PSSA Panic and Paranoia: Effects on Student Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

It has been several years since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was renamed the No Child Left Behind Act. In this major expansion of the federal role in education, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 required annual testing, specified a method for judging school effectiveness, set a timeline for progress, and established specific consequences in the case of failure (Wenning, 2003). The Washington Post referred to it as the “broadest rewriting of federal education policy in decades” (Milbank, 2002). The effects of the overwhelming pressure to perform well on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests on teachers, students, and parents had brought about “PSSA Panic and Paranoia.” Although strides have been made in overcoming the stress and pressure created by these tests, teachers (veteran and new), parents, and students are still showing signs of panic and paranoia. Now, young professionals entering this challenging field of teaching are also affected by the implementation of the NCLB legislation. The domino effect is profoundly influencing the education profession. The government pressures the state, the state pressures the schools, the schools pressure the educators, the educators pressure the parents and students, parents pressure the students and teachers, and finally, the students pressure themselves.

Panic as defined by Dictionary.com Unabridged is “a sudden overwhelming fear, with or without cause, which produces hysterical or irrational behavior, and that often spreads quickly through a group.” Paranoia is defined as “a baseless or excessive suspicion of the motives of others characterized by systematized delusions and the projection of personal conflicts” (Random House, 2006). Signs of this “PSSA panic and paranoia” are still present today. Dedicated educators had embraced the challenge that President Bush put before them. Just as Ronald Edmonds had lectured years ago, teachers believe that effective schools do have closely monitored student achievement and orderly environments characterized by high expectations. Upon recognizing the positive aspects of the legislation, it is important to recognize what it is lacking. Two of these weaknesses attributing to the panic and paranoia are the amount of skills tested in a specified time frame and unrealistic, not high, expectations placed on teachers and students.

THE SCENERIO

The word was out, “Our class is getting a student teacher,” cried frantic parents. Word spread like wildfire and phones began ringing. Concerned parents bombarded the principal and teacher with a barrage of irate calls. “This is too important a year to have an inexperienced person teaching our children,” chanted the anxious parents. These concerned caregivers are referring to the PSSA testing given in fifth grade for writing, reading, and math. The experienced fifth grade teacher was shocked by the parents’ response to receiving a student teacher. As a veteran teacher who had received student teachers over the years, there had never been a problem before. What was the source of this hostility? What had changed? Parents are panicking at the thought of their children being retained or not graduating on time if they should not meet the guidelines set by the high-stakes testing. Although surprised at the parents’ response to having a student teacher in the classroom, the sympathizing
teacher understood the parents’ concern. It is something even many teachers experience … “PSSA panic and paranoia.” Almost immediately after President Bush signed the NCLB into law, changes, both positive and negative, began to take place in the education profession. Arguments that the PSSA tests do not accurately measure children’s work, force teachers to teach the test, narrow the curriculum, provide insufficient funding and many more issues deeply concern teachers. The mandatory testing is here, like it or not, and teachers, parents and students must deal with them.

STUDENTS’ PANIC AND PARANOIA

The introduction to the No Child Left Behind legislation states, “In America, no child should be left behind. Every child should be educated to his or her full potential.” There is no argument that students should be educated to their fullest ability from teachers, parents, and students. The regulations and requirements that the NCLB act assumes is that all children can learn at the same level and in the same amount of time; herein lies the problem. Empirical research does not support the belief that all children can learn the same curriculum, in the same amount of time, and at the same level (Bainbridge, 2002). The late professor Ronald Edmonds of Harvard, founder of the Effective Schools movement, once stated, “Most children can learn the basic curriculum if sufficient resources are provided” (as cited in Bainbridge, 2002). Students are racing to keep up with their classmates and the panic is building. “What ifs” haunt our anxious, young learners. “What if I am only basic? What if I get held back?” Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic are touted on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Students are labeled using the new PSSA criteria. Terrified students frequently shed tears before, during, or after the PSSA testing. Strategies have been put into place to help turn the negatives of the testing into positives. Children are encouraged to work to the best of their own ability. The pace is rapid, but amazingly many students accept the challenge with great spirit. Everyone is unique, and as long as students try their very best, any improvement is applauded. Hopefully, one day, as Bainbridge states “all children will be treated as individuals, achieving at various levels appropriate to their development, and that they will not be treated as learning at the same level at the same time – all marching to the arbitrary beat of a state proficiency test” (Milbank, 2001, p. 4). Meanwhile, students are committed and encouraged to do their very best on the state-mandated tests. If parents and teachers put everything into perspective, “that all children do not learn at arbitrary levels predetermined by individuals external to the schools” (Milbank, 2001, p 4), then students will reflect their attitudes. Children’s panic and paranoia vanish as parents and teachers’ understanding becomes clearer about PSSA testing.

