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How FCAT Inhibits Learning

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As a father of three public schoolchildren and as a private school educator, I believe strongly in the need to test all students in order to ensure they acquire the core knowledge of a well-educated person. The tests should be standardized, for we should never judge the quality and breadth of any child's education by merely reviewing a report card.

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test is a valid test to reflect the state's grade-by-grade standards, and it should be an important part of our public school landscape.

But where we have gone terribly wrong is by allowing politicians and education bureaucrats - many of whom haven't the slightest idea of what constitutes well-rounded learning - to make the FCAT virtually the sole arbiter of our children's and schools' progress.

What results from this myopic dictate is not pretty.

Our teachers are becoming widget-makers - and our students the widgets.

Public schools are under enormous pressure to get good "grades," as reflected almost entirely by FCAT scores - with the attendant embarrassment or retribution for lower scores. So is it surprising that they are becoming dull factories, where students are constantly drilled on how to succeed on FCAT? How can teachers instruct creatively when they are forced to prepare for FCAT as if it were the invasion of Normandy?

Art, music, drama, foreign language and physical education are relegated to afterthoughts, especially in our elementary schools. It is common for children to get, at most, one 45-minute class of art and two 30-minute classes of music and physical education classes a week. Forget about drama and foreign language. How dull and lifeless do we want our schools to become?

Children and parents spend inordinate amounts of time worrying about the test. How sad to learn from a smart neighborhood child that he needed to go home to take FCAT practice tests on his computer - on a beautiful Saturday afternoon!

For the next few weeks, we'll hear politicians and education bureaucrats fall all over themselves explaining what the increase or decrease of a few FCAT points means for the state of education.

But the education of children goes well beyond transforming them into proficient testing machines. How can teachers inspire students when they're constantly told that one test evaluates everything they do?

We should not be mollified by what we're told about education "progress," and we should never allow the beauty of a well-rounded education to be sacrificed at the altar of the FCAT god.

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