

Community and Lifestyles

State tests fail needs of mentally challenged

by John Dubosky

At the LifeLink apartment just off Vairo Boulevard in Patton Township, guests have cleaned their rooms and are setting a dinner table and preparing their evening meal. The apartment is designed to let high school-aged students transition to adulthood smoothly. Guests practice their decision-making and problem-solving skills.

"Are you hungry?" asks Aidan Morgan, the on-duty transition coach as Carlson Mbeseha multi-tasks at the stove. It's Thursday, which means Mbeseha is the cook. The menu for tonight is ravioli, green beans and Texas toast. The food could only be prepared after this week's apartment residents made menus for the week, budgeted the week's food money and went grocery shopping. Within 20 minutes the food had been prepared and the table was ready.

Mbeseha and his fellow guests Pat Carney and John Armington are all cognitively disabled and have learned the skills they present tonight because of what they have learned through Individualized Education Program-based (IEP) educational standards applied to the State College Area School District and elsewhere in Pennsylvania. Their skills are unique from those of reading, writing and arithmetic emphasized for their fellow students, although in the eyes of the Commonwealth, they may as well have stayed home on test day. The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment, (PSSA), the standardized test they are forced to take in high school, measures nothing important to them.

As thousands of students in Centre County school districts walk into classes this year to take the PSSAs, teachers of students with cognitive disabilities once again face the challenge of submitting their students to frustrating and some say useless standardized testing.

Teachers and advocates of these special needs students say that standardized tests do nothing to measure the achievements of many of their students and have a negative effect on the students themselves.

"I think it's a false indicator of how our students do," said Gina McFalls, director of special education at Bellefonte Area High School. "They may be making progress in the classroom but they may not be growing by leaps and bounds to read at an 11th grade level. For example, they may at the end of

the year be reading at the 8th grade level—that's a year's worth of progress in reading, but that doesn't appear on the PSSA."

Yet the Commonwealth, which spent \$32.7 million on PSSA development, administration and scoring, seems oblivious to the challenges that severely disabled students face.

"There's no reason that a kid can't learn how to read, write and learn math... even if they learn at a different pace or learn in a different way," said Michael Race of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. "It's dismissive and arrogant to say these students can't learn. Those are disabilities that can be overcome with the right teaching."

Others interpret dissenting opinions about the PSSA as a fear of responsibility.

"It's clear some people don't like accountability," said U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in her speech at the Aspen Institute's National Education Summit. "These keepers of the status quo prefer inertia and obfuscation to reform... so it doesn't bother me if a few grown-ups are uncomfortable or second guess our efforts. The excuse that some students will drag down everyone else is worse than false; it's the soft bigotry of low expectations."

Centre County has 1,877 IEP students, not counting pre-school students, 840 of which are in SCASD alone, according to the Central Intermediate Unit # 10, a division of the Department of Education that serves Centre County's private and public schools. IEPs are developed for students with special needs, including physical and cognitive ones. The vast majority of these Centre County residents, (excluding about 2 percent who are considered too severely disabled to take the PSSA and instead take the Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment), will take or have taken the PSSA in grades three through eight and grade 11. Students in fifth, eighth and eleventh grades are assessed in writing, while students in fourth, eighth and eleventh grades are assessed in science in addition to math and reading assessments.

While some IEP students are not cognitively disabled, discerning between students with cognitive disabilities and those with physical disabilities is difficult to do on such a large scale since many of these students have multiple disabilities, and fall



Photo by John Dubosky
John Armington, left, and Carlton Mbeseha, far right, prepare dinner with the help of transition coach Aidan Morgan, center, at their LifeLink apartment on Vairo Boulevard.

under distinct classifications according to their primary disability, explained Sue Willis of the CIU#10.

In the 2006-07 school year, 11.8 percent of IEP eleventh graders reached proficient or advanced status in math. By comparison, 53.7 percent of all 11th grade students were either proficient or advanced in math, according to the Department of Education's Web site. Schools are rated based on such scores and risk losing funding, students and even the right to govern themselves if enough students don't show proficiency.

Students are identified by the Department of Education as performing at one of four levels: advanced, proficient, basic and below basic. The goal is for all students to be proficient or advanced. Taken last year by an estimated 1 million students, the PSSA is used to evaluate Pennsylvania schools' Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) toward the goal of 100 percent proficiency, as required under No Child Left Behind. Only reading and math tests count towards Pennsylvania's AYP.

