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OPED

State Doesn't Need More School Testing

April 1, 2005
Betty J. Sternberg

Several years ago, I decided to lose weight. Seventy-two pounds later, I can tell you that achieving success did not require more trips to the scale, but did require changing my habits to eat less and move more. Oh, I certainly did weigh myself regularly - but once a week, not every day. I balanced the need to measure my progress with a greater need to make daily changes in my behavior to reach my goal.

We have a similar situation regarding the approach Connecticut wants to take to achieve the goal of leaving no child behind. Despite requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, we know that we do not have to test statewide more than we already do. We do have to continue to test what is important, reasonable and challenging at regular intervals. We do have to provide the programs - such as high-quality preschool for all our needy 3- and 4-year-olds, and rigorous curriculum and instruction with assessments throughout - that will raise our students' achievement. We must balance the need to measure our students' progress statewide with the need to provide daily, high-quality programs that will lead to our goal.

More than two decades ago - long before the No Child Left Behind Act was a gleam in federal policy-makers' eyes - the education commissioner, the state Board of Education and the General Assembly decided to address "the two Connecticut" and instituted the Connecticut Mastery Test. We decided to measure our students' academic performance in reading, writing and mathematics in grades 4, 6 and 8. We decided not just to present the results for Connecticut students as a whole, but also to identify the achievement differences among groups of students - white, black, Hispanic, wealthy and

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disadvantaged, male and female. We have produced these results annually since 1984 at the student, classroom, school, district and state levels.

So, given our assessment system, how well do our students fare on national measures of achievement? Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is administered to a representative group of students in every state, allow direct comparisons of student achievement state by state in reading, writing and math. The most recent results show that our youngsters do exceedingly well.

Take Grade 4 reading. Students in five states scored statistically equal to one another and significantly higher than all other states. Connecticut was one of these five. In fact, Connecticut fourth-grade reading performance (ranked by raw scores) is at the very top. White Connecticut fourth-graders shared top honors with their counterparts in only two other states and again were at the top of the states listed by raw scores. Black students in only two states scored significantly higher than Connecticut's black students, and no other state's Hispanic students scored significantly higher than ours.

Our results in writing are even more impressive: Connecticut's Grade 4 writing scores stand alone above all other states' - both when we look at the achievement of all our students as a group and when we look at the achievement of our white students separately. The scores of our black and Hispanic Grade 4 students are equal to or higher than those of their counterparts in all other states.

I could go on about our math results in Grade 4 and about all results in Grade 8. Suffice it to say that our white students do extremely well compared with the rest of the nation, and our black and Hispanic students, although performing at lower levels than our white students, score about the same as or better than their counterparts in most other states.

We have large achievement gaps - larger than many other states - not because our black and Hispanic students score poorly, but because our white students score way ahead of those in most other states. This reality, however, does not excuse these gaps. Connecticut has been working hard to close them for many years.

So why, given Connecticut students' extremely strong showing, would we want to spend an additional \$8 million to test grades 3, 5 and 7, as the No Child Left Behind law is requiring us to do? Why would we want to measure more to find out

what we already know? Why wouldn't we want to spend that money on proven programs instead? Ask Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. She says she has the answer: No Child Left Behind is the law, and we should "know better" than to question it. But I, for one, will continue to do so.

Betty J. Sternberg is state commissioner of education.

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