
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

NYC student testing scandal: roots and reverberations

Commentary | By Craig Gurian | Education

October 12, 2010 —Yesterday's New York Times carried Jennifer Medina's extended reporting on the profound flaws in the standardized English and math tests of which New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is so proud. These are the tests that he sold as proving that more and more students were getting a better education.

"The fast rise and even faster fall of New York's passing rates resulted from the effect of policies, decisions and missed red flags that stretched back more than 10 years," Medina reported, quoting, among others, a member of a state testing advisor panel who became worried about score inflation: "Teachers began to know what was going to be on the tests... Then you have to wonder, and folks like me wonder, is that real learning or not?"

Much attention will undoubtedly focus on the various warning signs ignored by the Bloomberg Administration — warning signs that would have interfered with its narrative of how "business savvy" can solve virtually any problem, and with the Mayor's ability to boast his way to re-election.

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The Bloomberg team's cover-up is certainly reprehensible, although hardly surprising from someone who was able to switch seamlessly from "principled" support for term limits to a "just one more term, I'm indispensable" stance when it suited his own interests.

More important is why the warning signs did not reverberate more with the public and the press during the course of the Mayor's second term (that is, the 4 years leading up to his latest reelection, in 2009). And, most critically: how the new attention on the problems with the current testing regime will be used and abused in the service of various other agendas.

The problems with the design and administration of New York City's tests, of course, were hiding in plain sight, just like the fact that there are many inadequate teachers in the system, the fact

that tremendous numbers of students are continuing not to learn, and that fact that — despite funding increases — public schools are still massively underfunded in relation to need.

Outsiders might be astonished at the credulousness of many New Yorkers, but a significant contributor to the lack of serious public debate was simply the awe that the term “wealthy and successful business executive” seemed to inspire. It is not, after all, intuitively obvious that the ability to lead a private company to success —having only in mind the single goal of maximizing profit — would be a useful proxy for the ability to lead a far more complex governmental enterprise that must satisfy multiple and competing priorities. Yet this was assumption was made, fed by a press corps that, much of the time, fawned over the Mayor and breathlessly reported his exploits as though the mayoralty had become part of the social calendar.

Issue by issue dissection — why did he believe in 2007 that Wall Street is over-regulated; didn’t his decision to continue construction of a new water tunnel show foresight; why is civil rights enforcement such a low priority; haven’t third-term traffic calming measures changed the experience of living in Manhattan in ways many thought were not possible — was largely displaced by worship of the super-wealthy (a phenomenon that has been replicated to the benefit of wealthy candidates and office holders throughout the country). This pathology was reflected in reporting that chose to focus on the effectiveness of sound bites the Mayor deployed in his debate against Bill Thompson, his 2009 opponent, instead of providing probing, real-time analysis of how schoolchildren were and were not being educated.

The hiding in plain sight phenomenon was strongly aided and abetted by many who described themselves as community advocates who were frightened to acknowledge the fact that even artificially inflated scores show devastating lags in educational achievement in many neighborhoods, particularly many neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of African-American or Latino children. Instead of meeting that reality head-on, instead of working towards a vision of children throughout the city and the region all being “our children,” these advocates preferred to disdain standardized testing altogether.

And this reluctance became part of remarkably unproductive debates. Even in yesterday’s article in the Times, Howard Wolfson, a deputy mayor who helped run Mayor Bloomberg’s 2009 re-election campaign, was still living in a world of bi-polar choices: “Either you believe in standards or tests, or you don’t,” he asserted, using the straw person argument that the only converse to the current system is that “we don’t test and we have no way of judging success or failure.”

Wolfson apparently lives in the mirror image world to advocates who have never met standardized tests of which they approved, and who think that any high-stakes testing is too much high-stakes testing. The sub-text for some of those advocates: we can’t afford a system that produces results we don’t like.

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For the rest of us, it would seem that auditing how well the school system is serving its students is essential, and that it would be more productive to have a serious discussion, first, of what the system needs to be teaching, and, second, how the effectiveness of that instruction can be measured in a way that neither displaces the educational mission, shies away from accurate reporting (no matter how ugly the picture that is painted), nor allows for any material level of gaming of the tests.

Likewise, we have heard over time interminable arguments between the “subject matter knowledge” camp and the “teacher skills” camp. Mightn’t we agree — in New York and elsewhere — that deep subject matter knowledge and teacher skills are each necessary but not sufficient parts of being an effective teacher, and that the system ought to be looking for that subset of teachers and prospective teachers who possess both?

In the wake of Medina’s reporting, I’m afraid, recrimination by anti-testing advocates, and defensiveness from the Bloomberg Administration will become a toxic cloud that makes productive debate less likely, not more likely. That is precisely the result that the close to one million students currently enrolled — and the millions who will follow them — can surely not afford.

Sooner than later, the question that needs to be asked — by parents, teachers, politicians, overseers, advocates on all sides, and, yes, even by reporters — was perhaps best posed in a song on a 1989 Bob Dylan album:

If my hands are tied must I not wonder within
Who tied them and why and where must I have been?

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