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Plate Tectonics in Teacher Education: Pressure, Crunching and Erupting

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The MN Dept of Education (MDE), the MN Board of Teaching (BOT) and the US Dept of Education (USDOE) are engaged in the process that geologists have named “plate tectonics.” The process forms new land, destroys existing land and showers the planet with volcanic matter. The teacher education world is experiencing pressure from the USDOE to have qualified teachers (their definition) in all schools, MDE is determined to comply, and the BOT is facilitating success in achieving that goal. In Minnesota, 98% of the core academic subject classes currently have an appropriately licensed teacher in the classroom (2004-2005 data).

So, how is the tectonic-type pressure being expressed? The BOT is an independent board charged with providing leadership for improvements in teacher education programs and assurance that the state has well-qualified, professional teachers. One of its tasks is the setting of cut-scores for licensing tests, the Praxis. The consequence of failing the test is that the aspiring teacher will not be licensed to teach. When meeting with the Minnesota Board of Teaching on May 12 the Assistant Commissioner of MDE told the 11 board members that they should attend to the goal of high standards by setting cut-scores high for aspiring teachers at the expense of “access.” The system of setting cut-scores is flawed, we were told. The BOT should not consider the impact that high test scores have on sub-groups, individuals of color.

And, what was created, what was destroyed and who got hurt? The majority of the Board of Teaching listened to the advice of MDE and voted to set the cut score for the Reading Licensure at 620. The score of 620 represents an increase of 50 points from the proposed score of 570 set a year ago during the piloting of the test. The data from the vendor of the test in question, ETS, projects the impact for the cut score of 620 to be the following: for every 100 African Americans who take this test, 13 will pass; of 100 Asians who take this test, 9 will pass; of 100 Hispanics who take this test, 13 will pass; of 100 Native Americans who take this test, 37 will pass; and of 100 Whites who take this test, 27 will pass. The overall pass rate is 26%. The volcanic ash from this process is spewing out and hurting many practicing teachers.

The Praxis test developed and offered by ETS is now a part of our licensing system in Minnesota. Teachers seeking an additional teaching license must pass the Praxis subject matter test before they are issued their license. My fellow members of the BOT ignored the fact that the number of test takers was low (63), and they ignored the practice of modifying cut scores if only 100 test takers were in the data set to be considered, a recommendation of psychometric professionals.

There are more open positions for teachers of reading than there are licensed reading teachers in our state, and students are diligently completing their coursework in university classes for the Reading License. Beginning September 1, 2006, passing the Reading PRAXIS test is required to be licensed. According to ETS, fifty percent will fail and very few individuals of color will pass. The spheres/plates are moving and applying pressure and I believe this is not what Minnesota needs as we struggle with closing the achievement gap for our students and teachers of color.