

## **What Should Education Be For? What's the Agenda? Is there One?**

Various challenges to public schools have been developed by state and federal government which have changed the face of public education and its mission as we know it by placing an emphasis on various forms of privatization of public education. (I first wrote that statement in 1999, not knowing No Child Left Behind would eventually confirm the fact I long suspected with even greater emphasis.) While Pennsylvania has always prided itself on being a "local control" state and local control has always been a significant priority within the school community, local control is gradually being eroded away. The state government, along with powerful bureaucracies, such as the Pennsylvania State Board of Education, which is a body of unelected people, appointed by the sitting Governor at the time of appointment has contradicted its rhetoric by its actions regarding proposed changes and education reforms through statewide regulations and mandates upon the local level. There are several schools of thought as to what the political and philosophical arguments or agenda is here in Pennsylvania, especially while interconnecting to some of the processes involving our state assessment system.

What should Education be for? There is a fundamental difference in opinion as to what education should be doing and providing our students. We need to ask "Should we be limiting or allowing commerce or the economy to dictate the needs of the curriculum in an effort to build a better workforce?" Mainstream media is constantly reporting that American students are trailing their Asian counterparts in math and science and those students cannot measure nor do simple math to count out change as a cashier? "Or should we educate a person to reach their maximum learning potential to become their personal best?" One perspective shared by many is the speculation that the PSSA is really about workforce development and the human resource boards currently being put into place county by county throughout Pennsylvania. What better way for the state to sample the upcoming workforce and certify its components before disbursement of the sample? What better means to determine what a person or a group of people is like than to assess at the age of 17, in mass, their written responses to open-ended questions, such as on the writing portion of the PSSA and NEW SAT 2005) about their attitudes towards choosing our leaders, the work ethic, rewards, punishments, and various other issues pertaining to society? The writing prompt once proposed on a PA state test and I paraphrase "Some people think you should work for an allowance and others think you should receive one. Which one are you?" Though the scorers are supposedly scoring the essays about questions like these according to the rules of quality writing, it is quite possible the "quality" of ideas and attitudes expressed by our young students could be examined through their responses. The State will argue that after the scoring procedures, the assessments are destroyed; however, there are no clear answers as to what is processed with all of the information and data gathered. State and Federal contracts indicate that our systems of government, schools, and businesses are being restructured in a way that will allow our states to manage the economy and dictate needs based upon that economy.

The second political perspective shared by many throughout Pennsylvania is the poorly designed state assessment was designed intentionally to make public education appear bad to worse in PA's schools as a way of allowing privatization of public education to occur. With the advent of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and the PSSA utilized as the mechanism, we will see schools restructured throughout the commonwealth and school choice provided to families within the next five years. Urban area school districts will be impacted initially. These schools will become consolidated, privatized, charter schools, or literally taken over by the State. Neither of these perspectives is unquestionable and perhaps could even be a combined effort, as both agendas are progressively moving forward at the current time.