

THURSDAY, APRIL 5, 2007

Complexities of education accountability

There is a tendency to mistake data for wisdom, just as there has always been a tendency to confuse logic with values, intelligence with insight. Unobstructed access to facts can produce unlimited good only if it is matched by the desire and ability to find out what they mean and where they lead."

Today, when educational accountability is confused with snapshot test scores, Norman Cousins' 1980 words are worth revisiting.

They may also apply to explanations for the superintendent's non-renewal of the Ottoson principal's contract. What do "the data" really show for the Ottoson Middle School? They tell half a story and demand context for their meaning to be clear.

Two subgroups of students, those with disabilities (i.e., receiving special education) and those from low-income families, failed to achieve what federal regulations identify as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). However, AYP is a function of how students in one grade compare to different students in that same grade in previous years. Comparisons within the class of 2011 tell another story.

As sixth-graders in 2005, 43 percent of students with disabilities received warnings on the MCAS math test. In seventh grade, they failed to make AYP. But in eighth grade, only 27 percent of those students failed the test.

The story is further complicated by the dual criteria for special education eligibility. Students must demonstrate a specific disability (e.g., learning disability) which must interfere with effective progress in regular education. They are not eligible for special education un-

til they have failed. So some students with disabilities don't get special help until the curriculum is sufficiently advanced, or the demand for organizational skills sufficiently great, that they can no longer cope.

In one large national study, 30 percent of students did not receive services until fourth grade or later even though they were typically diagnosed in first grade. Among children with learning disabilities, nearly one in four did not receive special education until middle school.

In 2006, only 10.8 percent of students in Arlington elementary schools — but 17.2 percent in middle school and 16 percent in high school — were enrolled in special education. In fact, 2004-2006 enrollment data indicate that more Arlington children receive special education in the middle school years than in any other grades. Therefore, it is in middle school that these students' MCAS scores have the most impact, when they are members of subgroups of 50 or 60 rather compared with the mainstream of 300.

Moreover, middle school students just beginning special education may react badly to the perceived stigma and isolation. They may need time to adjust before being able to respond to enhanced programming and attention and, eventually, to demonstrate the positive outcomes of appropriate instruction. It should not be surprising if MCAS scores of students new to special education declined in middle school but improved in

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high school.

Consider the Class of 2008. As sixth-graders in 2002, only 65 percent of students with disabilities performed above the warning level on the mathematics MCAS. By the eighth grade in 2004, only 56 percent passed. At the same time, 86 percent of students not receiving special education passed in sixth grade and 89 percent in eighth.

Bad data? Yes. Whole story? No.

The 2002 failure/warning rate in sixth grade regular education was 14 percent representing 45 students. Only 17 sixth graders were enrolled in special education, but by eighth grade there were an additional 37. Not coincidentally, 34 fewer students in regular education failed the eighth-grade mathematics MCAS.

Most of the Class of 2008 who moved into special education in middle school could not demonstrate gains on the eighth grade math MCAS; less than half scored above Warning. But after two more years of appropriate services, they progressed nicely. The pass rate in 10th grade increased to 85 percent of students with disabilities at AHS and 72 percent of Arlington students in special education at Minuteman and AHS combined.

Rather than failing students with disabilities, the progression of the Class of 2008 represents a willingness to identify underserved students and to get them the special education they need. But unless we look beyond the surface, the faculty and administration at the Ottoson get only the blame and none of the credit.

When my son first arrived at middle school, special education felt sadly from an earlier and darker era with little communication and no involvement from the administration. Things began to change in seventh grade, when a new principal, Ms. Bouris, became actively involved. By the eighth grade, we began to have team meetings — a critical aspect of special education — with the team actually present.

That is no easy accomplishment in middle school. Multiple teachers need to be freed up to exchange information. It takes resources to ensure that classes are covered adequately, and a committed principal to make that happen. The impact on my son's learning and engagement showed, the schools averted a lawsuit, and I believe that the students who have followed continue to benefit.

There are those who feel the data have spoken, but they are hearing an incomplete story.

Data are necessary for making educationally sound decisions, but they are not sufficient. Real leaders don't hide behind data. They contextualize them, not in snapshots, but in the streaming video of children's lives until the dynamic and complex picture becomes clear. They know, as Plato did, that good decisions are based on knowledge and not on numbers alone.

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