EFFECTS ON COOPERATING TEACHERS

Since the enactment of NCLB, many fellow colleagues, feeling the pressure of the PSSA tests, stopped asking for, or refused to have, student teachers placed in their classrooms. “Sorry, I have enough of my own work to do. We have too much to cover before the test.” Now dedicated educators felt that the results of the tests were a reflection on their teaching ability. Cooperating teachers feared their jobs were in jeopardy if students did not perform successfully on the high stakes tests. Was this some scheme to get rid of teachers or break the union? Frazzled teachers felt they could not afford to give young professionals the amount of time they needed to succeed in this all-important student teaching placement. Even expert teachers were experiencing this “PSSA panic and paranoia.” With time, the realization came that this law does have some positives, and educators need to focus on them. Accountability and high expectations are something that is agreed on by all, but not to the extreme that
Accountability and high expectations are something that is agreed on by all, but not to the extreme that the test mandates. Effective cooperating teachers know that a great deal of time, energy, and expertise is needed to ensure student teachers getting the most out of their placement. “The school district which employs the cooperating teacher expects all requirements to be met with minimal disruption to curriculum requirements and daily school procedure” (Polachek, Buda, Modrovsky, Sullivan, Whitfield, 1991, p. 33). The energy and expertise was not a problem, but time management would be challenging. At first, some sympathetic cooperating teachers offered only to take student teachers in the spring, after the bulk of the material for the PSSA’s was covered. Eventually, with some brainstorming, cooperating teachers have realized that the time management issue could actually be resolved with the help of new, young additions to classrooms. These new interns are actually a solution, not a problem to the time management issue. An enthusiastic person is available in the classroom to give more input, and there is no added expense to the school district. Another set of hands to help out has always helped, not hurt students. Teachers only needed to remember that universities are preparing young interns to eagerly meet new challenges put before them. Once dedicated cooperating teachers grasp these relatively simple concepts, their panic and paranoia will vanish.

ADDRESSING PARENTS’ FEARS ABOUT STUDENT TEACHERS
How could classroom teachers help alleviate some of the parents’ PSSA panic and paranoia? As soon as confirmation concerning placement of a student teacher is received, letters are sent home informing parents. Communication is vital throughout the student teacher’s placement. It is important to impress on parents the benefits that the new addition will give to the classroom. Also, referring to a student teacher as “partner” and “colleague” shows a more positive image of the young professional. Meetings are held for parents to help them understand NCLB and terms such as adequate yearly progress (AYP) and disaggregated groups. As parents gradually feel more comfortable with the PSSA testing, the trust returns and the paranoia diminishes. Reassurance is given to parents that the new colleague is not replacing the classroom teacher but working with the teacher, giving children double the attention they would normally receive in the classroom. This added benefit allows skills to be covered more efficiently for the PSSA tests. Next, the task of addressing the “student teacher’s panic and paranoia” of covering the material needed for the PSSA testing.

