

MARGINALIZING ARTS IN THE SCHOOLS

By William Nicoson

The revolution in Virginia public schools brought about by uniform Standards of Learning (SOL) testing has swept school administrators, principals and teachers into a frenzy over determined efforts for "remediation". That simply means preparing students to do better next year and in years to come. Judgment day comes in 2006-7 when any school whose students achieve less than a 70% passing rate loses accreditation. In other words, the jobs of all administrators, principals and teachers are on the line.

And, oh yes, the future of students is also on the line. Beginning in 2004 any high school student will graduate only by passing SOL tests in reading, writing, math, science, social studies and one other SOL-tested course of the student's choice. Results from the two SOL rounds this year have been discouraging at most local schools except Thomas Jefferson High.

Putting education to the test and holding professional educators responsible for results are laudable objectives. But the current intense pressure to improve SOL testing scores has drawn educational resources and student interest away from elective courses immune from SOL testing. The orphaned subjects include music, art, photography and theater. Teachers specializing in these subjects are frustrated and concerned.

Last week a report to the Fairfax County School Board called attention to scheduling problems in Elementary Schools for instruction in general music and string and band instruments which compete with core curriculum sessions. Superintendent Daniel A. Domenech's "Plan for Excellence" introduced this year calls for "reduction of elementary fragmentation by reducing classroom pullouts for band, strings" and special instruction for the "gifted and talented."

At local High Schools, teachers in elective courses feel the interest of students and parents is draining away to the core curriculum subject to SOL testing as a major determinant of college admissions. At Herndon High, in an incident with wide grapevine reverberation, one student told an elective instructor: "This class is not very important to me." By their nature, electives are presumed important to students who exercise their own judgment to take, or avoid taking, the elective offered.

Elementary and secondary education is about more than kids getting into college and learning skills to make a living. It's also about learning skills to make a life. A student who comes to some appreciation of the treasures to be found in music and art will find his or her life immensely enriched. And some of the "gifted and talented" might actually find themselves a professional place in music or the arts. As a student, don't knock it until you've tried it.

How, then, can the competition be evened between the SOL-tested core curriculum and electives immune from testing? The obvious answer is extension of SOL testing to electives. South Lakes

Principal Realista Rodriguez tells me she doesn't discount such a possibility. (Given South Lakes' reputation for excellence in art and theater instruction, her view is understandable.) But at all schools it's important to right the current testing imbalance which tends to marginalize learning of immeasurable import for students' future appreciation of life.

William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers.