

A Dozen Years of Hard Work

By Jane Sonenshein, State Board of Education, 10th District

The school year has just started and report cards are in the news. Newspaper readers have had the opportunity to see how their schools are doing in meeting state and federal standards. For a deeper understanding, visit www.ode.state.oh.us to find building reports as well.

Sorting out test scores, percentages of students scoring proficient, accelerated and advanced, and what AYP means should lead to an appreciation of what our schools in Ohio have accomplished even as we continue to push for improvement.

When the Ninth Grade Proficiency Test was created by state law for 1993 graduates it was the first time individual districts were not in charge of their own expectations for graduation. The setting of state standards followed, which meant each district now had to align the curriculum with state standards. In a few years a sixth grade and fourth grade proficiency test were mandated. Each time, the Ohio Department of Education had to define and create standards that would align subject matter with test expectations. Each time, every one of our 600 plus school districts had to change their curriculum and each teacher had to change teaching plans to include the state mandated topics in each subject. All these steps required districts to spend time and money realigning their curriculum, teaching tools, and professional development to meet the new statewide expectations.

Ohio was well ahead of many states in creating tests, setting statewide standards in reading, mathematics, writing, social studies and science, and scheduling tests so students were not inundated with all tests in one year when the federal No Child Left Behind law went into effect in 2002. That law required testing of every student in 3rd through 8th grade in math and reading every year and once in high school. Ohio had to change our own testing laws to meet the federal mandates. Ohio has been good at recognizing that writing, history, civics and science are important core subjects as well as the extremely important reading and mathematics, and have continued to require statewide testing in these additional subjects once in elementary, middle and high school. The current Ohio Graduation Test, given at the end of 10th grade replaces the ninth grade proficiency test that started it all thirteen years ago.

I hope you will keep in mind, as you read the dizzying number of changes and increasing expectations for students and educators, the amount of effort needed to inform and instruct all 600 plus districts on each new requirement. There are new additional teacher qualifications and new requirements of reporting on the achievement of all minority students including low income and disabled students. Once each district received information on the new state and federal mandates and what these mandates required of them, every district needed to adjust their curriculum so students are taught subjects in the correct order to be ready for each new test. Each teacher needed to be instructed on the new changes, expectations, and how to make the most of information the tests gave them to improve the instruction in the classroom so each student can learn in his or her best way what they need to know to be successful on the tests and in life.

This is all good for education. The changing economy requires all Americans to be better educated for well paying jobs. More is being required of students and educators. This has been a period of dramatic and continual change for the educational community. Change is expensive. The cost of testing is a minor part of the cost of changing the entire system. Every year or two educators have been asked to do something differently or something new. These changes will continue for some time as the NCLB act requires 100% proficiency at all grade levels by 2014. In a nation where individual freedom and individual differences are welcome and expected, this will require learning new techniques for reaching all students.

Education must change as our economy has changed. Educators are working hard to adjust, and to assure that the changes they adopt are the right policies. No one knows what the future of the United States is in the new economy, but education is in the forefront of the efforts to keep our citizens prosperous and successful. Success will not come quickly, easily or cheaply. We need it to be done well.

State Superintendent of Education, Dr. Susan Zelman, says, "It will take the hard work of students, parents, educators, and the business, labor, and political communities." Please support your schools as they change for our future.

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