

A crucial moment for pandemic-era students

Unfortunately, it seems part of the post-pandemic “new normal” in Georgia is for our educational leaders to continue seeking ways to water down accountability measures and lower expectations.

The latest blow comes via federal acquiescence to the Georgia Department of Education’s request not to report a single score for public schools as part of its College and Career Readiness Performance Index, or CCRPI. Parents are rightly concerned about the pandemic’s lingering fallout for their children’s education, but this maneuver will weaken both accountability and transparency.



Public Policy

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Educators have long chafed at the idea of a single score to represent achievement, except when they issue single scores to students at the end of the term. Education, they say, is so much more complicated than that – except, again, when they issue single scores to students at the end of the term. (Although at the rate we’re going, they might try to get rid of those as well.)

That’s why efforts to undermine metrics like the CCRPI, in the name of the pandemic, are so suspect. It just happens to be what many educators wanted before the pandemic.

The alternative to a single score for schools is not a broader set of metrics that help parents gain a fuller picture of how their local schools are serving their children. More likely, it’s a blitz of numbers that (perhaps intentionally) confuses parents. It wouldn’t be the first time a government agency sought to bury meaningful data amid reams of facts and figures in the name of “transparency.”

Worst of all is the apparent point of this exercise:

“We structured our requests to ensure that the 2022 CCRPI is realistic and takes into account the extraordinary circumstances of the last two years,” state schools superintendent Richard Woods wrote in an email to local superintendents, as reported recently by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “Our goal is to establish a new baseline, rather than compare your schools’ performance to pre-pandemic norms.”

Read that again: “Our goal is to establish a new baseline, rather than compare your schools’ performance to pre-pandemic norms.”

If that is unclear, allow me to clarify: The result of this change would be to lower standards and expectations across the state precisely because students have fallen behind.

Every parent should find that unacceptable.

The earlier part of the excerpt, referring to “the extraordinary circumstances of the last two years,” is understandable. The last two years certainly have been extraordinarily difficult for teachers, students and parents.

But that is all the more reason for us to measure our progress in overcoming those difficulties, so that we know we are not leaving thousands of children permanently worse-off. How do we do that? By comparing post-pandemic results to pre-pandemic results.

To do otherwise – to accept that fewer students are on grade level, fewer students are reading proficiently, fewer students are prepared for college or a career – is to lower the bar forever. If we believe that education matters, as educators surely do, that would be a tragedy for these students, their future families and our entire society.

After all, why do we measure schools’ performance? We do it because it reflects students’ performance.

“Performance” itself is a sneaky word. It almost sounds as if we are talking about something external to learning: a kind of act, rather than the thing itself.

When we talk about “schools’ performance,” what we mean is an objective measure of whether the students who attend those schools learned what they were supposed to learn, so that they can continue their education, so that they might maximize their potential.

Sometimes that basic truth, and its fundamental importance, gets lost when adults start fretting about whether they’ll look bad based on their “schools’ performance.”

This is such a crucial moment for pandemic-era students. Either we face up to the hard realities of what pandemic policies cost them, or we just grade on a curve from now on and pretend it’ll all be fine.

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Is our democracy in danger of eroding away?

We all know the story of how to boil a frog to death (Frog lovers: I’m not suggesting you do so, I’m just trying to make a point here.) The premise is that if you suddenly plopped a frog into boiling water, it would jump out. But if the frog is put in lukewarm water which is then very slowly brought to a boil, it won’t recognize the danger. And before the frog knows what is happening, it will be cooked to death.

I thought of that well-known fable as I read something recently that scares me worse than being a frog whose goose is cooked.

A new Yahoo News/YouGov poll shows that most Democrats (55%) and Republicans (53%) now believe it is “likely” that America will “cease to be a democracy in the future.” For Americans who claim to be independents, their numbers are close to half -- (49%). Only 25% of those polled consider the end of democracy in the United States unlikely and another quarter (25%) say they’re unsure. Not exactly overwhelming optimism.

Like the poor frog being slowly boiled to death, we seem to be slowly eroding as a nation. And unlike the amphibian that had no idea what was happening, we are fracturing on purpose. We seem to be more interested in focusing on what divides us rather than in what unites us as Americans.

Speaking of division, you will never see the word American hyphenated in

this space. You either are or you are not an American. No hyphenations. Period. Besides, I have a friend from South Africa who is a naturalized citizen of the U.S. She is white but is she also African-American? I must remember to ask the politically-correct police at the Associated Press who dictate that black be capitalized, but not white.

We are reminded of our past mistakes by tearing down statues, changing names and defiling historical figures who deserve better from those who don’t know any better. To my knowledge, the Brits have not torn down the Tower of London in spite of the atrocities that occurred there. Nor have the French razed Versailles, where the royals once lived opulently while its citizens starved.

