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## **LOWERING STATE'S EDUCATION STANDARDS A BAD IDEA**

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - Tuesday, January 2, 2007

Author: Richard Day

At issue

Commentaries by Herald-Leader contributing columnist Marty Solomon, "Testing bar set too high for Kentucky schools, children," Oct. 6, and "Testing focus muscles out real education," Nov. 29

Since June 2002, Herald-Leader contributing columnist Marty Solomon has written several articles on the achievement gap and the federal No Child Left Behind law. I have tended to agree with his understanding of the research and his views -- until recently.

Over nine articles Solomon enumerated data points while referring to research and observations from the professional literature that suggest: poverty is a major factor in the achievement gap, anti-intellectualism threatens strong black students who are accused of "acting white," money matters, white racism matters and federal lawmakers shackled schools with unprecedented levels of testing under an arbitrary scheme that will unfairly label far too many schools as failures.

Despite the credible scholarship that supports Solomon's reporting, his conclusion that standards for Kentucky students should be lowered would, if implemented, yield sad consequences for education reform in Kentucky and, more important, for Kentucky's children.

NCLB required all states to achieve proficiency but, inexplicably, left it to each state to define proficiency. This single act rendered any hope of fairness to reform-minded states dead on arrival. After several years of determined talk about enforcing the law as written, federal education officials, this year, began cutting deals with states that want to lower standards -- not to improve education but to avoid looking bad under NCLB.

In the 1980s, Kentuckians had a saying: "Thank God for Mississippi." If not for the Magnolia State, Kentucky would have ranked dead last in support of schools. Today, Mississippi leads a small band of states that are competing to see who can require the least of their students.

As New York Times Magazine editor Paul Tough reported in the Nov. 26 issue, Mississippi lowered its standards and "declared 89 percent of its fourth-grade students to be proficient readers, the highest percentage in the nation, while in fact, the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that only 18 percent of Mississippi fourth-graders know how to read at an appropriate level -- the second-lowest score of any state."

This kind of gamesmanship, designed to neuter federal requirements, might stick it to the authors of NCLB's deeply flawed accountability system, but it does so at the expense of education.

When I think of how schools should be, I rarely look back to the "good ol' days." I am much more motivated by the recent explosion of information technology, global competition, rising Medicaid costs and the overpowering need for a highly educated work force.

Lowering standards may relieve pressure on some folks in the short run, but it's not good for Kentucky in the long run. Solomon's solution would return Kentucky to the 1980s -- with 1980s accountability. That's not the right solution for Kentucky's future economy.

Low expectations are much worse than high expectations. Low expectations are a recipe for low performance. For a principal, low expectations remove the need for results. For a teacher, it is an invitation to ease up and allow a certain percentage of hard-to-teach students to fail; and students always do better when teachers really try.

Motivation is important in any human endeavor, and that includes teaching. What gets inspected gets respected. Reasonable accountability systems, applied humanely, give the public useful information about the performance of schools without harming children in the process. In its present form, NCLB is not that system.

It is important to remember that Kentucky already had a well-developed accountability environment before NCLB came around. Kentucky school districts were already accountable for achievement by all subgroups of students under Senate Bill 168.

Testing in our schools has been ratcheted up to its highest levels in history. With the addition of NCLB on top of Kentucky's CATS assessment, it is arguably too high. But Kentucky teachers have responded well by using a variety of assessment data to help identify students who need more or different kinds of instruction.

If we really want to increase student achievement we should keep the state accountability system, but focus more on improving the instructional tools teachers can access. The development of assessment technologies that would give teachers immediate feedback on student progress, with minimal loss of instructional time, ought to be one of the state's major initiatives.

In the meantime, let's call on the new Congress to improve NCLB's assessment scheme by using a research-based calculation that takes student achievement growth into account and that defines proficiency with an eye toward the needs of the new century, not the last.

Caption: - **Richard Day** of Lexington is a former principal of Cassidy Elementary School.

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