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Where Klein Is Right

suggests the schools chancellor is being undermined by his own people

Andrew Wolf awolf@nysun.com

The schools chancellor, Joel Klein, is being buried alive on the testing issue, a matter he and I agree on.

In a wire to principals Wednesday, now widely distributed on the Internet by friend and foe alike, Mr. Klein correctly suggested that "our third graders were treated badly by the anti-test 'activists' who obtained and shared the test with the media or spread misinformation about it."

The chancellor is absolutely right. Objective testing is the only way we can evaluate the progress of individual students and, by extension, their teachers, their schools, and even Mr. Klein himself.

Back in October, when testifying before the Assembly and Senate education committees in Albany, Mr. Klein paraphrased a column of mine written three weeks before.

What I said back then is just as true today. "Winston Churchill once observed, 'Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried from time to time.' Similarly, the use of objective testing devices is the worst form of student assessment — except for all the other devices."

Mr. Klein also agreed with my advocacy of "value-added testing," which measures gains in performance of individual children from year-to-year, a more useful yardstick than comparing this year's fourth grade with last year's.

Accelerating a switchover to this form of assessment would be the best way that a business model could be applied to education. Mr. Klein should be applauded for embracing it.

Clearly, the chancellor is annoyed that those who oppose testing seem to sing the sirens' song when it comes to luring the press.

Just as Mayor Bloomberg promised us "back-to-basics," but actually gave us a "progressive" pedagogy, Mr. Klein grumbles about the anti-testing crowd, although he has empowered them at every level in his department.

Advocates of whole language, constructivist math and bilingual education, the programs at the center of the approach put in place by Mr. Klein's departed deputy chancellor for teaching and learning, Diana Lam, generally oppose "high-stakes" tests.

That is because the results of that testing reflects badly on their programs. The mere mention of "scientifically validated" programs elicits howls of protest from them.

The anti-testing fervor is especially prevalent in the small high school movement that is at the center of Mr. Klein's strategy for saving the high schools. These folks are no fools.

They understand that the greatest enemy to their philosophy is forcing these schools to conform to the same standards as the conventional schools.

Mr. Klein was justifiably proud of the high attendance rate on the days the tests were administered. This came in the face of efforts by a group based in the Bronx, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, which urged parents to keep their children home.

Is Mr. Klein aware that the president of the group that he may have seen leading the protests on television, Ronn Jordan, was until recently working as a community organizer for a Department of Education contractor, LINC Inc.?

This firm hired Mr. Jordan to coordinate the "organizing" of parents to "support literacy" on behalf of the old District 10, which is now part of Region 1, the same neighborhoods in which his organization, an Acorn affiliate, is active.

In his wire to principals, Mr. Klein complained about the group Time Out From Testing. He wondered how they got copies of last week's tests, and demands an investigation

Doesn't he realize that the group's co-chairwoman, Ann Cook, is also the director of the Urban Academy High School, a Department of Education public school situated in the old Julia Richman High School on the Upper East Side?

If Mr. Klein wants to learn about his opponents, he could check out the school's Web site, which includes a long diatribe against testing at www.urbanacademy.org/learn/urbanstand.html.

If that is too much typing, there is a link on his own Department of Education Web site.

Maybe even more convenient would be for Mr. Klein to dash over to the desk of one of acting Deputy Chancellor Carmen Fariña's top aides, Eric Nadelstern. He runs the office of School Improvement, a position just one step below that of the deputy chancellor.

In his career in the Department of Education, Mr. Nadelstern has been a frequent, vocal spokesperson for those opposed to testing.

He was the principal of the International School in Queens, which he led out of the old Board of Education to become a charter school in the hope that this would relieve his students of the "burden" of having to take Regents exams.

The Christian Science Monitor in February 2000 reported that Mr. Nadelstern felt that having to prepare for Regents exams would "interfere" with the school's curriculum.

State Education Commissioner Richard Mills felt differently and ordered him to administer the exams or the school would be closed, an action that led to a group of these schools, including Mr. Nadelstern's, taking Mr. Mills to court, unsuccessfully, as it turned out.