When a school fails to achieve its AYP goal for two consecutive years, it is identified as in need of improvement. States and districts must provide resources and assistance in making meaningful changes that will improve performance. Then "an escalating set of consequences will be taken if a school continues to miss its AYP goals, up to and including a change in governance," according to a 2004 PDE press release.

But "proficient or advanced" in math at the 11th grade level is irrelevant to most students with severe cognitive disabilities, advocates say.

"That's like me saying to you, we're going to give you a test at the end of eleventh grade to test you in the fundamentals of astrophysics. And you're going to fail or not fail based on passing that test," explained Teri Lindner, special education teacher with State College High School. "The first thing you would say is 'But that's

see Tests, pg. 10

Community Help Centre turns junk to funk at thrift shop

by Anne Marie Toccket

Pembroke Childs excitedly describes her new outfit in colorful detail.

"It's a dark green chiffon top with a bow in the front," she said. "It's vaguely Indian in style, you know, with little mirrors all over it. I've never seen anything like it before. Then to go with the shirt, I have a black silk robe-like dress with a belt. It's sort of a jacket."

Estimated total cost of the outfit? About \$10.

Childs is a volunteer at DoubleTake, a new thrift shop on Fraser Street below Dunkin' Donuts. The store is the newest player in the repertoire of second-hand stores of the State College area. One factor sets it apart from its counterparts: It is actually the newest arm of the Community Help Centre, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide services, resources, education, training and information to Centre Countians in need.

The shop, which opened in early September, caters to a distinctly college-aged crowd and boasts itself as an

"upscale" thrift store that carries popular brand names and gently-used articles of clothing for sale between \$3 and \$12.

All proceeds from the store's sales go directly to the CHC, which uses it to fund its diverse set of programs, including helping to provide services to clients that do not qualify for government programs.

"It isn't our intention to compete with Goodwill or St. Vincent DePaul," said CHC Executive Director Tammy Gentzel. "We have our own thing going on and it's completely different."

One main difference DoubleTake claims from Goodwill is that all the proceeds from DoubleTake stay locally, whereas Goodwill's are funneled to a national organization. Another difference is that students rarely leave downtown to go to the other thrift stores, therefore making DoubleTake a natural choice for students on a shoestring budget. And DoubleTake washes all of its clothes before they hit the racks, something Goodwill's volume does

see DoubleTake, pg. 10



Photo by Doug Bauman

Pembroke Childs, a volunteer at the DoubleTake thrift store on Fraser Street, shows off a mannequin she brought to the store to display new arrivals. The store is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. - 8 p.m.

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At 86, Port Matilda's mayor won't look back

by Zac Taylor

Typical of most folks in their twilight years, Elvira "Vi" Duncan, 86, starts her day at a spry 6 a.m. She reads the daily paper and clips out any articles she finds particularly interesting. Duncan then goes about her day with a normal routine, maybe tending to some housework and always making sure to tape her favorite soap opera to replay later while she is enjoying her dinner. Duncan then retires to her bed early in the evening.

Not so typical of most senior citizens is the job Duncan performs for three days a week.

Duncan is the mayor of Port Matilda, a small town between State College and Philipsburg. Her spunky, fun-loving attitude translates well into Port Matilda's high post.

"She's pretty popular," John Myers, a resident of Port Matilda said when asked about the mayor's character. "For her age, I think it's remarkable, all the stuff that she does."

Duncan fell into the position by chance in 1999, when the previous mayor resigned her post two years into her four-year term. The Port Matilda Borough Council asked Duncan if she would serve as the interim mayor. Duncan, who at the time had recently become a widow, had reservations about taking such an important position. Eventually her will to serve won out, and she accepted the post.

Mayor Duncan has not looked back. Just like any public post, the mayor of Port Matilda is elected by the people. Since 1999, Duncan has won two reelection bids against what she considers stiff competition. Her experience gave her the edge in those races, Duncan said.

The mayor of Port Matilda is a volunteer position. Duncan's will to serve is motivated simply by her love of helping people.

"I like people. I like young people, I like middle-aged people, I like older people," Duncan said.

From 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. every Tuesday through Thursday, Duncan can be found in the Port Matilda Borough Office on 400 South High St, answering phone calls on the building's only phone line.

Besides answering phones, Duncan is responsible for enforcing ordinances, working with the state police, and local fire department. When the borough council votes on an ordinance, Duncan, as mayor, holds the power to break the vote in the case of a tie.

