

Are Our Schools Getting Better?

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Legislatures deal with a range of issues as diverse as human conduct. And legislators are assisted in their understanding of complex issues by their own backgrounds, lobbyists and interest groups, experts, and public opinion. In one area, however, most legislators declare themselves to be the experts – education. After all, everyone has the common experience of having been to school. We remember what we liked and did not like about school and what we thought worked and what did not work. Virtually all legislators realized some degree of success in school, and many excelled.

A similar perspective exists in the general population. Most everyone has an opinion about public schools and the job they are doing. Unfortunately, that perspective has too often been negative. Public opinion about schools affects legislators who must take action to improve education. Always facing budget constraints, legislators seek quick, easy, and cheap solutions. Too often the solution has been more testing.

Amid reports that some students who graduated from high school could not read, write, and/or compute, legislators in Virginia and other states several decades ago put in place “minimum competency testing” programs. After many years of testing that was not making the children any smarter, the testing programs were phased out.

The most recent wave of criticism of public schools led by conservatives who wanted vouchers or tuition tax credits to send their children to private schools brought about the Standards of Learning (SOL) program in Virginia and other high-stakes testing programs in other states. This year’s graduating class was the first required to pass the SOL tests in order to graduate. There were no calamitous results that I and others predicted with high percentages of students failing. In fact, only a handful of students failed.

Are our schools getting better? Are our children getting smarter? Between announcement of the SOL testing program and its full implementation, a number of things happened. Tests were rewritten, passing scores were lowered, alternative testing was adopted, and an undetermined number of students dropped out of school. Will previous complaints about public schools be quieted with the test results? Probably not.

If legislators turned to experts in education and asked their opinions on what could be done to improve student performance, they would not be told to require another testing program as the feds have recently done with No Child Left Behind. The solution they would propose would be to dramatically lower the pupil-teacher ratio to allow for more individualized instruction. Such a solution has a much higher price tag than testing.

We will pretend for a few years that SOL and No Child Left Behind testing programs have made our schools better. With all their disruptions to school operations, they have not. For the next cycle of school reform, let’s ask the experts for ways to improve our schools.