

No More Test Scores!
By Patricia Kokinos

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From the beginning, I have advocated giving the Obama administration a chance to show us a new perspective on schools, and, in the beginning, they said some things that were giving me hope. Charter schools, despite their uneven performance and a great deal of questionable support, do one critical thing: They call into question the traditional structure and **the way over-regulation has paralyzed movement in overburdened school systems** where teachers, kids, and parents have no control over their educational fates. I have been all for a federal approach to school reform, as well, because we don't have time to wait for each state to get up to speed with the 21st century; **too many kids' lives are at stake every day in hopelessly out-of-date school systems** run by small-time (or big-time) political hacks, including upper management, school boards AND unions!

But nowhere in my wildest dreams did I imagine this stance would put me in league with people who want to tie test scores to teacher evaluation, as though that were the critical factor in changing our schools. **Stop the insanity!! Test scores are PART of the problem, not a solution.** The overdependence on numbers and statistics brought to us by NCLB is what needs to be STOPPED, not perpetuated through the ridiculous notion that scores from "standardized tests" will tell us anything about teacher quality. That is the most heinous use of these ludicrous tests yet, perpetuated by ignorance about what the student-teacher dynamic is all about or how learning actually occurs. There is not space here to go into the million ways **overdependence on "standardized testing" has severely damaged the educational process over the past ten years** or helped to severely "dumb-down" our entire culture and, in fact, widened the "achievement gap" between rich/poor, black/white, or any other dichotomy you wish to throw in.

If we really wanted to do something, using the clout of federal money, we would be forcing states (half of them!) who do not fund schools equally for all children to get in line. We would be giving federal money to states that have a plan for creating intelligent accountability measures (pardon the jargon) like "authentic assessment" (look it up on Edutopia.org). We would be supporting states that move aggressively to **CUT DOWN the bureaucracy and create small, personalized teaching-learning environments for ALL kids**, putting more highly educated people into direct contact with students every day. We would be supporting states that build new approaches to insure higher order thinking skills, creativity, collaboration and entrepreneurship--for students AND teachers. This can all be done WITHIN current school district structures with the appropriate federal leadership.

But THIS! Reducing the argument for state participation to using test scores to evaluate teachers--this is just more ignorance piled on ignorance, and I expected a LOT more from the Obama administration. What happened to the leadership of Linda Darling-Hammond as education adviser to the Obama team? **Why is Arne Duncan running around with education know-nothings like Newt Gingrich and Al Sharpton?** Sure, I can see their political usefulness, showing us that we can make change if we all work together; I even believe that. But we can't do it by blindly continuing to blame teachers for a system that was created for a "factory" economy that we are dragging behind us like a ball and chain into the Information Age.

As a California teacher and administrator, and a district administrator in New York, I can tell you with some authority that **EVERYONE knows who the bad teachers are**, and it isn't that difficult to isolate them, help them or remove them. The kids can tell you in five minutes whether the new teacher "has it" or not. If we want to get rid of bad teachers and not let them into the profession, then put some money into forcing states to **develop competent teacher evaluation processes** and train people to use them.

I want much more from the Obama administration than a political solution to a deep societal issue, and I want the rest of us to smarten up about what makes kids and schools and teachers tick. Here's a big clue: it is NOT test scores. **Arne, you're going the wrong direction now**, and if we have to come out in opposition to you, we will. The fight is too big and the stakes too high to play petty politics with kids'-- and teachers' and parents'--lives!

Patricia Kokinos is a veteran educator and the author of ANGEL PARK, an award-winning novel about the bureaucracy, corruption, self-serving agendas and cluelessness that are killing public education. Visit her website at, www.ChangeTheSchools.com.