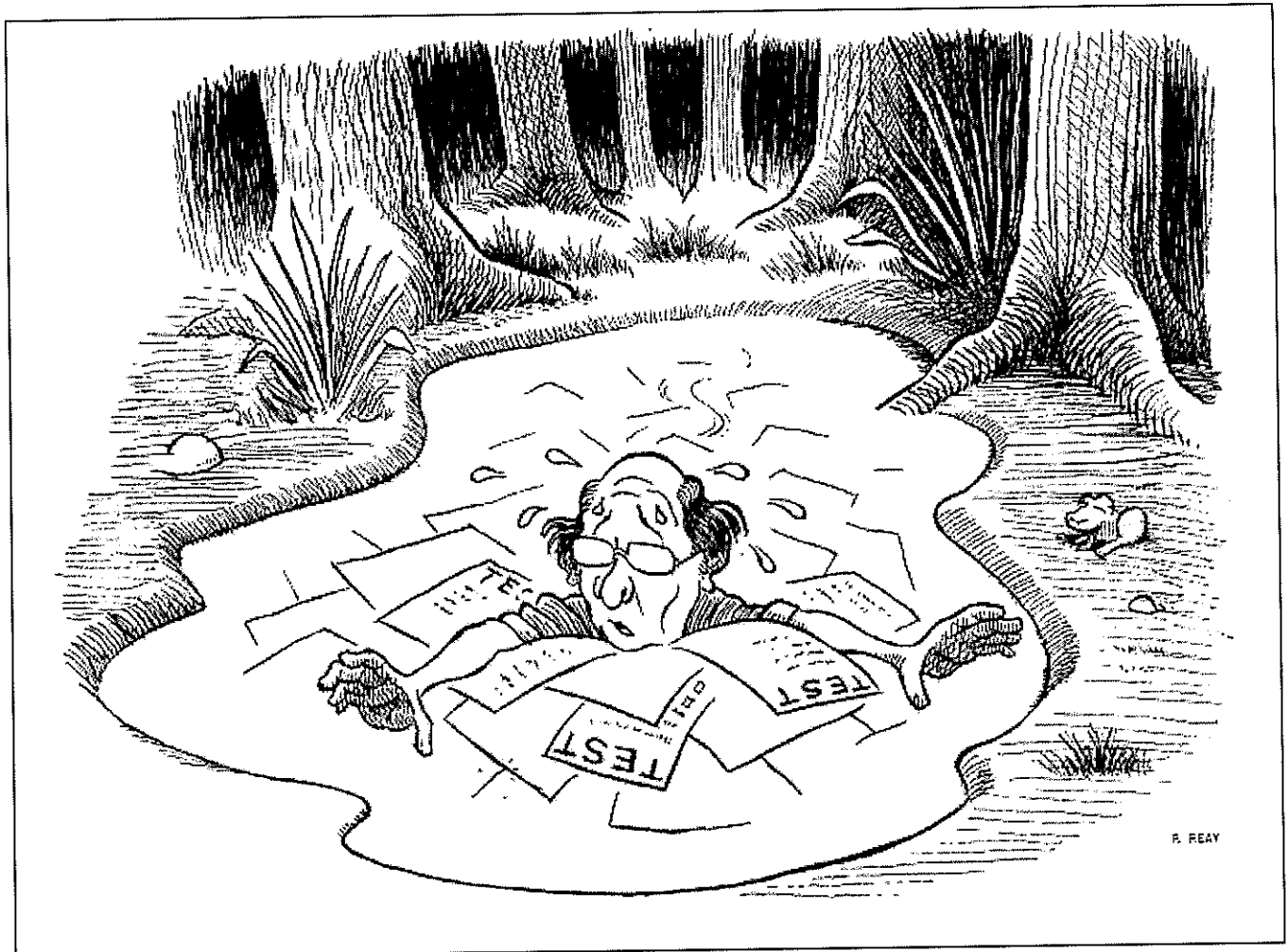
As a result, Mr. Nadelstern seemed to lose his enthusiasm for the charter movement and led his school back into the Board of Education and their more tolerant approach to his anti-testing philosophy.

In a letter to the New YorkTimes, Mr. Nadelstern wrote, "Replacing the joy of learning with test anxiety simply hastens the premature end of childhood." I disagree.

The joy of learning and the challenge of testing need not be mutually exclusive. The role of the school is to provide the transition from the innocence of childhood to the responsibilities of adulthood.

Mr. Klein seems to understand this, and I am not trying to undermine him but help him when I point out that he has inadvertently nurtured philosophies and personnel diametrically opposed to these core beliefs.

I hope the testing episode will make the chancellor a tougher and wiser man.



R. REAY