

DISTRICT 202 COMMUNITY COLUMN

By Dr. John Harper
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One of the real benefits of maturity is the ability to see the “Big Picture” more clearly.

As parents, we know that children, particularly teenagers, don’t often understand or care about much beyond what is happening right now, or what will directly and most immediately impact them. We see the same thing happen every day, as educators.

That is why District 202 is asking the parents and guardians of our 11th grade students to help our students understand the broader perspective on an important issue.

High school juniors will take the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) this month. The PSAE is the state’s standardized test for high school students. It combines state-developed assessments testing high school juniors’ progress in meeting the state learning standards, the entire ACT college entrance exam, and two ACT-developed career skills tests.

Most teenagers – and this is a function of their age, common to all generations – tend to care most about whatever will help them take their “next step” after high school, whether that be college, employment, the military or some other option.

By law, nearly all students must take the PSAE to graduate high school -- but they do not have to actually pass it to graduate, get into college, get a job after high school or enter the military. So some students do not take the test as seriously as they should, because they think it does not impact them in a meaningful way.

In the “Big Picture,” however, nothing could be further from the truth.

Both the state and federal governments use the PSAE to determine if schools are meeting learning expectations and making adequate yearly progress as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act. Schools that do not make AYP for several years face significant state and federal consequences. So this single test is perhaps one of the most important our students will take in their entire school career.

Our high schools are taking special steps to emphasize the importance of this test to our students and to encourage them to do their very best.

We continue to work to increase the rigor of our curriculum and improve the support given to students so that all of our students will be prepared to do well on high-stakes tests like the PSAE.

This year, juniors have received PSAE test preparation in most of their core academic classes. All district 202 high schools this year have offered an after-school ACT preparation course taught by our own teachers. Next year, we will offer a similar program during the school day.

In the weeks leading up to the PSAE administration, some staff members are wearing shirts with special messages on them promoting the PSAE. Fun events, like academic challenges between teachers and students, are being held.

Most importantly, we are asking parents and guardians to help their junior students see the “bigger picture” behind the PSAE. We’ve created and mailed a special flier for parents of juniors, in both English and Spanish, explaining the significance of this test and asking for their support.

Obviously, there is a lot of life beyond high school. But we cannot look past high school. The PSAE is important to our students, our schools, the school district, and our community.

Parents and educators working together can do just about anything worth doing. And helping our students do their very best on the PSAE is certainly a worthy project.

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