



Del. teachers find common ground

In face of changing standards, student success remains the goal

By EDWARD L. KENNEY • The News Journal • May 11, 2010

When Milford High English teacher Patricia Masten started at the school 33 years ago, she tested her students in a more informal way.

"In 1977, the state standards hadn't been written yet," she said. "We were looking at the objectives for each course at our school to see if those objectives were met by the students."

In the years since, just about everything about school assessments has changed. From **No Child Left Behind** to the Delaware Student Testing Program.

"The data we get from testing has changed. Now we're able to see not only data for one classroom, but we can see comparison data, we can see student growth from one year to the next," Masten said. "So there is a connectiveness for what students learn regardless of what school they are in."

Her views echo those of a fraternity of Delaware classroom veterans who, instead of complaining about having to teach to a succession of new assessments, say that teachers are now on the same page and working toward the same goal.

"Accountability builds in good things for both the student and the teacher," she said. "We're all moving toward that same goal, which is student success."

Delaware teachers have dealt with a lot of changes in the classroom in the decade since the federal No Child Left Behind law raised the bar by setting higher standards and establishing measurable goals.

Now, even greater changes are on the way with Delaware on the cusp of huge educational reform efforts aimed at low-performing schools backed by

\$75 million -- to be shared with five other states -- by the School Turnaround Group at Mass Insight Education & Research Institute. Add to that a new computer-adaptive state testing system set to start next school year.

"Now, everything is based on data, data-driven decision-making," Masten said. "The tests enable us to make sure the instruction is targeted to particular skills that students need to learn. We have a sense of what our standards are. We have performance indicators."

The original DSTP, ushered in a dozen years ago, was another in a host of changes teachers have had to adapt to as educators look for ways to improve student achievement.

Replacing the DSTP will be the Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System, a computer-adaptive, growth-model test. It will have two parts: The first is a comprehensive, end-of-the-year exam that will be used for federal, high-stakes purposes such as school accountability ratings. The second is a benchmark test that would be administered at the beginning, middle and end of the year for immediate feedback on how a student is doing in a particular subject.

Vicki Seifred, an eighth-grade social studies teacher at Red Clay Consolidated's Stanton Middle School and an educator for 30 years, said some form of classroom assessment has been around for years, but the tests began to be used differently.

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"Before, we used to use these tests for instructional purposes only to see what we needed to do in our classroom," she said. "It wasn't punitive for the students. It was used more as a tool, more as information for teachers to make adjustments. Now you have to get a certain grade to pass, and the school is given a status based on student performance."

Teacher Karen Simpson said the assessments can be used to provide better outcomes.

"We're doing that [testing] to find out when a child reaches a point where they need help with something," said Simpson, a teacher for 22 years who currently works at Brandywine's Lancashire **Elementary School** in Brandywine Hundred. "We're targeting the instruction much more to the student than we did 22 years ago. Now we're getting much more specific about it."

Sue Gleason, who has taught her entire 24-year career at Middletown High and is the science department chair at her school, said the better guidelines help the students and teachers.

"Before, when teachers came in and asked me what they should teach, I'd say, 'Here is a biology book, go have a good time,' " she said. "It's important there is some commonality about what they're all learning."

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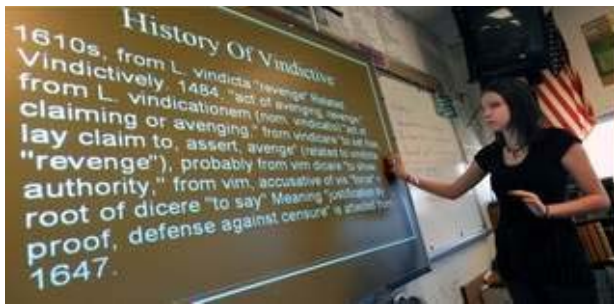
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Mary Rairigh (left) and Grace Neal study the Statue of Liberty at Bunker Hill Elementary School in Middletown. (The News Journal FRED COMEGYS)

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Milford High freshman Dakota Cranmer brings up a definition for "vindictive," one of her vocabulary words, in Patricia Masten's English class. (The News Journal/GARY EMEIGH)

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