

Is our public school system the equivalent of a self-licking ice cream cone? The crazy sounding term refers to a bureaucracy or organization that is self-contained, that evaluates its own performance, and exists with little reference to or influence from the external environment.

It would seem that public education in Arizona, Prescott Unified School District (PUSD) included, may fit that definition. For example, the PUSD recently announced preliminary student test scores for the 2022-2023 school year. The outcome of state mandated annual testing, the results showed some pretty alarming numbers. Average fourth through eighth grade student proficiency in English language arts was 48%, in Math 39%. Disturbingly, student proficiency in both subjects declined from 3rd to 8th grade. Looking at these numbers, the casual observer might very well say something the equivalent of, "Houston, we have a problem.", which is astronaut-speak for a disaster in the making. Joking aside, parents would likely be very disturbed by these numbers and expect a radical change by educators to elevate the knowledge of a large percentage of their students.

So, it might come as a surprise to those same parents that the administrators of PUSD are not alarmed by those low proficiency scores. In fact, at a PUSD board meeting on August 1st, the PUSD Superintendent assured the community that our schools are making the grade in terms of student performance. How could this be? The answer is that the administrators view annual tests results, tested late in the school year, as a point in time well after the students have been exposed to the test subject matter. Children forget, so low proficiency is not surprising. For PUSD, the proficiency scores are mainly useful for comparing our school district to others in Arizona. In that comparison, PUSD is doing well, but is being better than other Arizona districts good enough and is this a reasonable means of assessment?

First, there are several logical inconsistencies in the PUSD argument that end of year test results do not warrant cause for alarm. Test scores may be useful for comparison, but the question of how much lost proficiency is acceptable by end of year is not addressed. For example, if a high school senior graduates with sub-proficient scores in English and math and goes into the workforce or the military, how successful can we expect that student to be?

Another example. If a 4th grader is sub-proficient in math, yet is passed on to a higher grade, how can we expect that student to be able to handle the next grade in math skills, especially since ability in math is cumulative. In PUSD schools, 98% of students progress from one grade to the next without delay, whether or not they are subject matter proficient. It makes sense that passing students not proficient at the end of one school year will have a compounding negative effect on student learning as years of schooling accumulate.

Another issue, a symptom of a closed, self-evaluating system, is that there appear to be limited ways to compare our kids, academically, to those of other states or nations. According to test results presented at the August 1st meeting there is no way to make a state-to-state or international comparison. There are some benchmarks which compare US children to those

educated in other developed nations. Overall, American children test slightly above average in reading and well below average in math---even though our per child funding is substantially higher than average. If we cannot compare our kids' academic progress to those in other US school systems or foreign school systems, and test scores are only for in-state comparison, how can we know what our own school system is delivering?

If we take the view that our children are products for the workplace, what is the quality of that product and is it reflected in our school's evaluation? There does not seem to be a connection between our public school's self-evaluation of academic proficiency and feedback from employers. There are many anecdotes of young adults not being able to perform basic math or English in the workplace. Why shouldn't this type of feedback be part of a school's evaluation?

For college bound students of PUSD, is ability to succeed in college reflected in a school's evaluation? One answer to this question could be the number of our college freshmen who must take remedial courses in college before proceeding. The national data indicates that between 40-60 percent college students were unprepared by their public school for college level math or English and must take remedial courses. How does PUSD measure up in this regard?

In short, the PUSD evaluation of student proficiency may raise more questions than answers regarding the quality of our children's education. It seems clear that PUSD is a closed, self-evaluating system, somewhat disconnected from the real world. Parents and taxpayers deserve an open, transparent, two-way discussion of these issues. To not do so would just give weight to my unfortunate ice cream cone analogy.