

Two Chatham schools honored

A dubious distinction?

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THE CHATHAMS - The School District of the Chathams can add one more honor to a growing list of citations for excellence, but this particular honor has Superintendent James O'Neill answering the recognition in an unorthodox manner.

The grades 7-8 Chatham Middle School and the grades 4-5 Lafayette Avenue School are two of six Morris County schools named a 2007 Just for the Kids—New Jersey Benchmark School by the Business Coalition for Educational Excellence (BCEE) at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce (NJCC).

The award is given for outstanding standardized test scores on the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA), and the state's Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (ASK) tests.

"I am always proud of our students and the high standard of achievement that they have established at multiple levels by multiple measures. The achievement of our students at Lafayette and the middle school is reflective of talented students responding to talented teachers and supported by parents, who hold education as a common value in our community," said O'Neill.

"Having said that I would point out that I have very little confidence that state tests accurately measure the skills students need to be successful in college and the work place. I think well intentioned people and groups like the Business Coalition for Educational Excellence do a disservice to education when they reduce it to the winning score in an athletic event. Education is complex and cannot be judged successful by a single metric."

One Of 73

Six Morris County schools along with 67 other schools statewide were honored. Morris County schools included, excepting the two Chatham schools, Madison High School, Frelinghuysen Middle School in Morris Township, Pearl R. Miller Middle School in Kinnelon and West Morris Mendham High School.

"The Just for the Kids—New Jersey Benchmark Schools should make everyone proud of what is possible in great educational environments," said Dana Egreczky, president, BCEE. "We hope these schools will stand as role models for others around the state. We owe our young people the best chance for a rewarding future."

The National Education Foundation has said that standardized testing is only one piece of the puzzle, however, debunking the notion that standardized tests measure

intelligence.

The foundation claims on its Web site that many states have increasingly used standardized testing as the only criteria for student progress, student excellence or whether the school district is living up to the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, an act that heavily focuses on standardized testing. The act was designed to increase federal spending on education, as well as increase federal authority over public education.

The NEA insists that any kind of standardized testing is merely one factor in determining a student's progress, intelligence or his or her final outcome within society.

According to the NEA, "standardized tests can measure only certain kinds of student learning - and can't give a complete picture of what an individual child needs. Comparing standardized test scores across schools, districts and states doesn't take into account important differences in school funding or parent and community support to help students succeed."

And O'Neill agreed.

"Standardized tests seldom if ever measure skills, they measure knowledge or recall. We know that communication skills such as talking and listening, as well as working cooperatively in a group - not to mention honesty, decency and creativity - are keys to success but since we are not skilled at measuring them we don't evaluate those skills and thereby pretend they are not important."

He also pointed out that children learn at different rates and at different chronological ages.

Lifelong Process

Education is a lifelong journey, which cannot be measured with a number two pencil scoring black dots on multiple-choice blanks a, b, c, d or none of the above.

"Education is not a baseball game," he said. "The obsession our society has with testing, nurtured by the No Child Left Behind legislation has only been successful by enhancing the profit line of testing companies across the nation. I believe that school districts like Chatham face the daunting task of continuing to perform well by standardized measures while we actually go ahead and do what we know is developmentally appropriate and at the same time challenging for children at different ages."

The BCEE at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce said it is committed to ensuring that all students achieve at high academic levels, become productive citizens, and are well prepared to succeed in the workplace.