The Case Against Standardized Testing

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More than ever, K-12 public education in the United States is beholden to, and synonymous with, standardized testing. From teacher merit pay plans linked to test scores,[1] to school 'report cards' based on exam numbers under No Child Left Behind,[2] to high-stakes tests determining who walks and who waits,[3] policy makers display an abiding faith in the importance, meaning and authority of standardized tests.

But, is this faith justified? Is it borne out by research and academic studies? Corroborated by cognitive theory? Substantiated by best pedagogical practice? Supported by neuroscience? Confirmed by international comparisons? Does it create motivated lifetime learners? And, does it stand the ultimate test—successfully preparing students for active participation as citizens and workers in today's complex, multi-faceted society?

This paper examines these issues in detail, particularly from the perspective of English instructors, whose sacred domain, building literacy and critical analysis, demands that such questions be answered fully and fairly before handing over our prerogatives, and our curriculum, to those seeking radical change in how we teach.

It must be said at the outset: standardized testing has muscled its way onto the educational stage in very short order. In little more than a decade, the frequency and number of stan-

dardized tests has doubled and redoubled in response to public concern about the quality of high school graduates, and thus, the effectiveness of public schools. In 2005, 11 million exams were added in elementary and middle schools; another 11 million tests for high school science are expected to bring the national total to near 50 million by 2008, amid signs that the quality, reliability and validity of exams are eroding.[4] (Fairtest puts the total of all tests—including I.Q., screening and readiness at 100 million; that does not include the ACT or SAT college entrance exams.[5]) The rapidity of standardized testing's ascent means that few teachers are well-versed in its language, terms or accepted uses as most teachers' educational programs did not include such coursework.[6]

Ignorance, however, is not a defense; not in legal venues, nor should it be in education circles. It is my thesis that teachers' collective ignorance around standardized testing must change—and change quickly—if we are to preserve our autonomy and professional status as educators. The entire gestalt of the "accountability" movement holds that teachers are not to be trusted or believed when it comes to student learning. Even grades, acquired over the length of a semester are presumed suspect: subjective, inadequate measures which do not allow direct comparison across the domain in a cohort.[7]

For many outside critics of education, only a standard test can reveal the "truth" about what transpires in classrooms, and, thus, successful teaching is reduced to a single, narrow measure on a multiple choice instrument. Ultimately, such a system makes teaching the provision of defined information inputs—synonymous to a functionary responsible for conducting transactions on behalf of some distant monolith. And when the numbers rolling off the computer print-out appear unsatisfactory to those in authority? They will have their justification to take public education private[8], where due process, labor agreements and unions are not barriers to the prerogatives of management.

If that dystopic future alarms you as much as it does me, then I urge that you learn more about standardized testing (start by reading this article) and commit to sharing it with students,

parents and the larger community. At this point in education history, teachers are the last best hope for preserving not only the autonomy of local schools, but the very meaning and essence of American democracy.[9]

To be blunt: as of this writing, I am not impressed by the collective response by those whose very job it is to know better. Shame on us for allowing the train wreck of standardization to get this far down the track without raising a substantial ruckus, as in: *Wrong way! That approaching light is not a tunnel's end but the spear tip of a massive social and educational disaster!*

Defining Terms

We need to understand the language of standardized testing before confronting and critiquing its nature and assumptions.

What is a standardized test? An examination made up of uniform items which can be replicated across an entire domain of students, typically by asking short multiple choice questions which can be easily and cheaply scored by machine.

Validity. Does the exam accurately measure the kinds of skills and aptitudes it purports to? In other words, if we are trying to measure vocabulary skills, is that what we end up effectively measuring, or are we actually tracking something else, like reading skills or the level of advanced course work?

Reliability. Would the exam, if given again, yield analogous results from the same cohort? In other words, is the exam measuring a narrow band of knowledge that has been prepped for and will soon evaporate, or does a subsequent test yield similar scoring?

Transparency. Is the examination open to public scrutiny, debate and monitoring as to quality and accuracy? Or, does it remain a proprietary instrument of the corporation that created it and thus is unavailable?

Norm-referenced exams. Exams specifically designed to spread students out across a normal shaped curve. These instruments are field-tested to prove that they effectively identify high and low achieving students. In other words, psychometricians

(test makers) select questions knowing how many students, on average, will get each answer correct.

