

## ***DO WE VALUE SELF-ESTEEM OR LEARNING?***

***By Lance T. Izumi***

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Remember when Pinocchio was led astray by the fast-talking fox who promised him fun instead of the hard work of school? By the end of the story he turned into a donkey. Some modern-day foxes in Sacramento want to raise student self-esteem by eliminating state testing of second-graders, which could result in an education for our children better suited to donkeys.

Under the current testing program, the main state test, the California Standards Test (CST), is administered to students in grades two through 11. This test measures student achievement in reading, math and several other subjects. Correcting a defect in previous tests, the CST is aligned with the state's tough academic content standards so that students are being tested on what they should be learning in the classroom.

Legislation authored by Assemblywoman Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, and sponsored by the powerful California Teachers Association, however, would exclude second-graders from the testing requirement.

The main argument for the bill, which is expected to pass the Legislature by month's end, is that testing is too stressful for second-graders. Hancock says that she fears the tests "may do harm to a number of children in ... damaging their self-esteem." If children perform poorly, Hancock worries that, "It makes school the place where you fail, especially for young children, out of the gate." Hancock's argument, however, is seriously flawed.

Scarlet Fs aren't pinned on children. Poor performance by a child on the state test isn't the end of the educational process, but the beginning. Test results allow teachers, administrators and parents to see student weaknesses and target remedial help.

While the teachers union wants to eliminate second-grade testing as part of its continuing assault on the state school accountability system, many classroom teachers value the information they glean from test scores. Christina Andreas, who works with struggling students at Walnut Elementary School in Chino, relies heavily on the exams to identify students needing extra assistance. She says that testing "should be used to drive instruction and identify areas in need of intervention as early as possible."

Indeed, if testing were conducted beginning in the third grade with results not coming in until the start of grade four, a student would be halfway through elementary school before this valuable information became available.

That would be disastrous especially for students with reading difficulties. Reading problems not detected early often cause underachievement throughout a student's academic career.

Hancock says that in-class assessments, such as textbook end-of-the-chapter exams, could be used instead of state testing. However, there is wide disparity among teachers in their use of in-class tests. Some teachers, influenced by the anti-testing bias of university schools of education, use in-class tests sporadically. State testing is uniform and administered to all. Individual student scores can be collected over time and achievement tracked. All of which is why state testing is so much more useful to educators, lawmakers and researchers.

Finally, Hancock says that time spent on testing should be spent instead on instruction. But since the test is aligned with the state standards, it serves an instructional purpose as a motivator for teachers to teach to the standards. Los Angeles Unified school superintendent Roy Romer says, "We gain from testing second-graders," because it allows school officials "to know whether instruction is occurring and how to improve it." The strongly rising second-grade test scores in Los Angeles seem to bear him out.

Eliminating second-grade testing is shortsighted. Testing students early reveals their deficiencies, allows the targeting of extra help, and improves teaching and learning. The resulting increased achievement, not the lack of testing, is the best way to promote student self-esteem.

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