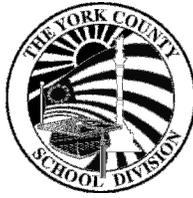


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Overexposure Is Deadly

Eric Williams, Ed.D.

This is the text of introductory comments to a workshop on January 27, 2009 relating to student engagement.

As part of getting know the York County School Division as the new Superintendent, I have spent a lot of time in schools listening to teachers and visiting classrooms. I have spent a full day in most secondary schools and the equivalent of a half day in most elementary schools. I have already visited the remaining schools, but I will be returning to them for in-depth conversations in the near future.

One of the themes that has emerged in my conversations with teachers is a sense that the emphasis on preparing students for the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests in Virginia has gone too far. Some teachers have actually privately praised the SOLs. I emphasize that they have provided this praise privately. They look left and see that no one is nearby, then they look right and see that no one is nearby, and then they conclude that it is safe to praise the Standards of Learning. They have told me that prior to the major emphasis on the SOLs, the students who arrived in their classrooms may have been in classrooms the previous year in which the teachers were not sufficiently focusing on the SOLs and that made their jobs a lot more difficult. Now, they tell me, that is less likely because of the emphasis on the Standards of Learning.

Although there is a sense that the Standards of Learning focus us on what students need to know and be able to do, there is a clear sense that this emphasis has gone way too far in that it sometimes leads us—and I mean all of us (teachers, principals, division-level staff members and others) –to sometimes make decisions that undercut effective teaching and learning.

Teachers tell me that they sometimes will set aside an activity that they believe constitutes effective teaching and learning because of an effort to cover content. They tell me, “I have this great lesson that really draws students in, that really gets them thinking. Students love it and they learn a lot, but I don’t think I have time for it because I have to expose them to all the content in the SOLs.” This emphasis on just covering content, exposing students to content, can come at the expense of true learning. It reminds me of parental directives to bundle up during the wintertime to avoid frostbite or hypothermia. Overexposure to severe cold can even be deadly. Constantly just exposing students to content without engaging them can also be very deadly.

If we—and I mean this very broadly in terms of the nation, the state, and the York County School Division—have created an environment in which we set aside lessons that effectively engage students, that draw them in, then the emphasis on the Standards of Learning and standardized testing has gone too far. In The Global Achievement Gap Tony Wagner quotes a biologist talking about the education of his two sons. The biologist explained that his two sons

went to the same school and had the same teacher . . . My eldest son had a great experience. His class went over to the pond at Mount Auburn Cemetery and took samples from the muck. They brought them back to school and studied what they found . . . and it really motivated my son. But my second son's experience was totally different. Now all the kids had to take the MCAS tests (the state standardized tests in Massachusetts), and the teachers felt they couldn't take the time for "fun stuff."

What can we do about this? What can we do to promote the joy of learning **and the joy of teaching**? What can we do to promote deep thinking on the part of students, not just rote memorization? Staff members outside the classroom, whether they are Assistant Principals, Principals, division-level staff members or others need to avoid creating procedures and making decisions that encourage merely exposing students to content at the expense of engaging students. As teachers, I encourage you to focus not just on the SOLs, what students need to know and be able to do, but also on attaining the joy of learning and teaching, of truly engaging students. If you are a teacher who sometimes sets aside what you believe is an effective lesson in order to try to cover content in a way that does not engage students, then the next time this is about to happen, please stick with the effective lesson. This does not mean that we forget about the Standards of Learning or that we junk the curriculum just to have fun. No, we need results. We need to teach the curriculum, but as we do so, let's not lose the joy of teaching and learning.

The teachers of the York County School Division are inspiring. I have been in your classrooms and I have seen effective, engaging instruction. Let me tell you about a writing lesson that was designed to teach students how to use transition words, such as first, next, and then. This could be taught in a very dry manner, but I saw a teacher teach this in an exciting way. You've heard of Native American rain dances. Well, this teacher assigned each of her first grade students to write a paragraph of instructions on how to do a snow dance. Students knew that their dances would not really make it snow, but they loved this lesson, all the more so because the class was going to post on the class web site video excerpts of students reading their snow dances aloud. They certainly better understood how to use transition words in their writing after this lesson. Another example, from the secondary level, is the middle school teacher who taught a lesson designed to help students grasp the concepts related to independent and dependent variables. He had students work in small groups to test paper helicopters with blades that varied in terms of length and shape. The task was to determine which helicopters stayed airborne the longest, and through discussion and analysis, to better understand the concepts of independent and dependent variables. These lessons and many others that I have seen reflect joy in teaching and learning AND they teach the curriculum.

Is student engagement just the latest buzzword or buzz phrase? Is seeking student engagement just one more item on teacher's plates? I don't think so. Refocusing on the joy of teaching and learning constitutes a return to what led many of us to pursue careers as educators. In York County, teachers have emphasized Marzano's high yield strategies, the concept of differentiation, and other powerful approaches and concepts. So, even if the phrase student engagement is new to you, thinking and talking about student engagement ties directly to these strategies and concepts, as well as to other effective strategies and concepts that have been emphasized throughout the years.

The Standards of Learning matter because they constitute what Virginia has said students need to know and be able to do. Maintaining accreditation and making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) matter because they reflect one measure of what students need to know and be able to do. However, 100 years from now it will not matter that we covered SOL 5.2 or 10.1, if we have not also created meaningful, engaging, learning experiences that make students think. It

will not matter if we make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) if our students can't apply what they have learned to the world in which they live and have to compete. It will not matter if they know all the answers if they don't know what questions to ask.

I look forward to our guest's presentation because this presentation can help us have fun. It is almost as if we need permission to have fun again as teachers and learners. Let's give ourselves that permission. Let's have fun!