Duncan is also given the power to perform marriages, which, she said, she performs without charge.

"When I'm offered something, I tell them 'no,'" she said.

To date, Duncan has performed 18 marriages.

Despite Duncan's public post, and her technical title as an elected official, she does not consider herself a politician.

"I don't discuss politics or religion," Duncan said, adding that she doesn't consider her mayoral post a political position, just a job. Duncan said her primary goal is to help people, not jockey for political control.

David Lykens, a member of the Port Matilda Borough Council, shares a similar sentiment.

"We try to keep as few ordinances as possible," Lykens said.

Lykens expressed his distaste with big government and its tendency to overregulate the common people.



Photo by Suzan Erem

Elvira "Vi" Duncan, second from left, has been the mayor of Port Matilda since 1999.

"The fewer restrictions we have, the better off we will be," Lykens said.

Lykens had nothing but good things to say about Mayor Duncan.

"She actually cares about every single person, and I'm not just saying that," he said.

Lykens added that Mayor Duncan is the kind of person who would typically be featured in a movie.

"If you watch a Lifetime story about a little old lady that helps people, that's her," Lykens said.

The borough council meets on the third

Tuesday of every month in the Port Matilda Borough Building.

The cozy meeting room can seat 25 people, including council members at tables. Nearly all of them are full by the time the meeting starts, indicating that the people of Port Matilda care a great deal about what goes on in their town.

The meeting is laced with familiarity. More than one reference can be heard about a zoning issue involving "that area behind

see Mayor, pg. 10

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from Tests, pg. 7

not what we're expected to learn."

In other words, special measures for special needs.

The "escalating set of consequences" for schools that fail to meet NCLB testing standards includes losing students to charter schools when public schools fail to make AYP for more than two years. The vouchers used for this program and overwhelmingly accepted by cognitively apt students will cost the SCASD more than \$2.2 million this year, according to a 2008 *Voices* article, "Charter Schools Siphon Public Funds."

"NCLB puts so-called failing schools in a Catch 22. Need more money to do a better job? Sorry, instead we'll take money from you," said Barbara Miner in her 2004 article "Seed Money for Conservatives" in the education publication *Rethinking Schools*.

Some say these voucher programs may be used as a way to leave public schools with a high population of the most difficult

see Tests, pg. 11

from Mayor, pg. 9

the old Legion building," or the waterline "that runs near the old mill" that some in attendance attest was torn down before World War II.

An attentive Mayor Duncan presides over the council with an ever-present smile. Most in attendance admire their mayor's character.

"She's a people person, she likes to help you," said Ginny Woodring, one Port Matilda resident present at the meeting.

Mayor Duncan stands at the door and greets those who make it to the meetings on time with a handshake and a smile. For those who have never met Duncan, she provides a description of herself:

"I'll tell you I have snow white hair," Duncan said. In her self-deprecating way she jokes about her one meal a day, from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m.

Those who do not make it to the meetings on time find themselves deprived of the mayor's handshake but not her smile. Behind it, though, one detects a discerning gaze, one of a woman ever watchful over her post and her town.

from DoubleTake, pg. 8

not allow it to do.

Plato's Closet, another used clothing store, offers cash in exchange for used clothes, but caters to a different crowd.

"Plato's Closet doesn't take large sizes, and won't take Gap anymore because they no longer consider it a designer brand," said Gentzel.

The initial lot of DoubleTake's merchandise is actually overflow from the spring's annual Trash to Treasure sale, said Gentzel.

Childs is a Penn State employee who heard about the new store through a colleague and was eager to become involved. All store clerks are volunteers, and Childs works a two-hour shift on the weekend.

"I think the best part of DoubleTake is that all of the money goes right back into the community," she said. "Nothing is wasted."

Frequent shopper Kathleen Galligan agrees.

"This is a really unique initiative, and I am willing to pay a few dollars more than I would at Goodwill, since I know the money stays in the community," she said.

Another major advantage to the store is that it takes the guesswork out of thrift-store shopping, said Galligan.

"It's as though DoubleTake hands you all of the things in a five-minute trip that you would have spent hours hunting for on all the racks at Goodwill," she said.

DoubleTake caters to both men and women and has roughly equal space dedicated to each in its store.

Gentzel said she is pleased with the store's success so far and is eager for it to become more well-known.

"Right now we're breaking even, and we haven't even advertised yet," she said.

