

Another view on opting out of testing

Delaware Voice Nicholas A. Fischer

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(Photo: Photo provided)

There was great irony in the Washington Post's praise of Gov. Jack Markell's standing up for accountability in the editorial "Delaware should not make it okay for parents to opt their kids out of testing."

In my view, Gov. Markell and Delaware federal and state legislators have opted out of their accountability and responsibilities by supporting and enforcing the Neighborhood Schools Act (2000) in Delaware. The Neighborhood Schools Act has helped to sustain and enhance huge disparities in access to educational opportunities and student achievement in Delaware. This is well documented in the Wilmington Education Advisory Committee's report "Strengthening Wilmington Education: An Action Agenda."

The WEAC report states the following:

"While the segregation of schools [in Delaware] was struck down in public law 60 years ago, the inequality of educational opportunity has persisted for three generations of students who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of these historic rulings (Delaware/Belton and Bulah v. Gebhart and U.S. Supreme Court/ Brown

v. Bd of Education)."

It goes on to say:

"Today, thousands of Wilmington children, most of them poor, black, or Latino, still do not have access to high-quality public education. Judged on most outcomes – test scores, truancy, graduation rates, college attendance, socio-emotional well-being, drug use, homelessness, arrests, and unemployment – these children have become data points for a system of failure."

I see this from perspective of having been the superintendent of the Christina Public Schools in Delaware from 1998 to 2003, and as someone who actually supported what I saw as the intent of the No Child Left Behind Act. I believe that President George W. Bush, Rep. George Miller and Sen. Ted Kennedy were deeply committed to taking a close look at and improving the achievement of groups of students who historically had been missed in aggregating test results, especially minorities and special needs students. I agree with the civil rights groups cited in the editorial that assessments or testing can provide an objective measure that can help avoid minority and other at risk students from slipping through the cracks academically.

The "opt-out" testing issues in Delaware mask the more fundamental problems of access to educational opportunities. It is easy to talk about the need for accountability and the right to parental choice and avoid discussing the consequences of laws passed and decisions that have been made for the past twenty years in Delaware.

As the WEAC's report clearly shows, disparities across race and income are growing in Delaware, especially between students in the state's only large city, Wilmington and students in other communities.

In Massachusetts, then-Sen. Thomas Birmingham on the eve of Education Reform in 1993 said that he believed in charter schools in that they gave poor students access to the same opportunities he, who had grown up in Chelsea, had had at Andover-Exeter and Harvard. But he said that that they must be open to all students. This is not the case in Delaware. As the WEAC's report shows, the charter schools in Delaware, especially those considered elite like the Charter School of Wilmington and the Newark Charter School, in no way represent the diversity of the communities in which they are located.

The inventory of testing and boosts in graduation rates described in the Post's editorial only have meaning when they are combined with assuring that all students have equal access to educational opportunities, and that those who receive diplomas have the skills they need to be successful in their lives as adults.

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