



In Search of a Balanced Education

A White Paper

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Colorado was among the nation's leaders in the mid 1990's when the state legislature, in conjunction with Governor Romer, crafted a statewide plan for public education reform and accountability. Twelve subject areas were designated as "core" subjects: civics, dance, economics, foreign language, geography, history, mathematics, music, physical education, reading-writing, science, theatre, and visual arts. Incidentally, those are the same areas of study that the later federal legislation known as "No Child Left Behind" identified as "core".

It's wise to re-visit Colorado's original vision of educational excellence and measure our progress toward that vision as a whole. CSAP has proven valuable in assessing proficiency in the tools of reading, writing, math and the area of science but what of the remaining "core" areas?

Across the state as well as the nation, there are reports of learning opportunities in the arts (and other subjects areas as well) that are lost to students because time and resources are reallocated to subject areas that are tested, and reported to state and federal governments. So much so that former U.S. Secretary of Education, Dr. Rod Paige, wrote an open letter to the nation's public school superintendents in July 2004 which began:

"As I am sure you know, the arts are a core academic subject under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). I believe the arts have a significant role in education both for their intrinsic value and for the ways in which they can enhance general academic achievement and improve students' social and emotional development.

As I travel the country, I often hear that arts education programs are endangered because of No Child Left Behind. This message was echoed in a recent series of teacher roundtables sponsored by the Department of Education. It is both disturbing and just plain wrong.

It's disturbing not just because arts programs are being diminished or eliminated, but because NCLB is being interpreted so narrowly as to be considered the reason for these actions."

In a March 2005, Education Week article "Social Studies Losing out to Reading, Math", E.D. Hirsch Jr., the founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation is quoted on the subject of a narrowed curriculum in response to high-stakes testing:

"The desperate response of the schools to test pressure has been to excise history, science, and the arts, and replace them with still more such exercises in reading."

A March, 2006 Center for Education Policy analysis of NCLB's impact on school districts across the nation found that:

"To make more time for reading and math in elementary schools, districts cut time for social studies (reduced to a great extent or somewhat by 33% of districts), science (29% of districts), and art and music (22%), among other subjects or activities."

Here in our own state, some school districts are moving to a "double-dosing" model, where students testing below grade level in math or reading are prevented from taking other courses as they instead are required to take two courses of the subject area in which they are underperforming. Another practice which results in the reduction of learning opportunities for students is to take the time allocated to other subject areas for the purpose of CSAP preparation and/or CSAP testing.

Colorado arts educators worry that yet another loss of opportunity is ahead for Colorado students. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education 2003 revision to its admissions policy created the Pre-Collegiate Curriculum Requirement. It places upon students an expectation of increased course requirements in English, math, science, social studies and foreign languages in order to be eligible for admittance to Colorado colleges and universities. CCHE believes it has accommodated other courses of study by allowing for 2 Carnegie units of "academic electives". A Carnegie unit is a one-hour class that meets 5 days a week for 24 weeks making 120 hours of seat time. The academic electives category allows the following types of courses to be counted toward college admittance here in Colorado: additional classes in English, mathematics, natural/physical sciences, social sciences and foreign languages beyond the minimum units required, as well as art, music, journalism, drama, computer science, honors classes, advanced placement classes and International Baccalaureate courses as well as career and technical education courses with credible standards.

Given that Colorado is constitutionally a "home-rule" state, meaning each school district's board of education sets its own graduation requirements, the ways in which the state can and has influenced K-12 education are limited. Checking back on

those state model content standards, we can see that reading, writing, math and science have the gravitas of being CSAP tested areas. At the transition point between K-12 education and higher education, we've got the regulatory mandate of CCHE for English (reading, writing), mathematics, science, social science, and foreign language.

So where do we find contemporary reference to the core subjects of civics, economics, geography, physical education and the arts? In 2004, the Colorado General Assembly, through Colorado Revised Statutes 22-1-104 mandated the teaching of civics for Colorado students. It is the first, and so far only state-mandated course inclusion for Colorado's K-12 public schools. Economics is one of the classes which can count toward college admission under the category of social science in the CCHE Pre-collegiate Curriculum Requirement, which will be fully implemented in the state by 2010.

Geography is included in the graduation requirements of many school districts as the result of a 1988 decision by the University of Colorado to require geography as an entrance requirement. Each school district is left to determine its own assessment policy for geography, as is the case for all subject areas not included in CSAP.

That leaves physical education and the arts. In what way are they anchored into the K-12 public education system of Colorado? The original statute, HB93-1313, called for the areas of art, music, physical education, and civics to be included in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). However, subsequent interpretation, new reform legislation, and changes in education policy makers at the state level have orphaned that provision, and civics has been accounted for in the 2004 legislation mentioned above.

In the educational landscape, it's time to look beyond the hypertrophy of CSAP. There's knowledge beyond those tools of reading, writing and math. There's knowledge that is creative and collaborative – there's knowledge that nurtures critical thinking skills. The beyond is twelve “core” fields of study, just as Colorado's pioneer reformers of the 1990's envisioned; and that's where our children will find the will, the values, and the understanding to continue the democratic principals of self-governance and economic self-sufficiency.

This is a clarion call to Colorado's policy makers. There's more than just data from ACT (American College Testing Program) and the templated plans of other states; and there are more ways to measure education than just data from CSAP. Make use of all research that evidences heightened educational achievement, including the plentiful research on the efficacy of arts education. Please renew yourselves with the careful thought, research, and endeavors of collaborative alignment that propelled Colorado to the national forefront of educational reform a decade ago. At that time, Colorado had a vision of educational excellence that wholly educated the whole child. Light the way again!