

A View from the Principal's Office

March 6, 2020

Partnering with all learners

As the calendar rolls to March, I am reminded of the many seasons that we are about to experience. In Vermont, we welcome spring, mud season, sugaring season, and, in schools, standardized testing season. During the next weeks to months, our students will be engaging in a range of standardized tests and I would like to use this forum to share information about them and to try to explain the value of these assessments.

I met with our entire 10th grade last Wednesday and shared with them the process for taking a PSAT on March 11. A number of years ago, Hartford High School committed to providing, at no charge to 10th grade students, a PSAT during the school day. We also chose to provide an SAT at no charge during the school day in the spring for all students in grade 11. These decisions were made for many reasons, including:

- Our deep belief that we are partnering with all learners and we know that cost or convenience is a barrier for some to taking these tests.
- We understand that some students who choose not to take the tests end up regretting this decision later in their lives
- We also know that there is evidence that taking the tests increases the odds that a student will apply to college

- We had become aware that some of our students were not taking the local assessments seriously; our sense was that PSAT and SATs, given their impact, would be approached with an “I will do my best” mentality.

As is often the case, I heard some moans from our 10th graders and the question, “Do we have to do this?” Something interesting happened when I explained why we were providing these opportunities; some of our students came to understand that this is not another thing that the school is “doing to them.” Rather providing these tests is truly about equity and partnership; it is my hope that our students will all understand this.

The PSAT and SAT are interesting benchmarks for our students and school. Often an average score is used to compare schools from community to community. The danger in using data in this way is the assumptions inherent in doing so. Our hope in providing these opportunities to all is that our students will all do their best. In providing these tests to all we are affecting our school’s “average” score, we do so with full understanding that our commitment to equity in this way is the right thing to do.

I believe that, during the past few years, some have confused my attempts to provide a full picture of our students and school with my not caring about standardized assessments. I will admit that I view the data with a critical lens and that I often struggle with representing our students or school by a number. During the past few years, we have had many thoughtful conversations about our school with families who have taken the time to ask about us and who come and visit us. I have talked about the numbers honestly and shared that, I too, want greatness for our students represented in all forms, including their standardized test scores. My experience is that, for those who have taken the time to engage in this way, our story has resonated.

The spring will see testing of our ninth graders including: our local STAR assessment, the SBAC, and the FitnessGram test, our tenth graders will take the aforementioned PSAT and the STAR, eleventh graders will be provided the SAT and will also engage in the STAR and the Vermont Science Assessment. In addition, many of our students will take AP tests that they have been, and continue to, prepare for. All-in-all this represents a healthy level of assessments. In the past, I have used this venue to describe the many ways that we seek to personalize learning. As we partner with each and every student on their unique path through our school, these tests become increasingly important. The assessments provide a standard(s) against which all students are measured regardless of their chosen path through Hartford High School. We will continue to analyze the data that results from the assessments – we will look

through the dual lenses of individual students and our school to ensure that our partnership with all learners prepares all our students for their post-high school journeys.

Thanks for reading.

Nelson Fogg
Principal, Hartford High School