

Hanlon's Razor

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Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity

What works is work!

Where's the Leadership?

Fully 57% of the students taking first year algebra are receiving grades of D or F with one out of every three failing algebra for the last two years. The statistics are not much better in geometry or second year algebra.

The end of semester exams created by the RPDP brought the problem to a head. Having 90% of first year algebra students failing the semester exam is simply unbelievable and is the direct result of not implementing the school district curriculum.

In the past, we knew some teachers were not teaching their assigned curriculum. That has always been a problem in public education. But to have entire departments deciding not to follow CCSD's curriculum, benchmarks and CEL with administrative approval is just ludicrous and a recipe for the disaster that occurred

This past Saturday, I sat down with some teachers to review the questions on the end of year exam for first year algebra. As you know in the beginning of the year, we gave teachers a specification sheet, practice test, ten practice problems per specification, and the tests, practice and real, were parallel constructed for the first semester, the same is true for the end of year final exam.

The idea of the meeting on Saturday was to go through the questions one-by-one to ensure the specification sheet, practice test, and real tests aligned. The first question on the specification sheet was described on the specification sheet as an "Application Problem – Ratio and Proportion"

The first question on the final: *The ratio of the number of boys to the number of girls in a high school band is 9 to 10. If the number of boys in the band is 306, how many girls are in the band?*

Two teachers in the group indicated that was too difficult of a question for regular first year algebra students, that only honors algebra students would be able to answer that question. Rather than address our failures, it appeared a couple of teachers preferred to defend them. The students could have done this problem by cross multiplying using a variable or by equivalent fractions. It was designed to be an easy first question on a semester exam – and it is. To anyway indicate that problem is too difficult for algebra students is outrageous.

A couple of teachers questioned almost every item on the exam. The teachers and students were set up to succeed. But the simple fact is students don't usually learn what teachers don't teach. One teacher indicated she was not made aware of the specification sheet, practice tests, or practice problems by her DC or building principal. The questions on the test came directly from the district's curriculum documents and reflected the specification sheet, practice test, and practice problems. There were no surprises! Teachers need to make a good faith effort to teach their assigned curriculum.

And so the meeting went . . . There were unmistakable underlying themes that occurred all during the meeting, the first was the teachers could not possibly cover the school district's curriculum. That opinion was expressed by a teacher whose school uses the block schedule and the students are assigned two blocks of math. I do agree that if a school is using a block schedule and students are using a single block for math with students meeting every other day, then teachers will find it pretty tough to cover their assigned curriculum and be successful helping students learn. However, being very clear, if you are using two blocks of time to offer math, those two blocks should be part and parcel of the algebra class. Having one block of algebra and the other in some fundamental math class is not supported by practice or research

A real concern is what some teachers don't seem to know, understand or grasp. There were a few questions on the algebra exam that regularly appear on the HSPE in math that a couple of teachers wanted removed from the semester test. Is it really possible that math teachers don't know what algebra topics are tested on the high school exit exam and are therefore are not preparing their students for a priority identified by the superintendent?

Another theme, students currently enrolled in algebra can't possibly succeed in algebra. That belief poses a huge problem for their students. With expectations that low, students are not going to succeed. I addressed that problem by asking about their instructional practices, implementation of the CEL and teacher expectancies. Asking if they used the "star" system in their notes, questioned the types of homework assignments given that support learning, etc. When it came to answering questions on what they could do to improve achievement, there wasn't much response. It's apparent that there are teachers who feel the problems they encounter have nothing to do with them, its their students, the district, the test, the _____ that are the problems. The research suggests that accepting responsibility is the essential difference between *more* effective and *less* effective employees, teachers, principals, and parents.

These attitudes and beliefs do not bode well for the students in southern Nevada. But knowing some of these teachers act as department chairs is really disconcerting. Since they are picked by the building principal, my guess is they have influence on that principal's decision-making with respect to math. Based on what I can tell, a number of math departments in CCSD decided not to follow the district curriculum, not to follow the district's benchmarks, not to implement the CEL, didn't bother to prepare their students for the semester exams using the provided specification sheets, practice tests and practice problems. Some of these departments implemented practices that are not only

not supported by research or common sense, but also are specifically identified in research as practices that should not be implemented because they don't work. These practices seem to be occurring with the knowledge and approval of the school administration.

Alarming, it appears some of the region superintendents have taken a position that the tests either don't matter or must be somehow unfair because they have taken no corrective action to ensure our students are receiving the instruction required in these core academic courses.

I know testing can be sometimes confusing to parents or people in the business community, but as educators, we know different tests measure different things. The interim tests, for instance, measure achievement based on the state standards, district curriculum, and the standards tested by the states. Those tests are very different from end of semester exams in specific subjects. The end of semester exams were created because teachers continually complain that students are entering their classes without the prerequisite knowledge and skills to be successful. As you know, the CRT in high school is the high school proficiency exam as the CRT in 8th grade measures the 8th grade standards all students are supposed to meet. A CRT would not come close to measuring students' knowledge in first or second year algebra, geometry, pre calculus or calculus class. So it is very possible a school could be identified as being "high achieving" by the state based on the CRTs and be doing an incredibly poor job teaching classes like algebra and preparing their students for college.

I have heard some principals indicate their DCs told them that the end of semester exams were not based on the district curriculum or on the appropriate benchmarks so they have not been concerned with the results nor addressed them with their teachers. That information is wrong! I'm beginning to believe that some principals are not only getting poor advice from some staff members, but the information they are basing that advice is incorrect. Giving misleading or bad advice might be a way of covering their own performance which would suggest principals re-examine the grade distributions of those teachers.

As principals, your decisions are only as good as the information you receive to make them. As you make those decisions based on the input you receive, the question that comes to my mind is: *Would you ask doctors for advice that are experiencing high mortality rates, lawyers that lose most of their cases or would you ask those who have experienced success?*