

Dallas schools not out of federal woods yet

Anyone listening to School Superintendent Mike Moses talk about Dallas public school students knows he is both persuasive and passionate about the academic progress his district has made. Yet as I recently listened with a group of Dallas Hispanic leaders to Dr. Moses present his case for discontinuing the federal desegregation order, I was reminded of the old saying "it's not what you know but what you don't know that can hurt you the most."

What Dr. Moses wanted us to know that evening, and what his legal team is prepared to argue before Judge Barefoot Sanders, is that Dallas students have made significant gains in achievement and that the gap in standardized test scores between white and minority students has narrowed significantly as well. Coupled with a student population that has become 95 percent minority, the issue of desegregation would appear to be moot.

The meeting clearly scored

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some points for Dr. Moses, who seemed optimistic about the apparent support from the Hispanic leaders who were present. But what the Hispanic audience didn't hear from Dr. Moses perhaps was more striking than what it was told that evening. For example, the leaders weren't told the following:

■ While passing rates on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills have been rising throughout Texas school districts, high school graduation rates remain at 54 percent to 55 percent. The Dallas school district graduates a dismal

50 percent of its students. Shouldn't graduation rates be increasing with the improved TAAS passing rates?

■ Since the TAAS system was introduced in 1990, little if any student improvement has been observed on other national educational measures like the SAT and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. That is, learning isn't being transferred from the TAAS-driven curriculum to broader educational experiences.

■ Studies in Texas show a marked decline in the number of students academically prepared for higher education. A 1999 study by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board found that half of the more than 200,000 first-year students failed to meet the minimum college standards.

■ Under pressure to report higher passing rates, school districts are engaging in various practices to inflate their performance, such as retaining more freshmen to improve sophomores' perfor-

mance on the TAAS.

■ School districts in Massachusetts and California have rejected similar state-mandated testing programs in favor of measures that are less punitive to students. Parents and teachers have formed powerful advocacy groups to restore public confidence in the learning experiences of schoolchildren.

Contrary to what Hispanics heard from Dr. Moses, the academic picture in the Dallas public schools only modestly supports the school district's desire to remove the federal desegregation order.

Moreover, the thousands of failures expected from the introduction of the new and more difficult Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test are likely to erode the improvements made by minority students under the previous TAAS test, while also increasing the gap in passing rates between white and minority students. Once the passing rates

begin to improve again, the politicians will deem the new test as "too easy" and repeat the predictable cycle.

In my view, good measurement practices are fundamental to any accountability system that seeks to improve the educational experiences of its students. But the Texas accountability system is driven less by educational theory than desired political outcomes.

During the district's transition to the new TAKS system, it may be advisable to phase out the federal desegregation oversight *gradually* to ensure that the district maintains consistency in its commitment of educational resources to its students.

The district also would do well to expand its indicators of academic achievement to include more meaningful measures, such as the percentage of students continuing to college, performance on national measures of academic achievement, the percentage of students graduating from high

school, and other life achievements.

Although the limitations of measures like the TAAS have been well documented by the National Academy of Sciences and other organizations, they rarely are disclosed to the public and continue to be used for important decisions about students. For the long-term benefit of Dallas students, let's hope the decision reached by Judge Sanders on the desegregation order incorporates a broader scope of information than Hispanic leaders recently were presented.

Hispanics and other community members deserve to have a more complete picture of student achievement and its implications for important public policy issues like desegregation.

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