*Moving the goalposts on student achievement*

Let’s step back a few years, to trace the beginning of high stakes school test-taking in America.

It’s January 8, 2002. The place is Hamilton, Ohio. The speaker is President George W. Bush, on the day he signed the so-called No Child Left Behind Act

“The first way to solve a problem is to diagnose it. And so, what this bill says, it says every child can learn. And we want to know early, before it’s too late, whether or not a child has a problem in learning. I understand taking tests isn't fun. Too bad. We need to know in America. We need to know whether or not children have got the basic education.

“No longer is it acceptable to hide poor performance. No longer is it acceptable to keep results away from parents. … If schools don’t perform … there must be real consequences. There must be a moment in which parents can say, I’ve had enough of this school. Parents must be given real options in the face of failure in order to make sure reform is meaningful.”

Fair question: How’s that all working out?

The Civics Academy – a great series of public affairs programming – convened a discussion October 31 at the Beloit Public Library, to take a deep look at understanding Wisconsin’s school district report cards. The discussion included expert commentary from Colleston Morgan Jr., executive director of City Forward Collective in Milwaukee, and Alan Borsuk, retired Milwaukee Journal Sentinel journalist and senior fellow in law and public policy at Marquette University Law School. Beloit Library Director Nick Dimassis moderated.

In a nutshell, here’s the answer to that fair question: Not very well. Academic scores, particularly in Wisconsin’s urban schools, have not soared to new heights in the test-taking era. To the contrary, an alarming percentage of students have fallen not only below grade level, but into the lowest category of “below basic.”

So the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction – the state agency with authority over education matters – has decided to raise scores by moving the goalposts. And changing the terminology.

Standards for measuring results have been lowered, and the outcome will be a mirage of higher scores. With lower standards more schools will see their overall report cards improve. But that doesn’t mean students taking the tests are actually doing better. It just means they don’t have to perform as well in order to appear to be improving.

Tests measure performance in language skills, math and science. Previously, top student performers were rated Advanced; that category stays the same. Next came Proficient, but it’s now called Meeting. Basic is now Approaching. And the bottom tier, previously called Below Basic, is now Developing. Whatever that means.

For good measure the college-bound ACT test standard for Wisconsin also was lowered from a score of 22 to 19.

Morgan put it bluntly: “This widens our state’s achievement gap,” and causes the most harm to vulnerable students who may be low-income, minority and special needs.

Borsuk was even more biting: “The change lowered the bar. DPI doesn’t like to use that term but I don’t know any other way to describe it. I don’t even know what Developing means.”

He added, “Developing, I fear, is a way of backing away from what are we going to do about it?”

Agreeing, Morgan said, “Labels are one thing, lower standards are another. There should be some truth in advertising here.”

To make matters worse, they said, parts of the DPI process to make the changes were conducted in secret, behind closed doors, with participants asked to sign NDAs (non-disclosure agreements). So much for Wisconsin’s vaunted commitment to open government.

Here are a few of my takeaways and observations:

* If test-taking could fix the problems we would already be done.
* Tests largely illustrate what we knew to be the case. Kids coming from low income, disadvantaged homes tend to perform poorly. Kids from higher income, stable and advantaged homes do better.
* Tests verify that problems are more severe among Wisconsin’s most challenged communities.
* And when the government finds itself flailing for solutions, the go-to move is to hide the ball.

As a life-long private sector guy, this is what stands out for me. The real test is given in the days after a student leaves campus for the last time. Will it be a successful adaptation to the rigors of the adult world? Or a failure to launch, with all the likely bad outcomes – for the individual and society – that implies?

When it comes to setting goals, building adults is job one. For some, that involves college. For others, technical and trade schools, or apprenticeships. Honest work is honest work. Preparedness is everything. Helping kids find the right track is just as important as shuffling report card papers.

The good news is the room was packed. Lots of top area educators were present and engaged. People really care about this. So there’s hope.

Bush’s No Child Left Behind was well-intentioned. There’s that, but nevertheless it’s been mostly ineffective. Lowering standards while claiming to get better is an awful approach. The folks at DPI and the Wisconsin political class should be ashamed.

When it’s all said and done, though, responsibility for fixing this mess lies where it always has – right here, with us, the people.

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