

POLICY BRIEF

An electronic publication of
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

January 7, 2003

Volume 3, Number 2

Teacher Testing: A Compromise

One of the most sought after New Year's wishes for the state's education unions, as well as defenders of the "no strings attached" approach to evaluating educators, is the rescission of the Professional Development Assistance Program (PDAP), which requires testing of teachers in math and reading skills. An attempt to overturn the examinations failed in the waning moments of the most recent legislative session due to a gubernatorial veto, but there may be renewed pressure as a new administration and a new legislative session commence.

It is very questionable for these groups to push hard for the elimination of an exam that, according to the organization that designed them, has no pass/fail criterion, does not publicize individual scores, and is intended to aid the professional development of teachers.

Yet opponents of the tests have raised a variety of objections to the PDAP since they were first administered. They argued that the tests did not adequately measure classroom skills. A researcher that advocated the elimination of the PDAP stated that a "[test taker] could do great on these tests but be a terrible teacher, or they could be a great teacher but not do so well on the test". Then, union officials objected to methods of administering the tests, noting that a pencil and paper format could jeopardize privacy, but computer-based tests could confuse other teachers. There were complaints that the tests did not measure content knowledge. Lastly, there was a line of objections that stated the tests were just a political way to "get" teachers and that they were a waste of taxpayer dollars.

These objections are all refutable. The PDAP tests were not intended to measure classroom ability anymore than the state's bar exam evaluates the ability of a prospective attorney to make a convincing closing argument to a jury. The tests are for the purpose of measuring general knowledge of reading and mathematics, similar to the way the Pennsylvania assessment exams measure the abilities of students in these areas. Objections to taking examinations in basic areas that are the foundation of other subjects of study is not a confidence builder for the public's perception of educators.

In addition, it is almost laughable to see union officials decrying the politics behind the institution of the PDAP. To be sure, political motivation was evident when the education unions agreed to the tests in return for over 230,000 school employees being included in a

May 2001 statewide pension increase. We doubt there was much kicking and screaming at that time. We also doubt the unions will recommend giving back the pension increase when and if the PDAP is eliminated.

Assuming that the tests are eradicated in the near term, what method of evaluation will be put into place to assure Pennsylvania's parents, taxpayers, school board members and other interested parties that teachers are competent in basic skills?

Rather than getting rid of the PDAP altogether, we offer a compromise solution: make the test optional. If it is indeed true, as some have claimed, that a teacher can do poorly on a test of math and reading proficiency yet still be a great teacher, then it follows that his/her students will show substantial improvement during the school year. Therefore, we recommend that any teacher that does not wish to participate in the PDAP could have a student achievement score be used instead.

At the beginning of the school year, that teacher's class would be tested and then tested again at the end of the school year to see how much has been learned. A ranking system would be designed to measure the performance of those teachers.

What could be fairer? If there are great teachers who don't test well, there should be no objections to this alternative measure of performance. However, it is quite doubtful that teacher unions will rush to accept this measure. We suspect that far too many teachers don't do well on the tests because they are not prepared and will never be great teachers. Unfortunately, that is the real reason behind the opposition to the tests in the first place.

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