TIME MANAGEMENT
Although disappointed by the parents’ reaction to their children having a student teacher, it is easy to understand their reservations. It is difficult enough for a seasoned teacher to cover the amount of information necessary for students to understand, let alone expect a fresh intern to take on this sometimes overwhelming task. Mentors of first year contract teachers are also seeing their new trainees experiencing the same problems when it comes to covering required skills for the PSSA. Prior years, cooperating teachers and mentors recognized behavior management as giving aspiring teachers their biggest challenge, but today, the most overwhelming problem facing teachers is time management. “Whose idea was it to test our students for writing in February and reading and math in March?” ask confused beginning teachers. “We don’t finish the skills until May. Why can’t we test then?” Once again, the paranoia creeps in and attempts to stifle teachers’ abilities. “Public education is being set up to fail; the government is pushing charter schools.” Determined teachers get past this paranoia and keep focusing on the positive, and as usual come up with strategies to cope with whatever is presented to them. Even book companies are still figuring out how to align the tested skills with the correct time frame. The publishers of these texts have done an outstanding job of covering all of the skills our students are required to master, but if we were to follow the time schedule given, all of the skills would be covered by June, not in time for the scheduled PSSA tests. When the testing windows
were first given to school districts, educators questioned the timing of the testing. “Why not just give the tests in May?” bewildered teachers asked. At first, the response told to anxious teachers was that they would receive the results of their tests in a timely manner. Teachers could evaluate the results, re-teach, and review the skills that students still had not mastered. This sounded reasonable. Unfortunately, schools never receive the results of the testing until summer. What happened to the importance of immediate feedback? “Applied studies using actual classroom quizzes and real learning materials have usually found immediate feedback to be more effective than delayed” (Kulik, 1988). Once again, teachers deal with the hand they are dealt and push forward. With hard work and perseverance, strategies are put into place.

I'VE FALLEN BEHIND…AND I CAN’T CATCH UP

“The United States Department of Education reports that over the next decade, more than two million teachers will walk into a classroom for their first day. Unfortunately, as the National Center for Education Statistics found, 666,000 of those new teachers will leave sometime during the first three years of teaching and one million of them will not make it past five years” (Ingersol, and Thomas, 2003). Newcomers to our rewarding field need cooperating teachers and mentors who understand the challenges of the PSSA with regard to time management. Educators strongly believe that mentors need to model curriculum planning and time management now more than ever. “I've fallen behind, and I can’t catch up,” is a familiar cry of our young, aspiring, panicking teachers. There are strategies to help novice teachers with this sometimes-overwhelming task of covering all of the material in time for the PSSA testing. Combining several teaching goals in one lesson, teaching skills in different content areas through an interdisciplinary curriculum, and employing cooperative learning techniques are just a few examples to introduce new concepts and cover required skills in time for the PSSA testing. All of these strategies also provide students with a more meaningful association, which leads to better retention. Intern teachers must be guided and encouraged through these strategies. Modeling how to organize and set up lessons for multiple skills to be introduced is mandatory for our new classroom partners to observe. Jorissen (2002) sums up this point, “The better prepared a teacher is, the more satisfied he or she will be, thus, more likely to remain in education” (p. 2). Not only does integrated curriculum provide students with meaningful association and better retention, but it also allows teachers and students to cover the skills in the amount of time required by the PSSA requirements. A mentor’s job is to make the new teacher’s transition easier, and this supportive mentoring relationship can ease stress for everyone involved, especially our new, young professional. Young people entering this profession need all the support they can receive if teaching is to be their lifelong career. We must provide every opportunity for our candidates to fully embrace their role as emerging professionals. Our strong dedication to the teaching profession and our willingness to mentor someone into the profession is needed now more than ever.

CONCLUSION

Since No Child Left Behind was enacted, school districts have felt forced to focus on testing. Almost every curriculum decision is based on raising test scores. In the past, pre NCLB, one school district employed a person who, along with other duties, oversaw student teachers, first year teachers, cooperating teachers, and teacher mentors. That person’s position was eliminated due to funding cuts. More than ever, school districts could use someone in such a position to help eliminate some of the frustration and stress that is currently felt by students, teachers, both novice and veteran, and parents due to the PSSA requirements. Maybe school districts can give this person the title “PSSA Panic and
Paranoid Preventer.” It would surely be a challenging, full-time position; filling it would prove to be difficult. It is important to keep a sense of humor and remember that this too will pass. Next year, NCLB will be reviewed and, hopefully, adjusted to meet individual needs. A final word of encouragement to teachers (veteran and novice), parents, and students is to remember, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Transform your panic and paranoia into discovering your personal greatness. We can all, students, teachers, parents, and future educators, overcome this “PSSA panic and paranoia” with better communication, time management practices, and patience.

REFERENCES


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