

A growing anti-CSAP movement fuels debate in Colorado

A January 26 story in the weekly "Rocky Mountain Bullhorn" updated a report that was published in the January issue of Substance regarding the growing resistance to the Colorado state testing program. The article follows:

"On Monday, January 16, five signs informing parents how to opt their kids out of taking the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) test were posted on bus-stop benches throughout Greeley. Two days later, the signs were taken down at the city's request.

"And two days after that, the city said they would go back up again.

"I went and cried that night,' Angela Engle says, remembering when she heard the signs had been removed. Engle is a member of the Coalition for Better Education, the state's most active anti-CSAP group. CBE paid for the advertisements on the bus benches.

"According to Chuck Esterly, public works director for the city of Greeley, the sign debacle was the result of a misunderstanding. Questions arose over a contract the city holds with media company NextMedia Outdoor Inc. Esterly claimed the contract was "not clearly understood by city staff members" and that the city regretted the 'premature removal' of the signs, according to a January 20 press release.

"CBE, however, alleges that a member of the Greeley-Evans School District 6 school board was responsible. So far, no one is giving up the name of the suspected board member.

"This particular school-board person went to the city attorney and wanted the city attorney to look [at the bench signs], because this person thought that those bus benches were government property and these signs had no business being put on government property,' says Susanne Villarreal, CBE spokesperson.

"The incident comes on the heels of a controversial decision by district administration to place students' CSAP scores on their report cards and permanent records. Advocates of the rule change say it will deter parents from excusing their children from the test.

"There's also uncertainty around the letter of the law in regards to the CSAP. While some maintain that taking the test is mandated by state law, others argue that the Colorado Revised Statutes allow parents to opt out.

"These differing interpretations of law, as well as the effects of education reforms implemented in the late 1990s, have breathed new life into a growing faction of teachers and parents who oppose the CSAP, and its federal counterpart, the No Child Left Behind Act.

“Don Perl, professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Northern Colorado, founded the Coalition for Better Education in 2001, after spearheading a boycott of the CSAP while he was a teacher at a Greeley middle school. Three years later, Perl and other volunteers gathered signatures for a citizens’ initiative designed to eliminate the CSAP, but the group failed to collect enough names to win a spot on the November 2004 ballot.

“‘[The CSAP] tells us what we already know, and since the results are published in papers and broadcast on the media, we are marginalizing our students even more,’ Perl says. ‘So those schools that do well, they’re generally in affluent areas. Those students have a tendency to wear certain smugness as a label to act like they’re superior.

“‘Those schools that don’t do well, they’re generally in poorer neighborhoods; they wear another label. ... More vulnerable students — that is, those who are in poorer communities — have much more to lose, because those schools will focus in on the test much more than the schools in affluent areas.’

“In 1983, a commission appointed by the Reagan administration released the results of a national education study. The report, titled *A Nation At Risk*, garnered considerable publicity for its call for major reforms and national schooling standards.

“It also played a key role in the creation of current federal policy, especially President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which was signed into law in 2002. Its passage cemented the shift toward yearly progress evaluations and accountability measures for students—as well as consequences for schools that don’t make the grade.

“At the state level, CSAP trials for fourth and eighth graders began in 1997, with the goal of determining whether students were meeting state standards. The assessment test was adopted for all elementary and middle school students in 2000, as part of Gov. Bill Owens’s education-reform bill.

“The CSAP is mandated in all of Colorado’s public schools, and institutions that continually fail to improve are considered for privatization. Critics of both NCLB and the CSAP say the tests set impossible standards for teachers and students by creating an atmosphere of racial and economic bias, and waste valuable classroom time as teachers abandon regular coursework to prepare students for the test. These sentiments and others were aired at an anti-CSAP forum on January 21 in Aurora. Colorado Rep. Morgan Carroll, a Democrat from Aurora, and Bill Winter, a candidate for Colorado’s Sixth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives, were among the attendees.

“Engle, of the Coalition for Better Education, was a presenter. ‘The problem with [the NCLB] is it’s all great in some kind of imaginary world, but this is a trap, because it’s not feasible for us to have 100 percent proficiency for children who are unique and diverse,’ she told the audience, adding that rural schools or those with limited resources are at a clear disadvantage compared with larger, wealthier schools.

“‘So already you have tremendous bias in the kind of abilities kids are demonstrating—not because they’re not smart, not because they don’t have the knowledge or the ability...but they haven’t had the experiences,’ she said.

“This year, the CBE will not pursue an anti-CSAP ballot initiative, as it did in 2004. It will instead focus on guiding policy and bolstering community support and education. It is also backing a state-level bill from Rep. Judy Solano of Eastlake and Sen. Suzanne Williams, a teacher from Aurora, that would allow parents to choose whether their children will take the CSAP.

“There need to be a lot of alternatives, because children are three-dimensional. They bring with them all kinds of talents, needs, and multi-dimensional ways of looking at the world. So we need an entire tool box,’ Perl says. ‘We thought better to focus our resources on parents, that is, informing parents, enlightening parents, and community leaders, to the horrors of standardized testing. And when the word gets out little by little, parents will be the ones to make the difference.’”

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