

The Daily Tar Heel

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Rethinking the ABC's

The N.C. State Board of Education relies too heavily on standardized tests in assessing school performance and should rework its policy.

It's time the North Carolina State Board of Education reexamines how it handles our state's schools.

That's the conclusion of a report drawn up by the North Carolina Association of Educators. It claims the statewide accountability program, called the ABC's of Public Education, relies too heavily on standardized testing in order to analyze a school's success and is in desperate need of retooling.

Unfortunately, the findings ring all-too true, and the State Board of Education should not dismiss them outright.

Under the current ABC's program, the state determines a school's educational success by measuring how students meet preset goals with standardized tests.

Those schools that meet or surpass the preset goal receive bonuses for teachers and aides. And the schools that fail to meet the standards only receive special teams to offer improvement strategies to attempt to pull the scores up to the state's criteria.

But the program is riddled with problems. Standardized tests do not measure a student's educational success accurately. There are many factors that could influence the score on that singular test, from a lack of sleep the previous night to the toll of stress the student faces knowing that so much rides on the exam before him.

"We believe, and evidence proves again and again, that there is no test available to us that can measure everything we want our children to learn," NCAE President Joyce Elliott said at a news conference when the report was unveiled. "No multiple choice test given on a single day can be the final answer in an enlightened accountability system."

But that test, which fails to accurately measure the academic performance level, can

make or break a school.

The best schools retain the best teachers. And struggling schools are left to try and persuade seasoned educators to help their school meet the standards.

But there is little incentive to move to a poor-performing school when the bonuses are being paid out at the top tier.

In a survey sent to 100,000 teachers, administrators, aides and other school personnel, a paltry 29 percent replied that they would volunteer to work in a low-performing school.

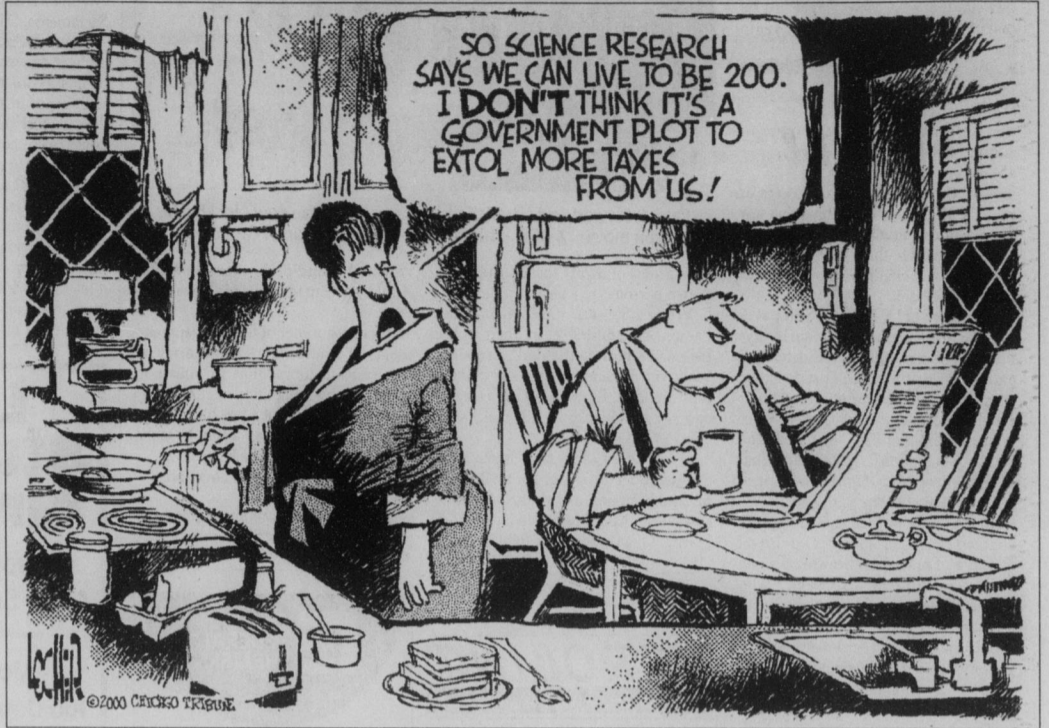
NCAE recommends that schools failing to meet the state's standards be classified as "priority schools" and be given extra help, including funds to improve classroom size and teacher bonuses to attract higher quality educators.

It seems like a logical request. Provide the real aid that poor-performing schools need to correct their problems instead of simply assigning "teams" to point out their weaknesses. Their recommendations should garner serious attention.

But instead, the State Board of Education acts as if the organization is more of a nuisance than an outside watchdog.

"Because of Gov. Hunt's strong leadership, I think he has basically held the NCAE in check at a time when we were working for national average salaries," State Board of Education Chairman Phil Kirk said. "Now that he is leaving office, I fully expect attacks by the NCAE to accelerate, but I don't believe the legislature is going to lower accountability and continue to raise teacher salaries."

