
MASS COALITION COURIER

Working Together to Produce Quality Teachers for Our Urban Schools'

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Special Issue –The Coalition on High-Stakes Testing

Coalition Connections

An interview with Principal Virginia Chalmers –
By Marcie Osinsky, Intern and Mentor Supervisor,
Wheelock-Young Achievers Partnership

Young Achievers Science and Math Pilot School is an elementary pilot school in Boston. We are currently a K-7 school, in our 6th year. Last year, to renew our pilot school status, we went through a School Quality Review. To improve student learning we have looked at the schedule of the day, the structure of the school and the teaching teams, and the priorities of our professional development work, and are engaged in the following changes:

Reorganization: The school began K-2 and has added a new grade each year. This year we have created a new model with a lower (K-3), and upper (4-7) school with the intent of getting supervision and feedback closer to teachers and classrooms. A lower and upper school coordinator work with teachers more directly than the principal could previously do alone. Coordinators observe in classrooms, meet with teachers and support the educational program for students. The lower and upper school teams also meet weekly to look at student work and share practice. Pre-service, novice and experienced teachers work together - using rubrics to score writing and present student work to problem solve new teaching strategies. This year, due to Title II funding, there is also a full time site based liaison between YA and Wheelock College supervising the pre-service interns and mentor teachers.

YA, Continued on page 4



Stakes Too High? – by Carolyn Farley Northeastern University Student

High stakes standardized achievement testing is the process by which one test is used to evaluate the cumulative knowledge of an individual to determine whether or not that individual is worthy of advancement or promotion. Although this type of testing may be seen in various aspects of our society, it most frequently refers to the testing administered to high school students to determine the type of diploma they will receive. In order to fully understand the controversy surrounding tests like the MCAS, it is necessary to identify and elaborate on the two distinct areas of testing, standardized achievement testing and high stakes testing.

Standardized achievement testing is based on the idea that there is a certain amount of core knowledge that each student should have upon the completion of a particular grade level. Standardized tests are administered throughout the educational experience of the students and are most commonly associated with the SATs, Stanford Nines and the GREs. At the state level, there has recently been a movement toward refining the standards for core knowledge expected at the individual grade levels. This has led to an emphasis on frequent assessment of what students know in light of what we (referring only to random, elite and distinct members of our society) expect them to know. Though there are some worthy ideals at the heart of standardized testing, this means of assessing the expected core knowledge leaves many vital issues to be addressed: the purpose of MCAS, Continued on page 2

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

- 1 Special Report - MCAS Editorial**
Coalition Connections – Wheelock/Young Achievers
- 2 Our Work On – Developing A Platform on Testing**
- 3 Voices of the Coalition – 180 Days in Springfield Spotlight – Communities of Inquiry and Practice**
- 4 Calendar, Announcements**

MCAS, continued from page 1

the test and if it was designed appropriately, who created the standards for core knowledge and what they are, cultural bias of the test, and test accuracy as an assessment and a predictor. As if these issues were not enough to consider, Massachusetts has recently upped the ante to require that each student pass the MCAS during their time in high school in order to receive a high school diploma.

Requiring that each student pass the MCAS in order to receive a high school diploma is the way in which Massachusetts moved from assessment to high stakes testing. The bottom line is: pass the test and receive a diploma or fail the test and receive a completion of high school certificate (if the student bothers to stay in high school). Though the validity (and sanity) of this type of testing is implicit in the options it results in, it is necessary to understand the process of testing in order to understand the test's full impact.

Students in Massachusetts are asked to take the high school achievement version of the test in tenth grade. The students who pass this first administration of the test are not required to test again through high school. If they retain a passing grade point average they will receive a diploma from high school. The students who fail the test will be given opportunities to pass in both their eleventh and their twelfth year. Again, the failing student will either re-take the test or receive a completion of high school certificate upon graduation.

This situation leads to a lot of issues that need to be addressed including motivation, efficacy, accuracy, and assessment. We must ask what a student's motivation will be to excel in high school if the measure becomes certificate or diploma. Or equally frightening, what happens to those students working to complete high school who are unable to pass finite tests measuring their ability in an antiquated manner? Do they stay in school or leave to get their GED or bag education all together? What are we as a society telling these students about their ability to achieve? What are we telling them about what we value in this society? What does it mean to an individual when you tell them that the sum of their education will be determined through answering questions written by people they have never met and evaluated by people they will probably never know?

