruction and therefore, student achievement. Our politicians need to keep out of this and allow the educational community to do its work. While we "Race to the Top" we must take the time to make sure when we get there we don't fall off a cliff.

James Parla, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

¹ Burris, C. & Welner, K. (2011). *Conversations with Arne Duncan: Offering advice on educator evaluations*. Phi Delta Kappan. pp 38-41.