But as long as they keep raising the bar, more and more schools will find the state's standards out of reach, with little help from the state to bring them up to par.



Marriage Open to All in Vermont

I'd forgotten just how beautiful Vermont is. The majesty of the mountains tightens the throat with awe. The beauty of the fields fills the heart with serenity. The green goes and goes until it touches a distant barn or lake or sky. And everywhere you look you can hear the call of freedom, the freedom for people to journey to Vermont to join together in civil union, to unite, regardless of gender.



DANA ROSENGARD
TV GUY

On July 1, a law passed by the Vermont state legislature after great debate and compromise (and a state supreme court order last December) and signed swiftly by Governor Howard Dean affords many of the same rights of marriage to same-sex couples. Men are joining together with men, and women are legally committing themselves to women in the beautiful Green Mountain State. Just after the stroke of midnight on the historic day, two women became the first couple to enter into the new state-sanctioned union.

Under Vermont's civil union law, same-sex couples now legally enjoy the rights of automatic inheritance, hospital visitation, partner guardianship and property transfer tax exemption. Man and man or woman and woman partners are now legally protected in their ability to make health care decisions, choose how a loved one bodily remains will be disposed upon death and apply for family-medical or parental leave from work. The civil union law affords other rights and responsibilities and protections to same-sex couples all because, according to those who fought long and hard for it, marriage is a basic human right and an individual choice.

I traveled back to Vermont on summer break just days after the law went into effect. Already, scores of couples had obtained licenses from town clerks, had them certified by justices of the peace or clergy members and then filed them back with the town clerks. Men are marrying men and women are marrying women in Vermont. But those in love need not be from the beautiful state that now leads the nation in freedoms afforded to

Americans to marry. Anyone can go get married there. However, not everyone is happy about the opportunities for wedded bliss now afforded to same-sex couples in Vermont. Retaliation against lawmakers who passed the legislation has taken form in "Take Back Vermont" signs visible in house windows and on car bumpers. Letters to the Editor in papers across the state are stinging with threats of conservative revenge. Those three words, "Take Back Vermont," have come to mean, "I'm voting for a closed-minded conservative who has his or her head buried as far into a pile of cow dung as I do." That's right, I have three other words for "Take Back Vermont" maniacs: "Get over it."

More than 200 years ago, our forefathers fought for freedom. They had enough persecution and tyranny. They fought a long and bloody war against the mother country for the right to make their own laws and establish their own rights and system of fair representation. Freedom, and the fight for it, is the foundation of the United States of America. And freedom, like love, should know no boundary.

Affairs of the heart are so mysterious. Some people fall in love with the person next door, others with a stranger abroad. Some fall in love with a peer, others with a member of another generation. Some people fall in love with old friends, others with near strangers. Some people fall in love with members of their own race, others with someone who looks completely unlike them.

And some people fall in love with members of the opposite sex, while others do not. Who is to say that any of these pairings is wrong? Who is to rule that any of these couplings is less deserving of sanctity than others? Who is to say that a particular kind or form of adult love is wrong?

The answer may well come on November 7, when Vermont voters go to the polls and vote not only for a new president, but also for their local lawmakers who faced the unenviable task of wrestling with this political and social hot potato.

Act 91, the official title of the civil union bill, can be overturned. But that will take time. First, time for forces on both sides to rally support for members of the state legislature, then time for that new body to tally the years and nays on the new legal structure that parallels marriage. What will become of the couples united under law if and when that law is repealed is unclear.

In the meantime, quickly, grab your gal's or guy's hand and race to that beautiful place to embrace your same-sex loved one, proclaim your love and enjoy the rights Vermont now offers. Do it regardless of whether those rights will dissolve once you cross out of its green borders and head back home. Do it to make a point, to show your support, to be heard and counted and honored. Do it because you're in love.

Vermont has taken a bold step into the new millennium. Vermont has become a single-state land of freedom in a nation based on freedom. Vermont has expressed a legal acceptance for man and womankind more so than any other state in America. Vermont has become the first state of love. Forget New York, I love Vermont!

Dana Rosengard is a graduate student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication originally from Massachusetts, with many stops between there and here along the way. He can be reached at danar@unc.edu with questions, comments, concerns or column suggestions.

Silence Isn't Golden

Though it brought on a media feeding frenzy, Hillary Clinton wisely denounced charges that she used an anti-Semitic slur 26 years ago.

To speak or not to speak, that was the question facing Hillary Clinton over the weekend.

The dilemma for the newfound New Yorker who's running on the Democratic ticket for a U.S. Senate seat arose from an utterance she supposedly said 26 years ago.

Normally, such a thing would be politically innocuous. But since it is alleged that she called a former aide of her husband a "Jew bastard" in a heated argument, Clinton had no other recourse but to publicly condemn the charges, thus creating a media wildfire.