It is here that we must go back to the question of what education really is and what purpose it is meant to serve. Yes, standardized tests may be based on some worthy ideals but we must look at the unintended impacts of this type of testing. Additionally, we must truly contemplate what adding high stakes to the idea of cumulative testing says to our students and about our educational system and our societal values. Ultimately, we must re-identify the problem that lead us to this solution and examine whether or not a better solution might exist.

Our Work On... Developing a Platform on High-Stakes Testing

On December 6, 2000, the Mass. Coalition met to discuss "Challenges and Strategies in an Era of High-Stakes Testing". Educators Peter Murrell, Irwin Blumer, and Rachel Curtis together with community members Felix Arroyo of the Hispanic Office of Planning and Evaluation, State Representative Marie St. Fleur, Robert Schwartz, President of the Governors school standards organization Achieve, and school-based practitioners, Nicole Guttenburg, Leah Ingraham, and Donna Rodrigues participated. They presented varied perspectives on high-stakes testing and the role of educators, parents and community in helping all students achieve at high levels.

After audience questions, Coalition members and guests met in small groups to discuss what they had learned, what they would like their partnerships to do to address these issues, and what steps they would like the Coalition to take on these issues. Suggestions for the Coalition include hosting a Coalition-wide Conference devoted to concrete, teacher-led examples of teaching all students, develop workshops on parental involvement and cultural sensitivity, distribute resources at Coalition meetings, vary meeting times so parents can attend, and explore policy changes that would permit school districts to propose alternatives to high-stakes aspects of MCAS.

At a meeting of the steering committee that followed the conference the group reviewed all suggestions and began to formulate next steps for the Coalition. The Committee noted that parent and community involvement directly addressed the Coalition objectives and would build on this year's efforts to expand the Coalition's communities of inquiry and practice. They chose Saturday, May 12, as a Coalition-wide day devoted to parent involvement. Karen Mapp, President of the Institute for Responsive Education and a member of Stewardship Group 3, is leading this effort.

Several people asked an important question: While addressing high-stakes testing is important, can the Coalition develop strategies to help kids pass the MCAS and simultaneously improve teacher education? The achievement of students is the foundation of our objectives. There is no one answer for the Coalition regarding high-stakes testing though it is clear that focusing on our objectives produces results. We will continue to use the community we have built to collect and disseminate concrete practices on issues including high-stakes testing which touch on a number of the Coalition's objectives.

VOICES of the Coalition

Nicole Guttenburg teaches 9th grade science at Central High School in Springfield. She is a graduate of the 180 Days Program at U Mass Amherst and was a member of the Dec. 6 panel, "Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement in an Era of High Stakes Testing." I asked her to reflect on the impact of the program on her teaching practice. Here are excerpts from our interview:

As a substitute teacher for a year before entering the 180 Days Program I realized I needed to spend as much time as I could in a school setting. I felt I learned more about the inner workings of a local high school than the student teachers: I was there for the whole day, I did study hall and lunch duty, I took homeroom attendance. Three things I learned: be flexible, the most important people are nurses, custodians and secretaries, and talking with veteran teachers can be invaluable. Through a traditional program I would not have been involved in the life of the school or learned that teaching is about more than preparing lessons and assessing students. It is about community.

Every student teacher in the program creates a legacy project, an innovative club or activity. During the activity the student teacher has the opportunity to get to know students outside of the classroom. It gives student teachers a chance to see students as kids and gives them a chance to understand that kids have lives beyond school that affect who they are and their attitudes. The legacy is the impact the project has on kids long after the project is over. Once you see the impact you have on the kids I think you become more understanding and you have more patience. You see your students as inner city kids with personal lives that are nothing like what you grew up with. I do not mean to say that you will break and bend the rules to accommodate all of their needs but you see that sometimes what they need most is consistency and rules with consequences but you are also more open to compromise with students who are willing to work with you.