Criterion-referenced exams. Exams pegged to a specific domain of knowledge or skill. There is no attempt to arrange questions to produce a normal curve, only to meet the "criteria" of those designing the test. As a result, in a given cohort, any number of students could pass or fail depending on the match between what they know and can do and what is on the exam.

High stakes exams. Tests which decide a final outcome for students, yea or nay, in terms of passing a course, advancing to the next grade level or even graduating.[10]

High-Stakes Testing: The Poster Child of Failure

I am focusing here mainly on "high-stakes" exams since they are the most pernicious, least accurate and least defensible of standardized tests. (There are good uses for standardized tests: in the form of short, frequent measures that assist teachers in making "formative" decisions about pedagogy.[11] But, that isn't what is transpiring in K-12 education today.) The rationale for high-stakes exams is that by upping the ante and letting students know there will be serious consequences for failure, it will provoke a better effort, more scholarship and greater attention to the subject matter. Teachers, too, are thought stimulated by potential excessive "failures" and, thus, focus their efforts more effectively on what will be tested.

Yet, giving a "norm-referenced" exam and counting it for high-stakes is simply an exercise of shooting fish in a barrel, since the test has been designed precisely because it identifies a declining level of achievement across a cohort.[12] Before the test is even given, a good psychometrician knows how many students will and will not pass. Why exactly, would a state administer a norm-referenced "high stakes" exam, well aware of the pre-determined fail rate? A question that has fueled speculation that privatization ideologues want to use public school "failure" to wrest control of schools from the government.

So, the only defensible exam used for a high-stakes pur-

pose would have to be "criterion referenced",[13] meaning that as many students who know and understand the material could, in theory, successfully pass. Quality criterion-referenced exams are tied to state standards. However, to believe that every state has successfully meshed its standards with its exams or that every school and teacher teaches to state standards in similarly enlightened and effective ways is not credible. Further, to believe that one entity, a state board for example, can adequately, fairly and effectively delineate all the important elements of a subject like history or mathematics, then encapsulate those perfectly on one multiple choice exam, is similarly without credence.

Thus, in terms of validity, the best that can be said of high-stakes exams is that they measure effectiveness of instruction toward pre-selected material (again, selected by whom?) on one particular exam. And, in terms of reliability, since most schools and teachers focus relentlessly on the material just before the exam is given, it is likely that, a year later, if tested again, many students would not be as successful. This is why most thoughtful educators decry the "narrow" focus of testing: it measures a small domain of select material; one that, when prepped for, regularly distorts the depth, complexity and steadfastness of student ability.

But, putting all this aside, let's return to the central premise: student effort will increase when there is "more" riding on a test's outcome. Astoundingly, there is no research data showing that such "high-stakes" environments actually work to improve effort, achievement or scholarship. None.[14] Nor have long-standing college-entrance exams, like the SAT and ACT, shown any significant change in student achievement over the last decade.[15] In fact, in 2006, they experienced their biggest decline in 31 years.[16] Nor do international comparison exams like TIMMS[17] or national comparative tests like the NAEP[18] show much improvement amongst the body of American students. In other words, if the claim is that high stakes exams are somehow improving "student achievement", it is not showing up in numbers across class cohorts.

Moreover, a well known sociological principle, Camp-

bell's Law[19] applies directly to "high stakes" exams. Campbell's Law, states: "The greater the social consequence riding on an examination, the more likely it is that the exam will be manipulated or corrupted to outflank the social pressures surrounding it." Campbell's Law has proven true for centuries, starting with ancient Chinese civil service exams based on Confucianism. It has certainly proven to be true with high-stakes testing as David Berliner documents assiduously in his book on the standardized testing craze, *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*.[20] Campbell's Law, by itself, makes clear that high-stakes exams—far from producing "certainty" of educational excellence—are a set-up for schools to forego real learning in favor of the only thing the system truly values: producing an acceptable numerical appearance of learning.

So, despite all the rhetoric surrounding the need for "accountability" in public schools, the one operational strategy designed to demonstrate accountability has itself escaped accountability—at least in terms of having any kind of a research base to justify its widely accepted use. High stakes exams typically feature low validity, low reliability and a high likelihood of corruption. Further, when you factor in that these high-stakes exams, which have so much riding on them, are not generally available to the public or subject to the safeguards or oversight that you would expect from such a consequential event, it should set off alarms across the country.

Think about this: if a school or a teacher announced to the student body that there was going to be *one test* to determine who graduates, and that what was on that test, its scoring and methodology *could not be revealed*—in fact, anyone found to have revealed specific material on the test could be tried for felony theft—does anyone think that such a policy would survive the next school board meeting? Of course not.

