
Time to ask some critical questions about "Dream Schools"

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For some the benefits of Superintendent Ackerman's proposed Dream Schools are so self-evident that opposition is seen as self-serving, racist, or both. I join with others in supporting the intent of the Superintendent's plan—to provide all children from the poorer neighborhoods, including African Americans, with the educational opportunities available to children from the more affluent areas of the city. But there are numerous worrisome questions raised by the Superintendent's plan that ought not to be brushed aside.

The "Dream Schools" label is a distraction from the fact that it is a plan to reconstitute schools that appears to be based solely on a school's API ranking. API is the State's index of school improvement. It is statistically derived from student scores on three tests—California Standards Test (CST), California Achievement Test (CAT), and California High School Exit Examination (CAHEE)—all of which are standardized tests, composed almost entirely of multiple choice test items.

The problems of using standardized tests as the indicator of school failure and as a measure of success of the Dream School proposal are far too numerous to enumerate here. I cite three.

Standardized test scores produce both false positives and negatives. This means that schools, students, and teachers are falsely judged. Capable students are denied opportunities and stigmatized; schools and programs with exceptional records of success are condemned as failing and dismantled, at the same time that schools in need of change are celebrated as successful.

The effect on the curriculum of using test scores as a measure of school success is well documented. It produces a one-size-fits-all, standardized curriculum. The pressures to make annual gains on scores inevitably curtail and marginalize activities, subjects, and areas of learning that cannot be measured by standardized tests. Music, the arts,

poetry, performance, interdisciplinary studies whither, or are offered only as rewards. Critical thinking, multicultural and civic education, community service, and work-study become luxuries reserved for successful test takers.

Perhaps the most disturbing consequences of a policy that puts achievement test score improvement first is that success and failure are not evenly distributed. Those disproportionately hurt are students of color—particularly Latinos and African Americans, and students from families for whom English is a second language. The reasons have little to do with relative academic competence or potential and much to do with how standardized tests are created, scored, and results reported. Instead of improving education and options for poor, minority students, heavy emphasis on test performance create more, not fewer, barriers to the dream of equality of educational opportunity.

Finally, there are unanswered questions about control and how responsive these schools will be to community needs and concerns. Who will make and how will the decisions be made about how the educational program is to be shaped and structured? Who will select the staff and by what criteria? Will the schools' basic direction and its curriculum be set by directives from the central office with little or no place for the creativity and imagination of the district's teachers and principals, or contributions of the local community? San Francisco is blessed with an exceptionally large pool of effective, creative teachers committed to social justice and to high standards of achievement. Will their knowledge and talents be well used in the design of these schools and in carrying out the plans?

Polarization of opinion within the Board of Education on the Superintendent's performance is no secret. It is vital that support for the Superintendent's proposal does not become personalized as a test of loyalty or opposition to the Superintendent. It would be a disservice to this community if the Dream School plan is not carefully examined to determine whether it will benefit students and the communities it is intended to serve and raises the quality of schools in the district as a whole. The issues raised by the proposal should be considered on their merits, with a presumption of good intentions by all parties, and be evaluated on the basis of what best serves the children of San Francisco.

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