

Mid-Del hosts discussion on state testing

By Traci Chapman
Contributing Writer

It's a high-stakes test issue and it was the subject of a statewide tour that stopped last week at Mid-Del School District.

Oklahoma Education Association Executive Director David DeVall brought the organization's "Common Sense Testing Tour" to the district, an effort to highlight the issues with high-stakes testing in Oklahoma. The March 12 Mid-Del stop was one of more than 20 such stops across the state in an effort to bring together administrators, teachers, parents and students for a conversation about the impact current testing has on everyone. DeVall said.

"It's not that we're against testing, we're against high-stakes testing, and it's hurting our education system — our teachers, our administrators, our future and, most importantly, our students," DeVall said.

Attended previously by district teachers and staff, the small gathering was a great opportunity to talk honestly about testing issues in Oklahoma, the executive director said. Rather than serving the purpose for which it's meant — a diagnostic tool for not only students, but also their teachers and school — it has had a negative impact on every aspect of education, he said.

"From the problems with administering the tests themselves to the attempts to minimize those results and more, there is just no positive influence this system has on our education system in Oklahoma," DeVall said.

Mid-Del educators present at the meeting agreed,

following a video presentation laying out what OEA officials contend are state testing problems. Audience members talked about their own personal issues with testing. Among those was Sean Trent, Mid-Del executive director of student assessment and STEM, who talked about the fact administrators and teachers receive test results near the end of summer break or sometimes the beginning of the next school year, months after students took the test. That meant officials were looking at scores for students who had moved on to the next grade or, perhaps, the next school.

"If we were looking at a test for our own health or something of that nature, we wouldn't wait four to five months to get the results, we wouldn't be getting the results after the fact," Trent said. "It's old data — it's not much, if any, use by the time we receive it."

High-stakes testing has forced a "tooth to the test" culture on educators, as well as students, who all suffer from the pressure of test results, those attending the presentation said. Students spend years about the imperfections of a bad score, while teachers and school district officials know their performance is being measured by a one-time test, they said.

"I had a gifted student who froze — she didn't know what a single word meant and she started to cry; it was horrible," teacher Jamie Fugate said. "This was a bright, gifted student who knew the material and who got limited knowledge because of a single word."

"Look at all of these tests — things like the



Photo by Traci Chapman

David DeVall, Oklahoma Education Association Executive Director, speaks to school staff and community members about state testing for students last Thursday at the Mid-Del School administration building. The meeting was part of the organization's "Common Sense Testing Tour."

ACT, but examinations, all of those — and every one of them allows for mistakes, yet the state of Oklahoma's high-stakes tests don't," DeVall said. "We know what it does to you and your students when a single test has so much riding on it."

For some students and their teachers, however, the problem is even worse, attendees said. Special education students, some of whom have no verbal skills and face profound disabilities, are being measured on the same test as all other students, DeVall said. Then, there are the students who have other issues in their lives, things that could cause a skewed test result.

"Look at these kids in state custody — their lives are high stakes," teacher Aaron Baker said. "They only have so much to give, and everything is stacked into this."

"We're left holding a shell

of a child and trying to teach and help them," he said.

No matter the skill level or personal situation a child faces, there is no denying both the financial and emotion costs of high-stakes testing, DeVall and the others said. According to OEA's video presentation, more than \$16 million annually is spent on administration of high-stakes tests alone;

one school can be forced to administer 6,000 individual tests and take 18 days — or more — just for giving those tests. Then, there are the hiccups with the computerized exams themselves, he said.

"How many of you know students who have been impacted because they couldn't finish the test," DeVall said. "We've had reports of students who've been forced to restart a test over and over again, over multiple days, because the

system kept crashing."

Trent said that was something wildly seen in Mid-Del Schools. Administrators finally had to petition for one student to be excused from the exam — after the computer kicked him off the test "more times than we could count," over a several-day period.

"What do you think that does to a student, someone who prepares and gets geared up for a test," Trent said. "All of that investment, the amount of time he had to sit through the frustration — it was just a complete waste."

DeVall said the answer is to get state lawmakers to change the current system and stop high-stakes testing for good. That action

should include the flawed A-F report card system, adopted in 2011, because it focuses completely on student test scores, he said.

Attendees were encouraged to write personal notes to their legislators and to take part in the March 30 Oklahoma PTA "Brighter Future Rally" supported by the Oklahoma Education Coalition at the State Capitol.

Thousands of educators, students and parents are expected to rally at 12:30 that day to support teachers and changes to Oklahoma's education system, DeVall said.

"We're not against testing, we're against high-stakes testing," DeVall said. "Let's use testing as a diagnostic tool, not to drive instruction and not as a punishment for our students, our districts or our teachers because let's face it — simply is not working."

More information is available online at www.visiblehighstakes.com.

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