And don't imagine there have not been errors in administering and scoring these exams—huge errors that have cost students diplomas, access to scholarships and even admission to college.[21] Such flaws turn up in the local press every year across the country. But, how are errors even discovered? So far,

only through the relentless pursuit of the truth by parents and a willingness to initiate court action. But, for poor families, when handed a score on official school stationary, with a young child standing nearby looking ashamed, what are the odds they will spend considerable time and money to contest it over the course of the next year?

Let me say this again because it is terribly important: *There are no large-scale, peer-reviewed academic studies that prove, or even suggest, that a high-stakes, standardized testing educational program improves learning, skill-development or achievement for students.* And, in fact, when you think about some of the best students and schools in this country—I am talking about the 10% of students in private schools—they do not, as a rule, employ high-stakes testing. And why not? Because they have a clear educational mission[22] in most cases, and understand that high-stakes standardized tests do not fundamentally move students closer to learning goals.

The academic motto of the Blake School in Minneapolis is: *Challenging the mind; engaging the heart*. And from their program description: *One of Blake's core values is love of learning. Every day, in every classroom our students embrace this value by actively engaging in the learning process*.[23] Here is the Mission Statement of St. Paul Academy and Summit School in Saint Paul: *In pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning, St. Paul Academy and Summit School educates a diverse and motivated group of young people for leadership and service, inspires in them an enduring love of learning, and helps them lead productive, ethical and joyful lives*.

If private schools are the gold standard in American education and they do not utilize high stakes exams, why then is it being foisted on public schools?

Why High-Stakes Exams?

Principally because we, as a society, unlike most private schools, have not decided what the goals of education should be. As a result, the aims of learning are easily diverted, misused

and hijacked to fit the latest campaign slogan, administrative fiat or position-paper. There is no clearer example than the 1983 report, *A Nation At Risk*,[24] put forward by business interests, supported by the Reagan Administration and swallowed whole by an uncritical media, portraying America's schools as being so disastrous that they were ruining America's competitiveness. (Funny that the decade of the 1990s turned out to be one of America's most successful, at least economically, in its history.) All this served the purpose of undermining confidence in the public system, softening the ground for dramatic change, and lock-stepping education policy with business interests—pushing us inexorably toward an over-reliance on standardized tests.[25]

The same thing has now happened under the more sanguine title, *No Child Left Behind*, which sets as a condition of aid for Federal Title I funding tests in reading and math for grades 3 through 8. While these exams are not high stakes for students, NCLB provides an ever increasing level of punishment for schools who do not move rapidly up to 100% proficiency by 2012—a level of student achievement that has never been attained in any school, district or country around the world.[26] (And, in fact, given that some states are using norm-referenced instruments, a level of achievement that *is already known to be impossible* before any tests are given!) In a sense, what the onset of NCLB means is that virtually every standardized test around the country is now high stakes, for schools if not for kids. What's more, there are some in Congress who want to extend the annual testing into high school and use the results to rate individual teachers.[27]

It is disheartening that there is not a stronger public understanding about what is important in education so that it doesn't become a political football to be tossed and kicked by self-serving politicians. Do we really want an education system driven by the latest political slogan? With education policy housed in fifty different state capitols around the country, the notion of consensus in terms of learning goals is inherently problematic. In fact, for most of our history, and, ironically, as recently as the Reagan Administration, local school-board con-

trol and individual states as incubators of innovative educational reforms were viewed as major assets in America's educational program.

As a child of two life-long educators, a teacher of 20 years and an author who has studied these issues, I feel compelled to confront the unchallenged assumption that the current hyper-testing regime is a sound approach for developing the human capital that is today's younger generation. In fact, I am prepared to argue that not only is the entirety of the standardized testing regime ineffective in its aims of improving education, but that it is, in fact, *the very reason* drop-out rates are accelerating,[28] the achievement gap continues to widen[29] and so much of America's educational program is dull and uninspired.[30] High stakes, standardized exams have been billed as a panacea for our educational ills. I declare this a sham and an appallingly bad educational strategy which guarantees poor results, reduced motivation and legions of graduates without the skills necessary to live a decent and fulfilling life.

The Dirty Dozen: How High-Stakes Tests Fail Our Kids

Below, I identify twelve principal harms that flow from the high-stakes, measurable accountability movement in U.S. education policy. Each contributes its share to making schools a less than welcoming and dynamic place for young people, but, taken cumulatively, they are conspiring to make the experience of school something that children learn to hate.

