

Public School Test Scores

by Thomas C. Reeves

The path breaking “No Child Left Behind” law, signed by President Bush in 2002, has placed considerable pressure on public schools throughout the nation. In Wisconsin, as elsewhere, teachers and administrators are eager to avoid being branded deficient and suffer potential financial losses. Department of Public Instruction officials in Wisconsin reported recently that the cost of tests taken in late 2005 included a \$10 million contract with CTB/McGraw Hill, a well-known testing company that designed new tests exclusively for the state. Almost half a million students took the tests, and the overall results were less than encouraging. This at a time when much money and effort have been employed to hike the quality of instruction and fend off the transfer of students to voucher schools.

The tests show that little progress has been made throughout the state in recent years, and that the gap between whites and minorities is huge and growing. In Milwaukee, where the schools are 58.9% African American and 19% Hispanic, no more than 40% of high school sophomores were rated as proficient or advanced in the subjects tested: reading, language arts, math, science, and social studies. Across the state, 78% of 10th graders were rated proficient or better in math. But only 46% of Hispanics reached this level, and a mere 28% of African Americans achieved it. Statewide, the percentage of black tenth graders who were rated as proficient in reading declined from 43% in 2004 to 39% a year later. The 2005 figure for whites was 81%.

School officials are puzzled by the rather sharp decline in test scores from eighth to 10th grades. The percentage of students who were advanced and proficient in reading dropped 10 points; for black and Hispanic students the decline was 17 points. One state official thought this had to do with student attitude. No doubt, but let us also consider another important word: puberty.

Common sense and decades of teaching experience dictate at least two observations: 1) until the home life of many low-income students improves (two parents, a steady income, solid moral teaching, at least some sort of intellectual stimulation higher than MTV, including the reading of books), the young people in question cannot be expected to embrace a life of learning and begin to plan for the future; 2) until the schools crack down on the costuming and conduct that fosters personal irresponsibility and anti-intellectualism (e.g. chatting on cell phones, wearing headphones, and sleeping during class; rowdy and noisy behavior in hallways and lunchrooms), dramatic improvement in test scores is highly unlikely. Both steps involve a commitment to standards of right and wrong, of course, which is especially difficult for multiculturalists, who pretend that all values are subjective.

But let us not oversimplify, thinking there are easy and quick solutions to the continuing and perhaps worsening tragedy of the public school systems throughout the country. The problems are deep and involve psychological, sociological, and cultural problems of imposing dimensions. In the Milwaukee Public Schools, for example, about 20% of the total high school enrollment skip school on any given day. How does one overcome even so basic a problem as getting the young people to show up? How does one foster learning in an environment such as Bay View High School in Milwaukee where the school boasts an overall grade point average of 1.63 and police had to be called 115 times during a recent stretch of 57 school days? When the principal of Bradley Tech in Milwaukee, a school that recently scored a low average of 16.1 in ACT scores, was asked what's at the heart of the difference between kids who are engaged in school and kids who aren't, he replied, "I don't know."

See the article by Alan J. Borsuk at www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=426137&format=print.

For the data, see www.dpi.state.wi.us/sig/index.html, click on "Data Analysis."

See also the 62 page "2004-2005 District Report Card for the Milwaukee Public Schools" at www.milwaukee.k12.wi.us.

A recent four part series on the MPS by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's* Borsuk is valuable and revealing. See the first at www.jsonline.com/story/index?id=434349&format=print.