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Let's teach kids, not test them constantly

by LAWRENCE A. FEINBERG

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Federal and state tests and test preparation already consume 20 days of the school year.

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In a recent letter to superintendents, Pennsylvania's Secretary of Education Dr. Jerry Zahorchak opened by writing that "During my tenure as Secretary, no policy question has proved more contentious than the discussion concerning high school graduation requirements."

With good reason. After following this issue closely for the last 15 months, I still don't know why we need more exams or how these additional tests will help our students.

Imagine for a moment that you are the policy makers -- legislators and administration officials, faced with this issue. But instead of thinking about it as education, let's use hunger as an analogy.

We could sit in the state Capitol and all agree that there are children in Pennsylvania who are not getting enough to eat.

If we were to go visit those school districts, the superintendents and principals could probably tell us just who each of those children are.

The federal government decides that it is simply not acceptable for us to have so many hungry children, so Congress passes a law requiring us to give the children tests. These tests will tell us exactly which children in which school districts are hungry, and exactly how hungry they are.

If more than a certain percentage of the kids in a school or a district are identified as hungry then the school and district names will be published on a list of places that are not feeding their kids enough.

Although the federal government requires us to test the kids, it does not give us the money to pay for those tests. Our policy makers call this an "unfunded mandate." So the state uses taxpayer money to develop and administer tests that every student must take, spending about \$30 million per year.

By the way, that's \$30 million per year that we are not spending on food. Now each year, we stop feeding our kids for a few days so we can administer the tests.

Now, we know exactly which students are hungry and just how hungry they are.

A group of governors gets together at a nice hotel in Washington, D.C. They have the best interests of our kids in their hearts, and they agree that we need to do more to help these hungry kids.

You might think that they would develop a plan to feed the very kids that we already know are hungry. Instead, they devise a plan for a new, additional set of tests.

Now, they propose, we should stop feeding our kids and offer them 10 new tests three more times each year. This is besides the federal tests that we already give because the federal government requires us to continue giving them.

The PSSA exams were developed to measure students' proficiency relative to the state's academic standards for education. They also are used to report the levels of proficiency (Adequate Yearly Progress) to the federal government under the No Child Left Behind Act.

High stakes testing and test preparation already impact instructional time on more than 20 days out of our school year. Next year Pennsylvania's 11th-graders will "celebrate" April as PSSA Month -- they will have at least 12 days of PSSA testing (not to mention their ongoing local assessments, SATs, ACTs, AP Exams).

We're spending \$30 million per year on the PSSA. With the current economy, it is astounding that the administration would propose spending another \$210 million through the next seven years for more tests that will not tell us anything we do not already know.

There is no argument that many of our high school students are graduating unprepared. The question at hand is how to best use our limited resources of instructional time and taxpayer-funded educational dollars to remediate that shortcoming. Our kids are already tested enough -- let's teach them.

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