When I was in the program, I had the privilege to get to know a very special girl. She had an identifiable handicap and because of it she has been abused, discriminated against, made fun of and teased throughout her life, by family members and peers. Even her name was an affront to decency. She was shy, had no confidence or self-esteem. Two other 180 Days student teachers worked on this project, between the three of us we convinced her to join us. It focused on students creating a presentation to educate middle school children on hot social issues. She chose the topic discrimination. By the end of the year, she, with a few others, created a 15-minute presentation that culminated in her reading a personal poem to 15 middle school students and 6 teachers. From there, she went on to lead a peer-mentoring group for other females in the city that had the same handicap.

Spotlight on...

Communities of Inquiry and Practice

Communities of Inquiry and Practice are our means of expanding collaborative efforts and resources in support of beginning teachers. CIPs add arts and science faculty as well as parents and community organizations to the teacher education equation in order to share resources and promote the objectives of beginning teachers. The Coalition's efforts to build CIP's are coming to fruition in these projects:

The Coalition's February Conference is devoted to the work of stewardship groups. The stewardship groups keep us focused on our objectives for enhancing teacher education so that we may all move forward together. As the Coalition evolves and our stakeholders continue to increase, the stewardship groups are where our different voices are heard, our goals reviewed and renewed, and our best practices collected and disseminated.

Vista Compass, a webboard platform that would enable us to communicate more easily between conferences, is in development. Members will log on via the Mass Coalition website and have a look at ongoing discussions on a topic of interest or participate in the work of stewardship groups.

The Boston College/Boston Schools Partnership is presenting a workshop that will focus on children's literature in Spanish. Noted author Alma Flor Ada will be the guest speaker. The workshop will consist of breakfast over round table discussions with practitioners presenting units of their work followed by the guest speaker and workshops to assist participants in rethinking their units. Planners hope to attract an increasing number of stakeholders and generate discussion regarding critical issues in children's literature in bilingual education. For information email Kathy Lee at leekn@bc.edu. PDP's available.

The U Mass Amherst/Springfield Schools Partnership is implementing an expansion of the CIP idea using technology to further teacher education. With the Department of Computer Science the partnership is developing VRROOM, or virtual resource room, an on-line annotated version of the MA curriculum frameworks with a database of web-based resources for teaching the academic content. The site is open to all and teacher candidates must use the site with their cooperating teachers. View the project on the web at: ccbit.cs.umass.edu/SchoolofEducation/Preservice/Vrroom

The U Mass Boston/Boston Schools Partnership will host a conference with the Adoption Resource Center on the different configurations of families found in urban schools including adoptive, foster, extended, and gay or lesbian

Calendar of *Events*

Coalition-Wide Conferences:

February 8 – Boston College
May 12 – Parent Focus Workshop
June 28-29 - Summer Institute

Steering Committee Meetings:

January 8 – Clark University
February 20 – Clark University
March 19 – Young Achievers
April 1-2 – Sturbridge Retreat
May 7 – Clark University

Coalition Conference Presentations:

January 27 – Holmes Partnership in
Albuquerque, New Mexico
March 1-4 - AACTE in Dallas, Texas
April 10-14 - AERA in Seattle, Washington

Partnership Events:

March 20 – U Mass Boston Conference
“Different Family Configurations in
Urban Schools”
March 31 – Boston College Workshop
“Children’s Literature in Spanish”

YA, Continued from page 1

Re-scheduling: The majority of Young Achievers attend school from 8:30 - 5:30. This year we have a staggered schedule in which teachers provide academic support throughout the day. In the first grade for example, a few days a week the literacy specialist works with the interns during the literacy block allowing the head teacher to come in at a later time. In the late afternoon this head teacher is available to take a small group on a pre-field trip to reinforce concepts and information, or to meet with a small reading or math group. It has been challenging to create and we are examining its effectiveness as we proceed, however it is clear that many children need more time on task or small group opportunities to further explore content.

Reflecting on our Curriculum: A priority for this year is to reflect on the coherence of the curriculum. Design teams in Mathematics, Literacy, Science and Technology are developing clear benchmarks for each grade level and explicit expectations for academic achievement Arts and Science faculty from Wheelock College and curriculum coaches from EDC and Boston are working with these teams. We are looking at results of the MCAS to analyze where our students are struggling or not representing their knowledge. We are using a range of assessments in literacy and mathematics to create a fuller picture of our students' strengths and areas of weakness. With this clearer picture we will design instruction to better meet student learning needs.