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Thanks, But...

What School-Raters Don't Get

By Marta Donahoe

This school year folks were so happy to congratulate Clark Montessori Junior and Senior High on our Bronze Medal from the US News and World Report.

Sally Warner, my friend, previous Clark parent and former Cincinnati school board member, stays up on every detail in the education world. She called me with the news.

“Yeah, that’s great,” I told her. But really, I was thinking, “What’s up with the best high school in the country getting a Bronze?”

That night I looked up the info on the ranking formula. The first two steps:

- ensure that the schools serve all their students well
- that the population within a school of economically disadvantaged students perform better than their statistical expectations.

Why wouldn't students who attend schools in which there is an entrance exam be expected to do better than their statistical counterparts? How can that be a measure of a high-functioning school when those students were already doing better before they even got close to the school? I would expect any school with students who test-in to qualify for the Olympics of High Schools because they are a school of good test-takers, even though this highly prized aspect has nothing to do with success and happiness in the real world. There is no correlation between high SAT scores and success in college.

Teachers at Clark are proud that all of our students—rich and poor—tend to perform better than their statistical expectations—because we set up an infrastructure for our students (with the help of the parents) to be successful, hardworking and deeply thoughtful.

The third step in the ranking was:

- college readiness performance.

That meant they only used data from Advanced Placement courses. This assumes that AP is the best way—and from the looks of the study, the only way—to assess college readiness. AP Courses are rigorous, content-driven, and rely heavily on memorization. Those are all fine things. Rigor means that students must work hard. Good. And who would argue with content? All high school courses need to have plenty of content. And I do think it is good for all of us to do memory work. Goodness knows, at 56, I should probably do more of it.

However, AP courses should be only one small way in which those three aspects are addressed (see <http://excellencewithoutap.org>).

Any great high school teacher knows that the best, hardest, most valuable courses in a school are the courses that require the greatest skill and creativity on the part of the teacher. AP courses are fast-paced to cover lots of content and therefore do not allow the time for teaching in depth, for calling on the critical thinking of every student, for wrangling with ideas and provocative issues that create the kind of soulful citizenry we are nurturing at Clark. Teachers will prepare Clark students to sit for AP exams in their core subject areas by having students attend separate tutorials to go over extra assignments if the students choose to, but Clark teachers are not willing to sacrifice the inspiring qualities of their honors level courses for the AP.

College readiness is of paramount importance to us at Clark.

That's why all of our courses are honors level, which means that when teachers plan their coursework, they have the opportunity to work with depth in the subject matter and have some flexibility to respond to students' interest and excitement in the topics being addressed.

For Clarkies, college-readiness is not something you test out of, or gain, by taking an Advanced Placement test. College-readiness takes into account Montessori's

observations that the chief symptom of adolescence is a state of expectation, a tendency toward creative work and a need for strengthening self-confidence.

For us, it involves all 15 years of a Montessori education, guiding our students to be good, hard workers, thoughtful citizens, kind community members, and inspired and hopeful young adults who interact respectfully and skillfully with persons of all ages and backgrounds as they negotiate their way to college and the rest of the world around them.

By the way, SAT and AP are both products of the College Board. College Board sounds like an objective group of selfless volunteers who work for the betterment of society. In fact, the College Board is a business, like Proctor and Gamble. They make a living by creating a need for their exams and courses. They have done a very good job of that.

I'm not sorry we got a Bronze award. I just think that a society invested in our children must be vigilant in order to not be duped into believing what has been marketed to us.

As a mini-society of Montessorians, we are doing better, don't you think?

Doing better means that we enter a process of discernment when it comes to status, things we "need," tests we pass, awards we receive. It is the only thing that can move us toward a more compassionate country and sustainable world.

We must strive to understand that every one of us can do better when we believe in the power of everyone doing better. William Ayers says it this way: "Engagement, thoughtfulness, connectedness, valuing youngsters as three-dimensional beings with their own hopes, dreams and capacities to build upon—these are the basics in teaching toward democracy and justice and care."

The fact that so many folks are willing to choose a Montessori education for their children gives me hope for the future. Montessori called for all of us to embody the notion that our children are the heirs to a progression of the human spirit. If Montessori students and parents and teachers can embrace that idea, we won't be fooled. We will continue to do great work.