

Computer based curriculum....no internet...what's the fuss about?

Younger children should receive extensive assignments involving use of personal computers, insists Superintendent of Schools Dr. Marcia Lyles, though a teacher working in the classroom with them every day contends the district should not until it significantly improves certain working conditions for teachers and their pupils.

Diane MacKay urged a go-slow approach on online educational mandates for the three lowest grades until the district provides its instructors more resources, including sound computer training and a technological infrastructure guaranteeing regular Net access.

At the board of education's Oct. 20 meeting, Lyles rejected the veteran 15-year Second Grade teacher MacKay's contention that children from Kindergarten to Grade 2 should not be subjected to trying to master so much testing online under present district conditions.

Adding to their stress, claimed MacKay, is mandating that the children tackle what she described as more advanced topics they are not immediately prepared to grapple with, particularly so early in the school year.

In addressing the board, the Nicolas Copernicus PS #25 School teacher further complained that her efforts are complicated by the fact that there are not enough computers to assure all children can master certain required tasks in line with her preferred schedule for delivering classroom instruction.

MacKay said that situation is further complicated by frequent disruptions to Internet access, given computer breakdowns.

"I totally find it hard to believe it is only October," said MacKay, "and if I feel that way, it's because I really cannot fathom the stress our children are feeling."

MacKay praised a state decision to eliminate mandatory "high-stakes testing" for children as young as her grade level, or earlier, to help better "prepare them to learn the foundation to get to the next (grade) level."

Yet she contended that Lyles has still locally burdened teachers - and pressured children - in the lowest grades with tasks only the district is mandating, including administering too-frequent online diagnostic tests.

She claimed this reduces the time the teachers have to do what they are trained to do best - deliver children the required instruction needed in acquiring knowledge essential for promotion.

MacKay said it is not fair that Lyles require putting "five, six, and seven-year-olds in front of computer screens and have them take not one, not two, not three, not four, not five - but six, six online reading and writing diagnostic tests - three and three - two of which, depending on who you listen to, needed to be done by Sept. 30, or the week of."

The teacher also objected to "clocking" these younger children, including special education students and English Language Learners traditionally requiring more specialized attention, on computers "which are limited (in number)," while expecting them "to read these stories" and solve complex math problems "just so they become a data statistic."

Yet Lyles responded that the purpose of the newer local exams is to test the extent of the younger

pupils' knowledge and problem-solving abilities at an early age to see if they can aim higher, while providing the district useful information in developing academic programs.

"We do not have 'high-stakes testing' in Grade 2," she said, while responding to public comments that evening. "We do have diagnostic testing. Part of the reason we have diagnostic testing is so we can better serve the students and we can identify their strengths and we can identify their challenges."

Indeed, the school district's Strategic Plan for 2014-17, makes clear teachers will spend a good deal of their work time serving as data collectors for Common Core research, in addition to performing their most vital and traditional role - teaching children.

Point Two of the plan's five-point "Goals & Objectives Summary," states that the district "will drive our academic achievement using data to inform instructional practices."

And under principles of New Jersey's Common Core State Standards, championed by local superintendents such as Lyles, districts are encouraged to begin teaching what were previously considered more complicated subjects for children in the lowest grades, even topics such as Algebra.

According to Common Core's national website, www.corestandards.org, 42 of 50 states have voluntarily adopted the organization's recommendations for mathematics and English language arts/literacy. Enacted in New Jersey in 2010 by the state board of education, they claim to promote tougher academic standards to keep the United States competitive with other school systems globally.

Beginning in the Third Grade and through Grade 11, students are tested using Common Core principles on the exam titled, "Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)."

Thus, teachers in the lowest grades, such as MacKay, are expected in the course of the school day to help children prepare for tackling "high-stakes" tests such as PARCC, upon reaching Grade 3.

This, in addition to their having to implement the six diagnostic tests, and traditional lesson plans and assignments in gearing pupils for promotion.

In New Jersey, passing PARCC is not currently required for promoting students.

In terms of their PARCC mandates alone, McKay said Second Grade teachers must endure a "never-ending rigor to prepare (children) to take the PARCC exam."

On its website, the national Common Core organization insists the PARCC-tested standards Lyles supports are "aligned with college and career expectations, based on rigorous content and the application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills and informed by other top-performing countries to prepare all students for success in our global economy and society."

According to current "New Jersey Learning Standards for Mathematics," updated every five years and put forth in a report by coordinator Deidre Richardson for the state Department of Education, the section, "Intent and Spirit of the Mathematics Standards," states, "For more than a decade, research studies of mathematics education in high-performing countries have concluded that mathematics education in the United States must become substantially more focused and coherent in order to improve mathematics achievement in this country."

"New Jersey Learning Standards" for English language arts/literacy, similarly based on Common Core principles, have also been promulgated. They are similarly revised every five years.

Lyles told the audience that, despite concerns over a lack of computer proficiency/literacy among many schoolchildren in their earliest years (K-2) - that could impact the results - any lacking such skills should still be exposed to using the technology upon taking the district-mandated online diagnostic tests.

For Third Grade onward, students must take all PARCC tests online.

"This (computer use in schools) is a fact of life," she said. "We do not want students to be at a loss to have access to technology. We have instituted quite an effort to make sure the students have access and are ready, and we will work with the school community if there are additional needs."

But if it is going to burden teachers and students with these newer online requirements, plus PARCC, MacKay pleaded with the district to significantly improve its online testing mandates on a number of fronts.

"We're going to need computer teachers in this district," MacKay told the board, given "we expect the (younger) children to do so much" on computers when they may not be fully prepared to do so.

"Some days, it is a guessing game to find out if the Internet will even work," she said. "Please, if you are going to base most of the day on computers and computer-based activities, have a reliable Internet."

MacKay recalled one instance where, in implementing a battery of diagnostic tests, it took her far longer to complete the testing than should be typical given a lack of resources - including dependable Internet access.

"At least three times, in administering ADAM (Adaptive, Diagnostic Assessment of Mathematics) and DORA (Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment), the Internet went down for me," she complained. "The 27 second graders were as frustrated as I, in having to share these computers and computer labs, and it took them several days to complete these tests."

Further, MacKay said, "In my school, we have four second-grade classes with 26 to 27 students. Accommodating them on a computer is not easy."

Lyles, who did not address MacKay's concerns over an alleged lack of computers - and computer teachers - assured the district is committed to maintaining Internet reliability, even as the teacher claimed there is now none, based on first-hand experiences that have adversely impacted her classroom.

Lyles implied teachers backed up by such breakdowns will just have to continue trying to work through them during class time, while the district keeps attempting to work any cyber bugs out.

"We continue to update our Internet (access) and our Wi-Fi and we understand how frustrating it is when the Internet is down," the superintendent said. "This is what we will continue to do."

By Chris Neidenberg