

The Well-Rounded Education Our Students Deserve

When Harvard researcher and author Ron Ritchhart asks educator-audiences around the world, “What do you want the children you teach to be like as adults?” the responses are fairly universal: curious, engaged, empathetic, tenacious, creative, passionate, analytical, collaborative.



Ritchhart, author of *Creating Cultures of Learning* (2015), notes that academic skills have little to do with the kind of student we collectively want to send into the world, but yet increasingly, narrowly focused standardized tests have become the marker of a quality education. He asks, “Is this why we send our children to school?”

Ritchhart is far from alone in challenging the status quo. Over the past decade, the notion of a well-rounded and complete education for every child has been stifled by the “narrowing” of curricula in schools to make room for standardized testing and preparation.

A Necessary Shift

While principals value assessment that leads to improved instruction, they know that high-stakes, summative assessments that are attached to punitive labels—regardless of whether or not a student actually experiences academic growth—are counterproductive at best. The untenable environment of over-testing has forced educators to spend less time on more robust, well-rounded instruction in order to prepare students for standardized tests.

NAESP has long voiced the detrimental effects of over-testing tied to narrow accountability measures that do not take into account the many ways in which children learn, and have little regard for their social, emotional, physical, or cognitive development. Many of the policy recommendations NAESP has put forward to revise the federal assessment and accountability system are reflected in the iterations of a reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act that are currently under consideration by Congress, as well as in the Obama administration’s recent announcement on revamping the testing regime. The administration’s “Testing Action Plan” acknowledges its complicit role in the “narrowing of curricula” in schools through policies that have fostered further egregious uses of assessment, such as evaluations of teacher and principal performance, and calls on states and districts to reform test administration to ensure assessments are one of multiple measures and “worth taking.”

As the nation sets out to scale back assessments, now is the time to ramp up efforts to provide a well-rounded and com-

plete education for every student. Principals should seize the moment to draw upon the overwhelming evidence that for children to be successful in school and in life, learning must:

- Begin early with high-quality preschool that provides a continuum of experiences from pre-K through grade 3, with an emphasis on early literacy and numeracy prior to third grade;
- Include arts-infused learning that spans grades pre-K-12, integrated with all subjects including science, technology, engineering, and math (STEAM);
- Embrace high-quality afterschool and summer programming aligned to the school day; and
- Consist of a curriculum filled with constructive play, creativity, and physical activity, and that nurtures social-emotional growth from pre-K through high school.

In addition, the school environment must leverage students’ own aspirations in ways that enrich teaching and learning. It must also provide a safe and caring setting with access to appropriate mental and physical health services. Such an environment must be led by principals and teachers who believe that all children can learn and commit to ensuring equity for each child’s success, and who are adequately prepared and professionally supported to do so.

Impact the Gap

While the well-rounded education approach is beneficial to all students, it is especially impactful in making academic gains for the growing population of students who are at-risk, like the more than 72 million children under age 18 who live in low-income families. These families struggle to provide the safety nets of good nutrition, stable housing, health insurance, and child care. According to “The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor” (2012), as disparity in income has grown, so has the student achievement gap, which grew by 40 percent from the mid-1970s to the new century. A well-rounded education has the power to provide the type of broad range of experiences that influence a student’s long-term success, supporting at-risk students where they need it most.

The best way forward is to shift away from the current climate of high-stakes testing in favor of an educational system that is measured by the robustness of students’ health, well-being, and happiness, which profoundly affect their academic achievement. As Ritchhart says “...we must settle for nothing less than environments that bring out the best in people.” Principals couldn’t agree more. ■