While many obsess on racial injustices committed in the past that were indeed unjustifiable, they forget that this country elected and then reelected a black president. (Hint: He had to get a lot of white folks to vote for him. Blacks make up only 14% of the nation’s population.) But nobody seems to want to focus on our progress as a nation and the tremendous opportunities that await those willing to seek them out. Our past is our prologue.

Civil discourse is no longer a means by which to discuss our differences. We now threaten and bully via social media (anonymously, of course) those with whom we disagree and are not helped by a tiresome ex-President continually hurling invectives and insults like a petulant child.

We seem to have lost our sense of humor. Nothing is funny anymore. Where are Bob Hope and Red Skelton when we need them?

Our national media have deepened the divide among us, slanting their reporting to appeal to those who agree with them and disparaging those that don’t. They – Fox News, One America, CNN, MSNBC – are neither fair nor balanced nor objective. They are Trump apologists or Trump detractors. No more, no less. Where are Chet Huntley and David Brinkley when we need them?

The blame for all of this falls on all of us. We are guardians of a special gift, this democracy of ours. Some 400,000 members of the Greatest Generation gave their lives in World War 2 to ensure that we would be free people. And now more than half of us opine that our democracy may eventually go away. Not because some country conquered us but because we rotted away from the inside out through indifference and apathy.

In the narrative that accompanied the poll, the question was posed: Have Americans simply given up on democracy? The answer was not at the present but it may be that Americans may have largely given up on each other. We may no longer be United States. I hope that is not the case but until we can find someone to bring us together as a people and help us find our better selves, we are in danger of becoming like that clueless frog. We won’t realize what has happened to us until it is too late.

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Dick Yarbrough

Dream of Guinness World Record won’t die

When I was about six years old, I told my parents of my lifelong ambition.

“I want to be in the Guinness Book of World Records,” I told them.

Unlike my prior lifelong ambition — to be a fire truck — my parents supported this aim.

Their approving tone changed, though, when I told them how I planned to achieve my world record.

“I’m going to break the world record for the fattest twins, like those two guys that ride motorcycles,” I proclaimed proudly.

I had to abandon my lifelong ambition when my parents informed me that I didn’t have a twin brother. Fred wasn’t my twin brother, they revealed gently, but was rather our Labrador retriever.

I’ve always had a place in my dreams for creating a world record, like the McCrary twins (Billy and Benny, combined weight 1,466 pounds) did. Unlike most of the McCrary



Len’s Lines

Len Robbins

twins’ competitors, though, my dream has not died.

A number of years ago, I thought I had my best chance yet to have my name in the book. Our old house had what I originally considered a large tree in the backyard. I was later informed that the tree wasn’t actually a tree but a holly shrub or bush.

Holly shrubs usually only grow a few feet in height, but this one was about 40 feet high and about 40 feet wide, with

delicious, yummy holly berries all over it.

Like Susanna Bokoyoni, the world’s oldest dwarf (105 years old, three feet four inches), visions of Guinness stardom started dancing in my head.

I first contacted my local Georgia Forestry Commission ranger, who told me that the state keeps no records on holly bush height.

I then wrote the Guinness people in Connecticut, telling them about what I believed, based on absolutely no knowledge or research, to be the largest holly bush this world has ever known.

I never heard back from them, even after more letters, repeated phone calls and a restraining order.

What’s most disappointing is that without an official Guinness Book designation, all my plans for Big Holly Bush World sort of fell apart. Like other holly bush themed parks, this one was going to feature roller coasters, a holly bush museum (where a biographi-

cal slideshow of my life would be shown), wild animals (I had already lined up two cats, a possum and some lizards), and a concession stand which would specialize in holly bush food and drink — holly bush pies, shakes, pastries and fruit juice.

The visions of celebrity and dollars were indeed intoxicating — or perhaps that was the holly bush wine I made.

Alas, Big Holly Bush World didn’t work out as designed, and I have yet to enter my name along the distinguished likes of Daniel Lyon (world’s lightest brain, and the founder of bell-bottoms), Kare Walkert (the world’s loudest snorer) or Emanuel Zacchini (the outrageous human cannonball).

But there’s always tomorrow, and the possibility of buying another house with a very large bush in the backyard. If you know of one, I’m in the market. This dream, like the world’s oldest dwarf, just won’t die easily.

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The Donalsonville News reminds letter to the editor writers that shorter is better. Concise letters are not only better read, they are more likely to be published because limited space is available. Almost any point can be made in 350 words or fewer, so this is set as an upper level for length.

Unsigned letters, letters signed with a fictitious signature, copies of letters sent to public officials, or letters containing unverified or anonymous quotes will not be accepted.

We limit letters on a subject when we feel it has been thoroughly aired to the point of letters becoming repetitive. Also rejected are letters that are libelous, in bad taste, or are personal attacks on individuals or private businesses.

Writers must include addresses and telephone numbers. These are for identification purposes only, and will not be published.

Send letters to the editor to P.O. Box 338, Donalsonville, Georgia 39845

