

In the name of achievement, we're dumbing down education

One of the great things about elections is that they provide an opportunity to argue.

I love arguing. I'll bicker about anything.

But it's especially satisfying to debate something important, like the future of Kentucky's education system.

I've been rehashing the just-concluded election with Jefferson County Teachers Association president Brent McKim, and, despite our editorial page having disagreed with two of the teacher union's choices for school board, we have found some notions on which to shake hands — like, what we should look for in a new Jefferson County school superintendent.

Recalling that we said, "The board should look for someone who is as student- and achievement-directed as Stephen Daeschner," McKim agreed that the current JCPS leader

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"has been earnest in these purposes." But McKim fiercely insists on a close examination of what really constitutes achievement, and how the state's schools should measure it.

He attributes a decay in the quality of our assessment system to (1) legislators who never believed in the Kentucky Education Reform Act; (2) the general government tendency, across the nation, to place low cost ahead of high quality in educational assessment; (3) the increased pressure created by ever-higher stakes and ever-broadening expectations that

are so wide that they simply cannot be deep.

McKim is convinced this has led us to "a very dangerous point."

"This environment invites schools and, indeed, entire districts, to adopt practices that do more for scores than for students," he warns. "The whole child is being left behind. With pressures from (George Bush's No Child Left Behind program) to prepare workers who have reading and math skills, we are losing sight of our broader responsibilities in a democratic society to prepare citizens who can think, communicate and interact effectively in a diverse, changing world."

As McKim says, the language we use here is important. Achievement is not learning.

Consider this example:

In one controlled study, two groups of students were given

math and language puzzles to work. "Achievement" was emphasized with one group of students, who were asked to do their best with the puzzles because they would be scored on their efforts. They were told this was important work and would be part of their overall grade. With the other group of kids, learning was emphasized. They were told the puzzles would help them understand math and English better, and would challenge their minds and their creativity.

In other words, for the first group the motivators were external, while the second group internalized the value of the opportunity.

So what happened?

Regardless of age, race or background, those in the second group always pushed themselves to do more difficult and engaging work. They also consistently reported enjoying the activity more.

According to McKim, "The first group, not being obtuse, always chose the easiest and most mundane tasks to ensure success and high achievement."

So what message do we send students each spring when we have pep sessions and offer extra credit and other rewards to externally motivate their achievement on high stakes tests? Are we saying, "Scores matter more than learning?"

Assessment and accountability are absolutely essential, but could we find ways to lower the atmospheric pressure in which we conduct the former and achieve the latter?

Too bad "student achievement" has come to mean scores on inexpensive achievement tests that measure mostly the basic, low-order knowledge and skills.

What we test drives what we do, and it should. But it's

profoundly important to test for the right things.

McKim and I may have voted for different school board candidates last week, but we agree on this: It's important to find a superintendent who believes in teaching the whole child, not only with powerful and insightful instruction in reading and math but also with exposure to such essentials as art, music, foreign language.

We need a superintendent who wants "authentic assessment," which calls on students to "construct knowledge" at higher-order thinking levels, not just memorize as much as possible and spit it back on multiple choice tests.

We need kids to demonstrate mastery, not just maximize scores.

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