I n 1990, the Maryland State Department of Education decided on a strategy to create higher standards throughout the state public school system. The accountability system put in place was Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). Quite simply, MSPAP is an assessment given over several days in May to students in the third, fifth, and eighth grades. The aim of weapons to kill the ugly beast of low test scores. And those test scores need to come up quickly and dramatically or schools within BCPSS will be taken over by the state. Why do I have a problem with a curriculum imposed on a population of students who historically have done miserably on the statewide test? Why do I find it offensive matter the culture of the school. Many spend long hours at their schools or in their supervising areas training staff and doing endless battle with paperwork. But I view them, those people above the teacher level, as acting like supervisors over a group of mechanics. They see it as their responsibility to break our work into functions that they can check off on a task sheet.

The Quarterly

Student Slayer
The Imposed Curriculum
KEVIN LAVEY

the tests is to measure higher-level thinking skills in an interdisciplinary way. I teach in the city of Baltimore, where the 1999 composite index for eighth grade is 15.3 percent (statewide it is 43.7 percent). At my school, Arnett J. Brown Jr. Middle School, the composite index is 10.1 percent.

Baltimore's response to the abysmal test scores has been to standardize the curriculum. All of us language arts teachers were given a three- or five-day training (depending on when you took it) on the McDouggell Littel Language of Literature, then sent on our way. It was our tool, our curriculum, to help the kids do better on MSPAP.

Well, I teach a population of eighth-grade students who, as a class, scored between the third- and fourth-grade levels on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills given in October, from a text which is many grade levels higher than most of them read. The Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) decided which stories, plays, non-fiction pieces, and poems we are to teach. Supposedly, we are armed with the proper

I believe that the imposed curriculum that has been inflicted on language arts and other disciplines puts learners in the posture of receivers rather than creators. It denies them choice over their learning and, therefore, before the moment they enter the classroom, they are denied ownership.

On a fundamental level, if one considers choice the essence of democracy, the imposed curriculum is antidemocratic. Those in charge have decided that these learners are incapable of choice, or perhaps more insidiously, they have decided that if learners or even teachers are given choice they would make "the wrong" ones. After all, the majority of students in BCPSS qualify for federally funded lunches, are African American, are poor, often come from single-parent homes, and enter middle school with breathtaking skill deficiencies. (How can a student get to eighthgrade and write a two-page paper without using a single punctuation mark?)

Students identify us teachers as part of the authority group, the choice makers, though
demand, current social trends, and advertising. They could enlighten themselves on how big industries have a vested interest in programming them to desire overpriced shoes just to maintain a place of status among their peers. One can easily see how a curriculum can be built that honors the students rather than their test scores—a curriculum that teaches skills, yes, but in a context that connects to students' lives.

Instead, we impose a curriculum on the kids, repeating the mantra to ourselves that we're teaching them higher-level thinking skills along the way. The real higher-level thinking skill I see too many of them employing is figuring out how to negotiate their way through middle school, then high school, by doing a minimum of work while playing the school game to keep their teachers—the human toggle switches which deem them successes or failures—happy. The school system has become filled with decision makers for whom numbers are a kind of religion: their belief in numbers as a measurement of success has hardened to such a degree that if you begin talking about good teaching practices that don't genuflect to MSPAP, you're considered a not-with-it throwback to a groovy era before data-driven thinking.

If you take numbers thinking to its extreme, you could make a case that if my school, currently with a composite index of 10.1 percent, was able to get 40 percent of its students at a satisfactory level on the MSPAP tests next year, it would be considered wildly successful. We would have people calling us from all over the state wondering how we did it. It wouldn't matter if we didn't teach the other 60 percent anything, as long as we made such a huge gain with 40 percent of them. The number gods overshadow the students themselves.

I recognize that there are no simple answers to the problem of poor achievement. However, when the premise of finding solutions rests on a lack of trust in teachers and students, the outcome necessarily becomes rigid standardization. When are we going to find a methodology of creating curriculum built from the bottom up rather than the top down? It's not a new idea.

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