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Time spent on standardized test preparation
outweighs value to students' future success
State's top teachers know what it takes to prepare students for success,
but lack of time and money keep them from teaching to that ideal

CHICAGO (August 18, 2009) – With the start of a new school year comes renewed debate over curriculum and standardized testing. What do Illinois' best teachers think should take priority in the classroom and are they able to teach to those ideals? A new survey from Golden Apple sought to answer those questions and found some surprising results.

The survey polled the members of the Golden Apple Academy, a community of expert educators, with more than 2,000 years of collective experience in the classroom, who have been recognized as winners of the Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching, a program that honors those who exemplify the highest standards and practices of the teaching profession.

The teachers polled universally agreed that an increased focus on standardized testing has not had a positive impact on either how they teach, how their students learn or the overall educational experience of their students, but the degree to which it has had a negative impact on those areas varies. On a scale of one to five, where five represents "Changed it for the negative," 56 percent of respondents chose the negative end of the spectrum (a four or a five) in regards to how the increased focus on standardized testing impacted the way they teach, 55 percent reported a negative impact on the way their students learn and 72 percent have seen a negative impact on the overall educational experiences of their students.

However, while a significant argument against the focus on standardized testing is that teachers can only teach to the test, a relatively small portion (10 percent) of Golden Apple Award-winning teachers polled spends more than 50 percent of classroom time preparing students for standardized tests. Nearly three quarters spend between 10 and 50 percent of their classroom time preparing students for standardized tests and 16 percent reported spending no time on standardized test prep at all.

At resource-poor schools the picture is slightly different. Eighteen percent of respondents who teach at schools of need reported that they spend more than 50 percent of classroom time preparing for standardized tests.

But regardless of the type of school, across the board teachers reported that they would prefer to spend less time on this area. One hundred percent of survey respondents reported they want to spend 50 percent or less of classroom time on standardized test prep, with 42 percent preferring not to spend class time on the test prep at all.

"While standardized tests may not literally take up the majority of classroom time, they certainly weigh heavily on the areas on which teachers are able to focus," explained Dom Belmonte, president and chief executive officer of Golden Apple. "As an Affiliate of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Golden Apple

seeks to be at the forefront of changing the way teachers relate to their students by focusing not just on what they need to do well on tests, but to succeed in the 21st century economy in general.”

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) is an advocacy organization that brings together the business community, education leaders, and policymakers to define a powerful vision for 21st century education to ensure every child's success as citizens and workers in the 21st century. In June, Illinois became a P21 Leadership State, the thirteenth state to commit to the goal of ensuring that their students learn world class content and world class skills. Golden Apple programs have a long history of incorporating many of the same skills and themes that make up the Framework for 21st Century Learning, and the current selection process for the Golden Apple Awards takes into consideration how well the teachers being reviewed reflect the components of the framework in their classrooms.

In fact, it was those skills, as defined by the P21 Framework that survey respondents, which include active and retired teachers who have been honored by Golden Apple over the 24-year history of the awards program, overwhelmingly deemed most important.

Taking the components of the Framework out of the context of P21 and presenting them simply as elements of education, no fewer than 81 percent of respondents deemed them Somewhat or Very Important to their students' future success. By contrast, Meeting or Exceeding Grade Level on Standardized Tests was deemed Very or Somewhat Important by only 44 percent of respondents, with only 4 percent identifying it as Very Important.

The skills identified most often as Very Important to students' success in the 21st century include Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (89 percent), Communication and Collaboration (84 percent), Creativity and Innovation (84 percent), Flexibility and Adaptability (78 percent) and Initiative and Self-Direction (78 percent).

“It's clear. Our Academy of Educators values skills that translate both in and out of the classroom,” said Belmonte. “These are life skills as much as learning skills and these decorated teachers appreciate their role in preparing their students for life after graduation.”

When asked to rate how well-prepared they feel to equip their students with the skills they deemed most important, however, only 21 percent feel very well equipped. What's keeping them from being able to provide their students what they need to succeed in the 21st century? Time and money, or more specifically, lack of it. Fifty-seven percent of respondents identified lack of financial resources as a factor keeping them from being better equipped to prepare their students for success in the 21st century, followed closely by school day and school year time constraints (53 percent). And in terms of what's missing most from today's classrooms, flexibility in curriculum/schedule and opportunities to foster creativity were selected most often, 67 and 65 percent of respectively.

About the Survey

The survey was conducted via email between July 30 and August 9, 2009, with a sample size of 102, nearly half of the members of the Golden Apple Academy of Educators.

About Golden Apple

Golden Apple began in 1985 with founders Mike and Pat Koldyke and a shared inspiration — to offer outstanding school teachers the level of recognition enjoyed by actors at the Academy Awards. Golden Apple's successful track record now spans more than 20 years. Integrated, innovative Golden Apple programs and resources enhance the quality, resiliency, and creativity of classroom teachers and improve teaching and learning throughout Illinois. Qualified, passionate educators — including Golden Apple Award-winners and finalists — lead a small staff of dedicated employees with functional and program expertise. A connected and committed board of directors oversees Golden Apple's strategic direction.

Together with a larger community of expert educators, the not-for-profit organization works to ensure that all Illinois children have the excellent teachers they deserve.

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