

Guest Editorial: Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) Recommendations for ESEA Reauthorization and Inquiry Science Teaching

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A new spring semester has begun and across the United States a new crop of science education student teachers are being sent to middle and high school science classrooms. Those of us who are science education faculty will stress the importance of *inquiry*--- “*the 5E*” in our students’ lesson plans--- because *inquiry* is the cornerstone of our discipline. It is spring, and thus the season of “the tests,” and well, you know the rest of the story.

The time has come for all who are passionate about science education to get involved...to speak up...to join together...in making the changes that are necessary in federal education policies so that science teaching in all classrooms in the United States can flourish again. You may ask, “How do I do this as a professor, a teacher, or a parent? How can I make a difference when policies are beyond my influence and control?” I reply by quoting Margaret Mead: “*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*”

On January 18 this year, Texas State University – San Marcos, my university, opened its “Lyndon’s U-Club” at the LBJ Student Center. We are proud of our most famous Texas State graduate, Lyndon Baines Johnson, the 36th President of the United States. In the late 1920s, he taught poor and minority group children in Cotulla, Texas. In education policy, his presidency is noted for the initiation, in 1965, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that was a part of his “War on Poverty” program. Title I of the ESEA addressed the need for improving the academic achievement of students from low-income families. Fast forward 46 years to 2011. In that time span, the ESEA has been reauthorized several times, including the latest ESEA reauthorization “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) in 2001.

There is now a perception, widely held in the U.S., that implementation of NCLB has been harmful to education as a result of high stakes testing on school children and schools. The threat of penalties, for schools and teachers whose students do not perform well on standardized tests results in “teaching to the test,” thereby narrowing the curriculum, with more school days spent on testing and preparing for tests. Unintended consequences have been an increase in the rate of students dropping out, or forced transfers of students with poor performance to other schools; forced school closures; budget shortfalls because money is allocated to standardized tests and test administration. NCLB is now referred to as ESEA but it is the same policy, and it is inconsistent with the commendable objectives that were expressed in 1965. Can something be done to repair the ESEA, and thereby help students learn and improve the nation’s underperforming schools?

The Forum on Educational Accountability, or FEA, (<http://www.edaccountability.org>) is a grassroots movement that has joined together 152 national U.S. organizations. These include the National Science Teachers' Association (NSTA). FEA is committed to a comprehensive set of 14 recommendations, with the objective of changing the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA): *Empowering Schools and Improving Learning: A Joint Organizational Statement on the Federal Role in Public Schooling* (http://www.edaccountability.org/Empowering_Schools_Statement.html) This FEA statement, with its detailed recommendations, strengthens the fundamental intent of the ESEA: to improve schools and student learning and calls for a strong but appropriate role of the federal government. In a May 5, 2010 letter to the Members of the United States Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, the FEA provided a succinct overview of its Joint Organizational Statement. It stated, “*While FEA supports some components of the Department of Education's "Blueprint," we have serious concerns about several elements, such as continued support of a model that punishes schools and educators for poor test performance, rather than providing support to help them improve...FEA believes the Blueprint and Education Department guidelines for assessment consortia continue an overuse of testing, are weak on multiple measures, do not allow the use of local evidence for accountability, and are unclear as to whether growth measures must incorporate multiple measures. However, they do acknowledge some value of performance items and universal design principles.*”

Here are just a few of the FEA recommendations from the May 2010 letter concerning assessment that are supportive of inquiry science teaching:

- Require states to use multiple sources of evidence of various types (“multiple measures”) in evaluating schools.
- Support development of improved assessments, such as performance tasks and projects, which states can make available to educators and incorporate into large-scale assessments.
- Support development of state and local assessment systems that include classroom-based evidence as part of public reporting and accountability and for improving teaching and learning.
- Reduce the amount of mandated testing, e.g., returning to requirements in the 1994 federal law (once each in elementary, middle and high schools), thus aligning the U.S. with the practices of most nations, which find that fewer but better assessments produce superior results.”

If you are interested in viewing all of the recommendations from the May 2010 letter to the Senate, go to <http://www.edaccountability.org/Legislative.html> and select link “FEA's complete recommendations, submitted to the Senate HELP committee”

Strong support for inquiry-based teaching of science is apparent in this brief look at a few recommendations concerning assessment. If I have piqued your interest as a

science educator, teacher, parent or student, you should examine all of the FEA recommendations in the Joint Organizational Statement. Click on the web sites shown above. The work has been done, the recommendations made. Now these recommendations need to be implemented. This is the time to become involved. Together, we can prevail, because it is now recognized that standardized high-stakes testing is harmful to education in the public schools of the United States.

A decade ago Leslie Upson, James Barufaldi and I published “*No time for Venus Flytraps: Effects of End of Course Testing on Biology Curriculum in Two States*”

<http://ejse.southwestern.edu/article/viewArticle/7702>, in which we examined the effects of end-of-course-testing on biology curricula in two states: Texas and North Carolina, as perceived by teachers. One North Carolina teacher said, “*I could spend more time talking about plants and animals and odd little Venus Flytraps that the kids always want to talk about. We don't ever have time to talk about Venus Flytraps now because we're trying to feed all of this other information to them (to prepare them for the end-of-course standardized test).*” Venus Flytraps are rare except in marshes or bogs of North and South Carolina, their natural habitat. As we stated in that decade-old paper, “*Students’ questions about the biology of things living near them, such as the native North Carolina Venus Flytraps, have had to be put aside.*”

Let’s make time for those Venus Flytraps.