

Moving the Goal Posts

WHY ARE WE RAISING THE BAR FOR OREGON SCHOOL KIDS?

Picture yourself applying for a home loan. Your credit is good, and you've worked hard to save the customary 20 percent down payment. That's what you, your parents and grandparents always paid. Then suddenly the bank raises it to 30 percent! Flabbergasted, you ask, "Who could afford that?" They reply, "Sure there'll be fewer owners, but at least they'll be more qualified!"

This analogy applies to a 2009 federal education law called "Race to the Top," the same one that introduced Common Core. It raised the passing scores for state standardized tests to a B. Yet in the past we were held to a C!

Coursework also got harder than in past generations. That's according to a recent study by the National Superintendents Roundtable titled "How High the Bar?"

Today's kids are falling short on standardized tests simply because we raised the bar by a mile. Oregon's Smarter Balanced assessment is much harder than the tests you and I took in school, which is why only 45 percent pass. But if we return the bar to the same height as it was for us, then the same number pass as before, 70 to 80 percent! Even outside measures like the Nation's Report Card confirm that student performance hasn't changed.

So why did we raise the bar in the first place? A 2009 federal education law mandated that schools prepare all children for college. That meant raising the passing score for standardized tests to a B to align with the university admission requirements of a B. That also shifted the focus from grade-level learning to college track — for all students.

International comparison

Students in other countries can't clear such high hurdles. The Superintendents Roundtable found only three nations could pass our standardized tests, and only by excluding poor or disabled students. Americans, on the other hand, teach and test all students alike.

Exactly how high must students jump? Everyone has to clear Algebra II, whether they are disabled, still learning English or have no college plans. Yet when you and I were in school, only future math and science majors had to take Algebra II. Band kids, for example, could simply take an extra music class. We must stop dragging everyone over a one-size-fits-all hurdle. No wonder our kids stumble and drop out of the race!

Could you have cleared the bar?

Reading requirements also rose higher than for past generations. Here are parts of a passage from an 11th-grade Smarter Balanced sample test — to be read with no dictionary:

"He ... assumed his most impassive and judicial expression. ... Baskerville Hall, as the paper says, would certainly remain untenanted ... I descended from my gig. ... However chimerical the cause might be ..."

Honestly, would you have passed?

Yet these higher standards haven't raised student achievement one iota, according to a study in the journal *Education Extra*.

Why are we doing this to our kids?

So what's really behind this insanity? Education industries push higher standards so they can cash in on test and textbook replacements, as well as on tutorials for failing students. Also, the tech industry perpetuates itself by pressuring officials to standardize and digitize education, even though studies show students learn more through human interaction and self-expression. Ridiculously high standards also profit the commercial charter school industry as it angles for reasons to replace public schools, despite its own slightly lower test scores. None of it's about kids' best interests.

Oregon has the option to do better. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act allows states to abandon dysfunctional approaches like Smarter Balanced Assessments. Oregon is free to choose more reputable standardized tests that track grade-level skills, not just college readiness. Our brightest will always shine with top scores, but it's only fair that average students be allowed to clear the same bar as the rest of us.

Rachel Rich is a retired Springfield teacher, past writer of state standardized tests and a member of CAPE — the Community Alliance for Public Education. CAPE meets the first, third and fourth Wednesdays each month at Perugino Cafe. Read "How High the Bar?" from the National Superintendents Roundtable at superintendentsforum.org/the-roundtable-in-2018/how-high-the-bar-report.

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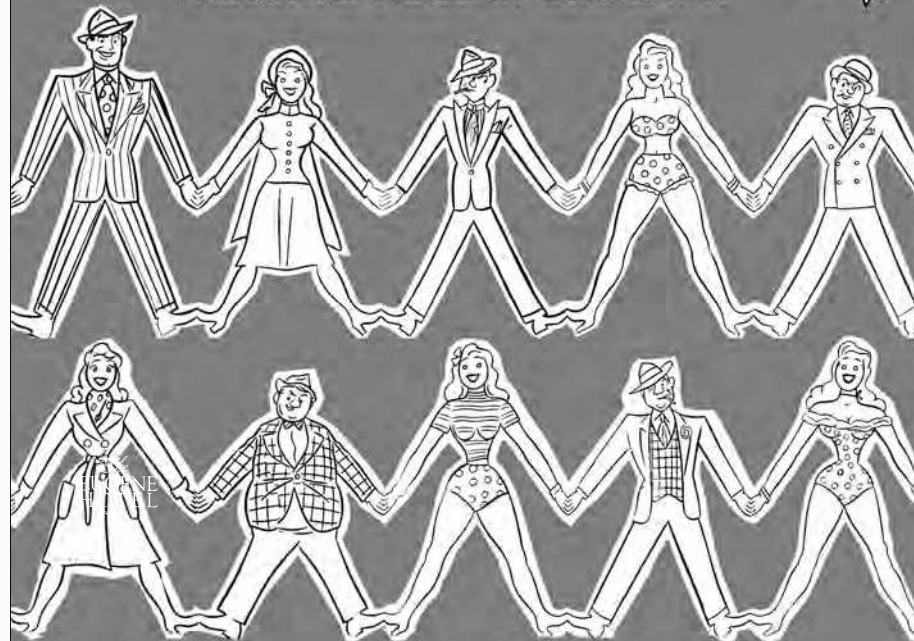
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