

A Broader Narrower Curriculum

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Language arts and mathematics were the only classes valued under the oppressive No Child Left Behind (NCLB) assessments. In elementary schools across the country, all other subjects were marginalized as teachers drilled, drilled, drilled for the annual assessments in these two fields.

In the new "Blueprint for Reform" (this administration's proposed revision of No Child Left Behind) the federal administration addresses this narrow curriculum by specifically directing states to add science and history to the college and career-ready assessments.

In one of the greatest ironies in educational logic, this very act of broadening the tested fields will result in narrowing our children's schooling even further.

Kansas children received a full and rich curriculum before the federal U.S.D.E. began imposing assessments. Kansas students in most high schools could pursue not just the language arts and mathematics, but also: speech and theater, instrumental and vocal music, vocational technologies, physical education and health, business related courses, foreign languages, a variety of arts, and much more.

But when federally-prescribed penalties were imposed for student failure on the language arts and mathematics assessments, schools responded by "double blocking" many marginal students. Students who were at risk of failing the tests were assigned additional courses in math and language arts to try to get them over the "proficient" threshold. "Double-blocking" reduced the number of students in non-tested courses. But most schools could maintain a balanced academic diet—a curriculum that still excited and met the needs of most students.

But now "Blueprint" pushes to broaden the tested curriculum to four disciplines, adding in social studies and science. "Blueprint" plays the same "blame game" as NCLB, penalizing schools with low scoring students with fire-the-principal or fire-half-the-teachers. Schools will have no alternative but to "double-block" even more students to attempt to raise science and social studies' scores. The result is to eliminate even more courses outside of the tested curriculum.

Say goodbye to arts, music, vocational, and many other untested courses. We don't have to wait for "Blueprint" to be approved and implemented. In many Kansas schools this fall, there will already be less art, less music—a narrower curriculum.

Kansas school administrators facing several hundred thousand dollars in funding shortfalls, are making difficult decisions now. With most money tied up in salaries, balancing the budget means dismissing teachers and staff. Because of the testing, language arts and math teachers have job security. But already, some Kansas teachers who teach art and other unassessed classes have lost their jobs.

The real losers are the Kansas students who are losing the full course options. Two out of three students who drop out, do so because they are bored. And nothing is more boring than drillwork for assessments.

The current Kansas Board of Education is highly unlikely to adopt any national core curriculum that expands into science and social studies. Yet, the cost to Kansas could be very high if future federal money is strictly tied to adopting "Blueprint" and national assessments.

But while the State Board appears ready to hold the line, the teachers and students of Kansas have received absolutely no damage control from our Kansas Representatives and Senators in Washington.