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Tests Can Be Useful in Addressing Gap

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State Sen. Steve Fischmann wrote an op-ed column on April 5 about improving our system of education. While I disagree with a couple of minor parts, I found his perspective refreshing. I would like to provide a little information as well as some suggestions on improving our school system.

We need to start by setting clear and realistic goals for our teachers and schools to work toward.

I would like to see a school system where our students graduate with a basic understanding of the world. I want them to be able to reason and solve problems. I want them to go to the polls informed about the candidates and U.S. civics. I want those who are college bound to be adequately prepared for their freshman year. I want our current and future students to have the tools to make better lives for themselves.

This is what I expect of our school system, but it is not what our school system expects of our students. Instead, our system expects students to score well on standardized tests.

The state and federal government have told our teachers and principals that students will perform well on standardized tests, or else! Standardized tests have become the end goal when they should be a means of assessment.

Our teachers have responded to this by increasing the number of students who score proficient on the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment (NMSBA) in eighth-grade math by almost 20 percent between 2005 and 2009. Our biggest improvements have been in math because it is where the most room for improvement was to be found.

Teachers are trying desperately to do what we have asked of them, and in many cases they are succeeding. Yet gains of this NMSBA magnitude are not shown on standardized national tests (NAEP) that some New Mexico students also take. This shows that our current goals and expectations, which focus primarily on test results, are misdirected.

Despite my concerns about standardized testing, it is a useful method of assessment if the conclusions drawn are limited to specific areas. Even while acknowledging the information that is gained from the NMSBA, it should be stated that our students are spending too much time taking it.

Kids in elementary school are spending more time taking tests than college graduates who are trying to get into law school. The time spent is absurd and could be shortened significantly while still yielding equally valuable results. However, since we have made these kids go through long tests, we owe it to them to make the best use of the information gained. It is called "working with what we have."

NMSBA test results contain information broken down by demographic groups and grade levels. Using this information, we can calculate which demographic factors correlate best with test performance.

In New Mexico, the students with the largest disadvantage are students who are both impoverished and belong to certain minority groups. The combined effects of these two demographics overshadow any other single demographic factor by a very large amount. The NMSBA shows that there is a very big and very real achievement gap between impoverished minorities and other students. It also shows that teachers and individual schools, on average, account for less than 50 percent of student achievement on standardized tests.

Demographic information provided in NMSBA results can be used to make predictions on how well the students at a school or in a teacher's classroom should do. Normally, these predictions are pretty accurate, but not always. Sometimes there are schools where a majority of the students come from a demographic background that would be considered disadvantaged, a priori, yet they do significantly better than expected.

This tells us multiple things: There is nothing inherent about these students that leads to poor test performance; the achievement gap can be closed, and we know where to look to find out how to close that gap.

We need to know what these schools, teachers and communities are doing right. What are we waiting for? Let us find the answers and fix the problems. Disadvantaged demographic groups need not be disadvantaged forever.

As Fischmann said, there is no magic bullet. We have a lot of hard work to do, and our schools will not turn into a shining beacon of educational success overnight.

The methods we use for assessing our schools need to be modified. Any method of assessment we use should be objective and not cut excessively into instruction time. We need to set some realistic overall goals for what we want our schools to achieve, and these goals should not be set by any single group of people.

The people teaching our children must be involved in setting goals because they have experience we do not. We all have a vested interest in improving education. We have seen that our teachers are capable after the state and federal government set clear, albeit misguided, goals for them. We owe it to our future generations to do better.

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