1. In the trash-bin of history: low order thinking skills

Standardized tests, typically multiple-choice and lacking in breadth and depth, tend to measure low-order thinking skills, the kind of short-sequence logic operations which are routine and involve immediate recall of discrete but obvious facts. There are two problems here: first, these types of questions are often abstract, with no connection to a student's life and are therefore inherently uninteresting and unable to pierce through to their real-world concerns. We know, or should, that connection to a

student's identity is one of the surest ways we can bring him or her into the world of academia.[31] In a word, students find these problems unimportant and useless, and many don't care enough to put forward a good effort. Second, the kind of skill-set that these questions build is rapidly becoming obsolete in today's economy. When you look at jobs that are being outsourced to Asia, it is exactly this kind of rote, sequenced operation that workers in India and China are able to do much more cheaply than the best-trained American workers.[32] Bottom-line: even if American students master these kinds of short, logical operations, executing them over and over again, the reality is there won't be much demand for these skills in the world of work.

2. The future is in the right-hemisphere.

The skills that are most necessary for today's work environment are much more right-brained: creativity, whole analysis, a collaborative people orientation, aesthetic appreciation, complex reasoning and critical problem-solving.[33] It is a fact that standardized tests do not, and cannot, measure these kinds of aptitudes.[34] Right-brained abilities are much more dependent on instructor modeling, personal exploration and experience, effective pedagogy and inspiring curriculum. This is precisely why America's best private schools do not overly bother themselves with standardized tests, but, rather, attempt to directly build academic skills—love for learning, creative problem solving, stimulating reading and discussion, critical thinking—that can be transferred to other endeavors.

3. A lousy way to teach and learn.

Standardized tests result in the kind of "drill and kill" pedagogy that we know is ineffective. In his ground-breaking book *How Children Fail*, John Holt wrote this about how and why children learn:

> The child who wants to know something remembers it and uses it once he has it; the child who learns something to please or appease someone else forgets it when the need for pleasing or the danger of not appeasing is past.

Brace yourselves: Holt wrote this 50 years ago in 1958! Teaching in a standardized testing environment encourages lousy teaching techniques—memorization, drill-and-kill, rote learning—and results in the kind of shallow, fleeting and compartmentalized knowledge that is ineffective and prone to turn children off from school. We have known this for over five decades—why would we go back to a kind of instructional practice that never worked in the first place?

4. Learning is natural and inherently valued.

As mentioned above, a standardized classroom results in poor pedagogy that gets the learning equation backward. Learning should be pursued for its intrinsic value, not because someone is forcing one to learn. Why do students put in hours and hours rehearsing for musical concerts, plays or practicing sports? Because, in fact, they see intrinsic value in those activities; in a word, they *choose* to pursue them. The same could and should be true for our academic subjects if and when we focus on giving students choices and responsibility for designing a learning plan. Course work should have much greater relevance to a student, as well as a specific and practical application beyond school. Mostly this means making explicit the connection between a given subject and a student's life—contextualizing it, bringing it home personally, giving them and their community a stake in seeing that learning matters.[35] Once students are hooked on learning—not for reward or avoiding punishment—they will do far more for themselves and their intellectual development than we could ever imagine. Unfortunately, in the current environment, students are told repeatedly: the reason they need to spend hours learning some abstract, disconnected operation or set of facts is that it will someday be on an exam.

5. We are ruining brains.

Brain development is perhaps the most pressing reason why we need to rethink our current high-stakes testing mania. By age 9 or so, young people have the physical structure—the hardware, if you will—of their brain in place. Over the next ten to twelve years it is crucial that they actively utilize different brain functions—develop the software—in order for it to reach

its maximum potential.[36] Structured complexity in the classroom, an enriched array of choices and modes of assessment, varied social groupings all contribute to growing the brain in particularly fruitful ways. And so does creating an environment in which adequate time, physical activity and low stress levels are baseline considerations.[37-38] Similarly, the aesthetic appreciation found in music and the arts as well as more contemplative activities like spirituality and compassion are not things that happen without schools making them a priority, or at least a possibility.[39] All of these are currently being shunted aside in our mad rush to increase test scores. As a result, we are in danger of producing a generation of learners who cannot critically think, appreciate the arts, nor marvel at the profound mysteries of our universe. And, tragically, once these abilities are neglected long enough, up through the age of 24 or so, there is less of a chance that they will ever be fully integrated into a person's intellectual repertoire.

