

Too Much Emphasis on Testing?

KERA Commentary featuring Anne Foster

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The Texas House Public Education Committee heard testimony Tuesday about the impact of the state's new standardized test on education. Whatever the word on the STAAR test, commentator Anne Foster wonders if it isn't time to reconsider our approach to standardized testing overall.

Perhaps it's fitting that more than 525 Texas school boards have signed a national resolution calling for an end to the over-emphasis on standardized testing. After all, the law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was modeled on what some called the Bush "Texas Miracle" – the mechanism by which former President Bush claimed improved test scores on standardized tests in Texas. What started in Texas could also begin to end in Texas.

While President Obama has responded to Congress's lack of action on revamping No Child Left Behind by using his executive powers to grant waivers to states that embrace his educational agenda, there seems to be a growing movement of voices calling for an end to high-stakes, standardized tests as the sole measure of accountability for public schools. High stakes testing as we know it means possibly rating an entire school failing based on the results of a few students. It means pinning student achievement to one test on one day. Rather than using testing as a diagnostic tool – to see where schools need help and where we need to put resources – it is, instead, punitive. To be sure, there has been a rumbling going on for years about this, but the voices seem to be getting better organized and stronger, and school boards and other groups beyond Texas are joining the movement and signing the resolution.

One of the problems the anti-testing forces have had is that testing is tied to accountability, so if you argue against testing, you're accused of being against the need for schools to be accountable to the public – who pay for them – for student learning and student achievement. In addition, the sub-population breakdown of test scores allows the public to see how each group of students is doing. Schools can no longer hide the progress of poor and minority children, and this is a boost to those students.

But while it was originally meant to insure students mastered basic skills so that they could go on to higher levels, No Child Left Behind has instead become a much hated law that many blame for everything from lack of creativity in the classroom to stomach aches to plummeting real estate prices. As a former Realtor and school board member in North Texas, I can attest that these claims are not completely unwarranted.

There is a way to maintain accountability to the public without creating classroom environments that drive teachers away, make kids sick, and cause parents to become angry. If multiple indicators and options are used, no one of them becomes the silver bullet of accountability and progress. Kids who shine in one venue rather than another are no longer evaluated on only one measure – one test given on one day. In addition to standardized state tests, there are also measures such as SAT/ACT scores, graduation rates, course grades, end of course exams, portfolios and others.

As a school board member, I supported accountability for public schools. The public deserves to know and should care how their money is being spent and what results are being achieved. I just think we have to find a better way to do it and be sure that in the process, we are offering students the foundation they need for post high school education, careers, citizenship and lifelong learning.

Lead the way, Texas.

Anne Foster is a former Richardson school board president and is currently National Executive Director of Parents for Public Schools.