

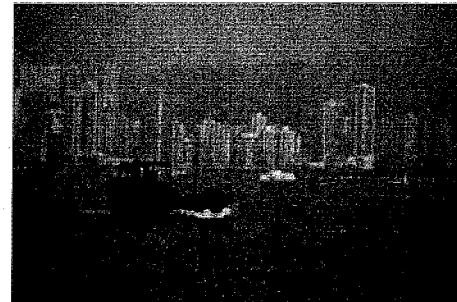
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MAY 29 2008

PA. STATE BOARD
OF EDUCATION

Jeremy Barnes



May 27, 2008

Mr. Jim Buckheit
Pennsylvania Board of Education
Harrisburg.

Dear Mr. Buckheit,

If the Graduation Exam is no more than just another test of memory, knowledge and comprehension, then I'm opposed to it.

But if it is a test of the higher order thinking skills (ANALYSIS, EVALUATION, SYNTHESIS AND APPLICATION) then I would strongly support it.

I believe that virtually every other country in the developed world has a school leaving assessment (eg. A Levels in England, or the International Baccalaureat in much of Europe.) What this does is

- (a) turn the senior year from 'one long party interrupted by the occasional test' (my step-son's description of his final year at York Suburban) to one of more intense academic commitment;
- (b) require the teachers to emphasize the higher order skills (which we all talk about but seldom practice and even more rarely assess) because the questions on the exam cannot be predicted or memorized for and thus it's difficult for the teacher to 'teach to the test' in the conventional sense.
- (c) It should not be a pass/fail assessment but a graduated assessment in a wide number of subjects, perhaps a minimum of 6, or more if the student so chooses. Thus a college or an employer gets a profile of a student's ability in more than just math and English, or verbal/no-verbal.

There would be no need that I can see to have both the SAT's and such a school leaving assessment.

Such a Graduation Exam would also be a better indicator than the current state tests for assessing the quality of education being offered at least in the high schools because, unlike the present tests, each student would be personally invested in the outcome.

In my 40 years in the classroom I have taught in both systems. What strikes me is the motivation of most European seniors compared to the lack thereof of their American peers. I have shown copies of the IB exams to both high school seniors and college students in York and they have said almost universally that they're too hard! No they're not, but they do require the ability to analyze, evaluate, synthesize and apply data which is not difficult if one has the skills and confidence.

The cynic in me believes that

- (a) there is a small but powerful percentage of Americans who do not want a thinking, educated electorate, and they would rather we continue to teach for and unquestioning obedience and loyalty rather than independence and autonomy;

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- (b) it would be opposed by a significant number of teachers who are very comfortable with the known and who themselves were never taught or rewarded for using the higher order thinking skills and the concept would be threatening to them. and
- (c) there is of course a huge commercial enterprise surrounding the SAT's which would presumably want to defend it's financial interests.

The over-riding question has to be "What is best for our children?" because what is best for our children is best for the United States.

A year in each child's life devoted to the development of higher order thinking skills might transform American education.



Jeremy C. Barnes

Meadowsong Farm, Land Preserve and Apiary.

Meadowsong Farm is dedicated to the Farm and Natural Lands Trust, is part of the CRP program and is a certified tree farm.