

Falls Church School Won't Teach to the Test

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By Marc Fisher

Teachers grumble and moan about how politicians' love affair with tests has turned education into a grim mission to teach creative young minds how to darken the ovals completely and neatly.

Parents complain about the lost arts and athletics, the exciting labs and imaginative lessons that schools cut out to make way for classes on the art and science of taking standardized tests.

But rarely do public schools take a stand on behalf of the children left behind by the very law that promises to carry them forward.

This summer, Bailey's Elementary School for the Arts and Sciences in Falls Church put down a marker. A letter sent to every parent said teachers are being forced to spend "valuable instructional time preparing students to take the Standards of Learning tests, to the exclusion of activities that extend and deepen student learning, integrate the arts with content, and allow students to develop and pursue their own questions."

The letter said Bailey's, which as Fairfax County's first magnet elementary school attracts immigrant families from its Culmore neighborhood and more affluent families from across the county, will still teach children how to think like scientists and historians, even though "this is not what standardized tests measure or encourage."

The letter was more than an ideological tract. It was a warning to parents that in the next few weeks, they may find their school declared failing under the federal government's No Child Left Behind protocols.

The problem is that about 77 percent of Bailey's students are immigrants, many of whom come to school knowing little or no English. The law requires the school to bring an ever higher percentage of those students up to grade level each year. Bailey's, like most schools with large populations of poor or non-English-speaking students, isn't hitting its numbers.

"It's an ax hanging over our heads," says Jean Frey, the principal, who has to explain to parents that if Bailey's is declared failing, the county could fire its teachers, and families would have the right to transfer to another school.

"I have no problem with being accountable," Frey says.

"As a citizen, I want these kids to grow up to be literate problem-solvers." But she will not shutter her science lab, pull the plug on theatrical productions or tell teachers to scrap a literature discussion to drill kids on test facts.

"The testing itself is enormously time-consuming," Frey says. "We give up over two weeks in May to the tests. So the rest of the year, we try very hard not to do 'SOL Prep Time,' like many schools do. How important is knowing how to fill in ABCD? I don't do that very often as an adult."

This is a school that remains open to experiment even while wearing the straitjacket of No Child Left Behind. It has just completed a five-year "looping," in which one class stayed with the same teacher from first through fifth grades, producing powerful emotional bonds. While many schools hack away at the arts to focus on test-taking skills, Bailey's has a busy black-box theater, a TV studio in which students produce a daily newscast and four visual arts teachers.

Reaction to Bailey's defense of its approach has been almost uniformly supportive. David Itkin, father of a second-grader, called the letter "eloquent and brave." Other parents have encouraged teachers to follow their passions in their lessons. And more than twice as many families apply for a spot in Bailey's magnet program as can be admitted.

Still, "it's going to look like we're a failing school when really we're a model school," says teacher Stephanie Fillman. "And that makes us really angry because we know what we're doing is right."

"Right now, we're judged by our attendance rate and English and math scores," Frey says. "How about parent satisfaction? Student progress?"

To keep Bailey's test participation numbers high enough to avoid the failure tag, Frey had to make children who had just arrived from other countries sit down and fill out bubbles.

"I would love to hear what they said at home that night," she says. "They were totally mystified. One child could say 'Hello' and another just waved; they'd been here one week and 10 days. But I had to make them sit here for two hours, three days a week, filling in circles so we could hit the 95 percent participation target. What a waste."

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