In a new book "State of a Union: Inside the Complex Marriage of Bill and Hillary Clinton" written by former National Enquirer reporter Jerry Openheimer, three people are quoted as saying that Hillary went into a rage in 1974 after her then-boyfriend Bill Clinton lost a Congressional race.

According to the three sources, Hillary hurled the anti-Semitic slur at one of Bill's campaign aides, Paul Fray, blaming him for the election loss.

The story was originally only covered in the New York Post, the Matt Drudge Report on the Internet and the New York Daily News. But by Sunday, local television stations were preparing pieces regarding it.

The Clinton campaign flew into a tailspin. Hillary convened a hasty press conference at her Westchester county home to vehemently deny the allegations. President Clinton even came to her aid, taking time out of the peace summit at Camp David to call the New York Daily News and defend his wife.

Once it was seen how seriously Hillary reacted to the situation, the more legitimate press outlets begin reporting it, bringing the national spotlight squarely on the allegation.

Was it a smart move to confront what had been, up to that point, tabloid trash, making it news for legitimate news organizations both in New York and around the country?

Absolutely. Hillary can't afford to alienate New York's Jewish voters. Already, many have a wary opinion of the First Lady, unsure of where she stands on issues relating to Israel.

Though the Jewish population only makes up 12 percent of New York voters, they will be of the utmost importance for Clinton in her tight race against Republican Rick Lazio.

Normally, Democrats attract three-fourths of the Jewish vote. But recent polls have Clinton only garnering 54 percent. For any Democrat to capture a statewide contest, it's an unwritten rule that they must capture at least two-thirds of the Jewish vote. So it appears that before this obstacle even erupted, Hillary had a lot of work to do to win that constituency. Now, she has to step up her courting efforts even more.

Because of the importance of the Jewish community's vote, Hillary was forced to react swiftly to the allegations that she used an anti-Semitic slur. She could not allow the allegation to fester and have people wonder if the comment could be attributed to her.

She learned a valuable political lesson: Don't dignify tabloid rumors with a response... unless it hurts you in the polls.

Will You Be My Vice President?

The post of vice president usually isn't difficult to fill. But the presumed Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore has already gotten a rejection, sort of, from one of his top picks for veep.

When asked Tuesday if he'd be willing to accept a vice presidential offer from Gore, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, a popular Democrat from Missouri, replied "I've said that I don't want to do that. And I've said that I hope and believe that they'll find someone to do that other than me."

While Gephardt didn't go so far as to say a definite "no" to the possibility (politicians rarely give definite answers to anything), he made it perfectly clear that he was not interested in joining Gore on the campaign trail. And who can blame him?

If Gephardt were to jump on board the sinking ship that is Al Gore's campaign, he would be walking away from a leadership position in the House of Representatives. He's been focused on regaining the six or seven seats Democrats need to regain a majority in the House. And if he succeeds in November, he will be catapulted to the role of Speaker of the House, a very powerful position that would allow him to set the legislative agenda.

What Gephardt really sees is the worst-case scenario coming into play, where Gore loses his bid for president and Gephardt is left out



JONATHAN CHANEY
MANAGING EDITOR

of both Houses in Washington. Dick's reluctance to join him is a major blow for the Gore campaign. Coming from Missouri, Gephardt's popularity would help Gore win those crucial Midwestern states. And with his clout with organized labor (something Gore is sorely lacking), the United Auto Workers and the Teamsters, who have been holding back their endorsement due to Gore's embrace of global free trade, would finally throw their weight behind the ticket.

But Republicans want Gephardt as VP about as much as Gore seems to. It would allow them to characterize the duo as excessively liberal, trashing the notion Gore likes to maintain that he is a centrist. Also, what could be more ideal for the GOP than to stamp the dreaded label "Washington insiders" on Gore-Gephardt, since their nominee is far outside of

the Beltway? GOP leaders have already compiled a database of hostile comments the two aimed at each other when they both ran for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination to use against a Gore-Gephardt run.

If he's desperate enough, and I have a feeling that he is, Gore could plead with Gephardt to take one for the team and join him, citing that he might be the final catalyst of a Democratic victory. And Gephardt would make the sacrifice, albeit reluctantly.

But it would be the downfall of the House Democrats. They would lose the phenomenal fundraiser who, alone, netted \$25 million for House Democrats. And they would lose a leader who has a talent for building consensus. Already, with just the stirrings of an opening for the leadership position, David Bonior, the House minority whip has said that he expects to inherit the job. But grumblings from center-right party members who question Bonior's left-leaning indicate that there would be a politically costly fight for the post, leaving the party wounded and divided.

So it seems Gore will have to keep hunting for someone who'll be the perfect running mate. Few will be able to offer as much as Gephardt can, but beggars can't be choosers.

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