Despite the success of the project, Gentzel acknowledged that there will be growing pains ahead.

"One big obstacle is that we don't have a storage facility big enough to store the merchandise," she said.

She also said that DoubleTake plans to continue to tap the Trash to Treasure sale annually to keep its stock full and current.

The shop also takes trades and offers store credit of \$10 in exchange for 10 pieces of clothing.

A fresh batch of winter coats hit the racks in late November, most for under \$12.

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CLOSED MONDAYS

from Tests, pg. 10

students to teach. Their fears are confirmed by the study Students with Disabilities, a national study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education in 2000.

"Enrollment of students with more significant disabilities in charter schools is relatively rare, except in schools specifically designed for these students," the study states.

To deal with special education students left behind in public schools, at least four states (Arizona, Florida, Ohio and Utah) have developed voucher programs or "scholarships" for students with disabilities.

One such program is the McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program. The voucher program provided 17,300 Florida students with special needs the opportunity to attend a participating private school during the 2005-2006 school year. The McKay Scholarships Program also offers parents public school choice. A parent of a special needs student who is dissatisfied with the student's current school may choose to transfer the student to another public school, according to the Florida

Department of Education.

But many parents and administrators believe that privatization is the wrong path for improving education.

"The PSEA believes using taxpayer dollars to give parents vouchers to send their children to private schools does not benefit students, families or public schools," the Pennsylvania State Education Association states on its Web site. "Pennsylvania's education funding should be devoted to improving public schools, not subsidizing private schools." PSEA represents 185,000 Pennsylvania public school staff, teachers and retirees.

Aside from the public versus private issue is the desire to measure any student's progress. This system isn't doing that local experts say.

"The most important thing that the states want to know is if students are progressing and they're not finding that out for this particular subset of students," said Lindner, who works with LifeLink at Penn State. LifeLink teaches this group of students independent living skills. Lindner said her students learn how to count money, keep a budget and shop, among other skills.

"It's not a matter that we don't expect higher level math, it's about setting the out-

"Giving a student an unfair assessment to me is wrong; it's not fair."

--Pat Moore
State High Director of
Special Education

comes appropriately for the educational expectations set by the students IEP Team," she said. "Their educational goals are set by professionals and parents and the students themselves. Yes, evaluate them, but evaluate them on outcomes that are part of their educational program."

There is more to this testing than numbers and measurements. There's the toll it takes on the students.

"The effects that we have seen are more of a negative variety particularly when it comes to self esteem and self worth," said Pat Moore, director of special education at State College Area High School, and parent of Patrick Northup-Moore, a high school graduate with Down's Syndrome. "It's something we need to work with our students constantly on because they are in an environment that is not a strength for them in a lot of ways, and then we put before them an assessment that makes them feel worse about themselves. When my son was going through that situation, the question that I posed was, 'What is this going to tell us about his performance that we don't already know?' Giving a student an unfair assessment to me is wrong; it's not fair."

Teachers agree.

"I see them [students] getting angry and frustrated. It [the PSSA] points out what they don't know instead of what they do," said Jill Hetrick, State College Area High School learning support teacher.

"I think sometimes it's difficult for them and for their self esteem in that they're tak-

ing a test that they may feel they may not do well on from the outset," said McFalls.

Lindner agrees.

"I think that my students deserve the opportunity to show the gains they've made. Just out of dignity to each student, they should have the chance to show the state, the district- whoever needs the information- that they are growing, they are learning, and they are doing a good job," she said. "This subset of students does not have a way to do that. There are lots of ways to evaluate students with significant cognitive disabilities that would be meaningful."

A success story is Northup-Moore. He is 22 years old and currently works two jobs, one at the audio/visual department of the Penn Stater, and another at the Bryce Jordan Center in the Men's Basketball Department. He is able to do this by using time management and budgeting skills his father attributes to his education at SCASD.

Learning to live as independently as possible is one of the ways local experts evaluate students, and how students judge their own successes as well.

A well-balanced meal and clean living quarters at the LifeLink apartments are proof that these students can pass the tests of daily life in this community.

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LifeLink State College

Lifelink was created in the 1993-94 school year by the State College Area School District. Teri Lindner, who helped create Lifelink, was named Disney's 1999 Teacher of the Year.

Notable LifeLink accomplishments include students winning a recipe contest; meeting Paul Newman; and the program's feature on the front page of *USA Today*.

There are currently two LifeLink apartments in State College.

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