

Statement by Julie Woestehoff, executive director of Parents United for Responsible Education
Bubble Test Protest Press Conference
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Federal Plaza, Chicago

Schools tapped by Obama family reject national testing mania

*University of Chicago Laboratory School and the Sidwell Friends' School
focus on knowledge and learning, not tests*

PURE has joined this group of parents and teachers here in Federal Plaza, in between the offices of President-Elect Barack Obama and Secretary of Education nominee Arne Duncan, to help send a message about what really matters to parents in education, and about the change we need.

We're happy to say that we think the President-elect already gets it.

Looking at the schools Barack and Michelle Obama have selected for their children, we can tell that they strongly value schools with high-quality educational standards and practices.

In the University of Chicago Lab School, which the Obama children currently attend, and the Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D. C., which the children will attend when the family moves to the White House, Michelle and Barack Obama have selected schools of true excellence.

The Obamas want what every parent wants for their child, that is, a high-quality education that will provide them with their best opportunity for a bright future and a happy life.

We're not sure what was on the specific list of criteria the Obamas used for selecting these schools for their daughters. However, a look at the schools' web sites provides some idea based on similarities in what the schools say they offer and what they say they avoid.

What we found was that U of C Lab and Sidwell share an overarching mission to educate the whole child with a rich, well-rounded curriculum, and a rejection of the narrow, test-prep approach to education that so many of our public schools have been forced to adopt by the district, state and federal obsession with raising test scores.

Rich, well-rounded experience

Here's what's offered by the schools the Obamas selected, according to their web sites:

- ▶ *About Sidwell*: "We offer students a rich and rigorous interdisciplinary curriculum designed to stimulate creative inquiry, intellectual achievement and independent thinking in a world increasingly without borders.... We cultivate in all members of our community high personal expectations and integrity, respect for consensus, and an understanding of how diversity enriches us, why stewardship of the natural world matters and why service to others enhances life. Above all, we seek to be a school that nurtures a genuine love of learning and teaches students 'to let their lives speak.'" (http://www.sidwell.edu/about_sfs/philosophy.asp)
- ▶ *About U of C Lab*: "Our mission is focused on students. We are more than just test scores and college admissions statistics. We are about learning well and complementing the work of one of the world's premier institutions of higher learning, the University of Chicago. Our academic program is rigorous, but we are as interested in the development of character as we are in scholastic achievement.... In short, we are among the leading independent schools in the nation and pride ourselves on creating conditions for a purposeful search for knowledge and truth." (Statement by Director David McGill, U of C Lab "About" page, <http://www.ucls.uchicago.edu/about/>)

That would appeal to any parent!

Lab and Sidwell reject test-prep focus

As is clear in the above quote from the Lab school principal, these highly-honored, internationally-renowned schools don't try to hide their distaste for standardized tests.

- ▶ *From the Sidwell College Counseling Test Guide*: "The school day is not an appropriate time for standardized test prep work."
(http://www.sidwell.edu/upper_school/collegecounseling_testguide.asp) Perhaps reflecting the school's pacifist Quaker heritage, the school's "Standardized Test Guide" explicitly opts out of the testing wars, but does reference the web site of FairTest, a well-known national organization that opposes the use of standardized tests.
- ▶ *From U of C Lab, 2003 Opening Day Message by David Magill, Director*: "Personal and political agendas are constantly challenging us, often making it difficult to work for the common good of all. Just **one of those challenges, but perhaps the most misguided one, is that somehow the testing of children will restore order, raise accountability, and quite simply raise the**

achievement level of American children. From my perspective, nothing could be farther from the truth. While quality standardized testing has a diagnostic and prescriptive piece in our schools, it was never designed to be the primary determinant if a school should survive or not. I am equally disturbed at how the media use these data to rank schools and, by so doing, fool the average person into believing that quality is determined by test scores alone.” (U of C Lab, <http://www.ucls.uchicago.edu/about/message/openingday.shtml>)

Hope for the average family?

Of course, most of us cannot afford the tuition at either Sidwell or the Lab school, but with a leader in the White House who understands what a good education is all about – and what it is not about – we have hope that the same high-quality education the President values will become the model for what every child receives here in Chicago and across the country.

We are somewhat concerned, then, that President-elect Obama has selected Chicago Public Schools’ Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan as his nominee for Secretary of Education. Presidential candidate Obama spoke out against the misuse and overuse of standardized tests. For seven years, Arne Duncan has led a school system that has been a prime example of overemphasis on tests. We hope for the best, however, and expect that Mr. Duncan will support President Obama’s vision and lead the revision of the No Child Left Behind Act to reduce its reliance on bubble tests. We urge swift action by President Obama to revise the No Child Left Behind Act and return it to its original purpose, as a blueprint for assuring the right of every child in the United States of America to an equal and excellent education.