

Alan Seibert (*Salem Magazine*, Spring 2007)

### **SOLs are the Minimum**

Teaching is a noble profession. As state and federal agencies clash over ways to test students and the national political landscape ripples with debate over the pending reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), teachers in Salem remain focused on cultivating excellence in their classrooms every school day.

Standards are important. I am thankful that when I travel by air the pilot was held to high standards and demonstrated skill on proficiency tests before I boarded the plane.

Tests are important. I am thankful that when I am not feeling well my physician uses diagnostic test results to decide my treatment.

As important as standards and tests are, few would argue that it was the physician's check of my pulse that caused me to feel better or the pilot's test score that delivered me safely to my destination. Similarly, standardized tests are useful, but inherently limited, in the education of our children.

Salem City Schools have good test scores. Our schools are accredited by the Commonwealth, made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB, and for two consecutive years, the division has received national recognition for student achievement. Even so, our good scores are no more a full indicator of student success in Salem than a thermometer a full measure of my health.

SOLs are the *minimum* of what we teach and expect students to learn in Salem City Schools. This does not mean that we disregard the SOLs. On the contrary, we focus on the standards and strive to help students master them quickly so that we will have time to move beyond the minimum.

My middle child will enter kindergarten this fall. Like his older brother and a younger one to follow, I want them to master the English language, be skilled in mathematics, learn from history and experience wonder through science. I also want my children to learn to respect others and to discover beauty in art, music and theater; to experience the thrill of competition, the necessity of fair play and the fulfillment of giving back to the community and to those in need. I want them to learn other languages and appreciate other cultures while always being ready to ensure that our nation remains free.

As technology makes our world smaller and inexpensive overseas labor results in the outsourcing of a myriad of jobs, it will not be enough for our children to have the skills measured by standardized tests. Our students will need to be compassionate caregivers, innovative designers of new products, creative inventors of better systems, passionate advocates for improved business

methods and informed participants in our democracy. These skills, coupled with new technology, will allow our children to compete in a global economy from anywhere in the world, including Salem.

Standardized tests cannot accomplish this; only committed, competent, and compassionate people can. The school bus driver who teaches every student to say, "Good Morning," the sandlot coach who teaches that playing together and improving every game is more important than winning, the cafeteria worker who serves a hot meal with a warm smile, the specialist who helps students overcome challenges, the career and technical teacher who provides relevance for student learning, the church volunteer who lives her faith, and the moms and dads who entrust us with their precious children each day make this happen.

Salem's six schools make a profound contribution to individual lives each school day while equipping an entire generation to make our world a better place. Our community has a history of providing the support and resources that enable our schools to achieve excellence, not just meet minimum standards. Our entire city is strengthened as a result of this commitment. On behalf of nearly 4,000 students, I thank you.