Put learning first
Standards outdated

BY ROBERT MARANTO
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President Obama wouldn’t fire Gen. David Petraeus for jaywalking. Apple wouldn’t dock Steve Jobs for not wearing a tie and if BP actually had an engineer smart enough to plug the oil leak in less than 80 days, it wouldn’t punish him or her for using the wrong form to deploy the drilling platform.

So why did the Arkansas Department of Education put some of the best public schools in the state on a watch list for putting student needs ahead of bureaucratic box checking? Har-Ber High School is the gem of the well-regarded Springdale School District. Data calculated by Josh McGee, my colleague at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, ranks Har-Ber eighth out of 297 Arkansas public high schools in value added, the material learned by students from one year to the next. Yet Har-Ber faces sanctions for allowing a single teacher with probationary English accreditation to teach Mandarin as well.

The facts that 17 students wanted Mandarin, that the teacher was the only fluent in the language and that she is a good teacher don’t matter. Nor does it matter that under the three different, very complex pathways to certification the teacher and district had reason to believe that they were in compliance. A great public school faces embarrassment for showing initiative in serving its students.

No less than Gov. Mike Beebe spoke at the first ever high school graduation at the eight-year-old Knowledge is Power Program campus in Helena-West Helena. As he said in his May 28 radio address, KIPP “puts learning first, and its students are motivated to soak up all the wisdom and information they can. The results are stunning: Every member of KIPP/Delta’s class of 2010, once counted among the highest-risk youth in Arkansas, will attend college this fall.”

Eighty-six percent of KIPP students are low income, and 97 percent are African American.

Members of the first graduating class have earned scholarships to universities like Vanderbilt and the U.S. Naval Academy. KIPP ranks among the top 2 percent of Arkansas public schools in value added. So why does KIPP face state Education Department sanctions?

First, department rules state that public high schools must offer nine career-related courses. This makes sense for a large, traditional high school, but is an absurd waste of resources for a small, college-prep high school. Even so, to comply with the tive schools for failing to teach children, the real message comes through.

That’s no way to keep public trust in public education.

It’s time for the state Education Department to work with public school superintendents and public charter school leaders to reinvent the rules to put student learning first.

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