6. Exams merely ratify the achievement gap.

The oft-stated purpose of NCLB is to narrow the achievement gap between whites and students of color. Yet, we know, and have known for a long time, that the most reliable predictor of a student's standardized test score is the square-footage of their principal residence.[40] In other words, students of affluent families almost universally score higher on exams than do students in under-privileged homes. Researchers have found that by the age of six, children in affluent families have been exposed to fully 2 million more words than have been children in more trying circumstances.[41] They are more likely to have been read to regularly, engaged in enrichment activities like travel and museums and also to have had access to adequate nutrition and health-care. Is it any wonder that there is a substantial achievement gap when there is a veritable gulf of difference between the haves and the have-nots in America? (I don't even understand why we are surprised by this.) But to then take the one reliable instrument which has always privileged well-to-do students and make it the basis of comparison and academic achievement for every kid in America is simply to lock in place existing inequi-

ties. Poor children are, by far, more likely to drop out, have a stressful home-life, get suspended, repeatedly move and change schools, run afoul of the law and act out during class.[42] They are also least likely to be interested in or motivated by abstract questions or the need to score highly on an instrument far removed from their personal experience. We are not closing the achievement gap under NCLB as major research studies have shown,[43] but, rather, we are confirming and institutionalizing at the level of policy how real and profound are the differences between rich and poor.

7. More anxiety = less learning.

High-stakes standardized tests increase the levels of fear and anxiety of young students, and it is a well-documented fact in education that the higher the levels of affective interference, the less able students are to complete even low-order thinking tasks—not to mention the more reflective, higher-order skills which are crucial for brain development and future employment. The stories coming in from around the country, even around the world,[44] of students unable to sleep at night, acting out, exhausted from stress[45] and generally working themselves into emotional wrecks[46] as a result of hype surrounding exams[47] is truly disgusting. These are children, some as young as eight years old, being put in highly stressful situations where their test performance may have extremely serious repercussions for their teachers, their parents and the fate of their school. Why are we doing this again? Oh, right—for the good of the children.

8. Narrowing the curriculum to a lifeless skeleton.

Fact: 71% of schools[48] report having to cut back on important electives like art, music and gym class in order to find more time for remedial instruction in math and reading. Some critics might consider this a step in the right direction, more like our highly competitive adversaries in China, India and Japan. But, as previously mentioned, in terms of brain development, pedagogical excellence, real-world skills and fostering intrinsic interest in learning, this is a huge net loss for children and our society. Doing more and more of what is not working does not equate with an effective educational program. We are asking

children to do the metaphoric equivalent of bang their heads against a concrete wall for hours every day—and when we discover that it isn't working, we are urging them to do it harder and for longer periods of time.

9. The higher the stakes, the lower the bar.

High-stakes standardized tests are not good measures of academic excellence. As mentioned previously, they measure a narrow band of logical sequence operations which are useful only for taking further exams. In fact, because states are under tremendous pressure to show that their academic programs are working, the truth is that state exams are becoming less and less demanding.[49] It is a truism: just as in gym class where every student must jump over a bar at some minimum height, the temptation is to continually lower the bar until a vast majority can make it. This is not driving the system toward Olympian heights of excellence; on the contrary, it is driving the system toward lower and lower levels of acceptability. Why is it that some states like Georgia and North Carolina have such remarkable pass rates on their State-wide exams but such a dismal pass-rate on the NAEP exam?[50] The answer is that high-stakes exam bars are not set very high, and are certainly not indicative of students who are ready for college, work or the complex demands of being an adult. Look at the amount of remedial instruction now required on college campuses before students can even begin taking introductory classes. On the route of trying to measure and prove academic excellence, we are guaranteeing ourselves a progressively larger share of mediocrity. We are being dumbed-down in a systematic, organized and expensive way.

10. Shallow is as shallow does.

The American public's perception of how public education is performing continues to slide in an era of standardized testing. Surveys confirm that Americans view public education unfavorably, saying that standards are too lax and that students are leaving with low skill-levels.[51] Interestingly, when the same respondents are asked about their own public school, the one at which they send their children, their perceptions are that the school performs quite well.[52] In other words, it is the "other"

schools that aren't doing well, the ones that are educating "other" children. No doubt, media coverage of school shootings, falling test scores and inadequate supplies and resources contribute to a general perception that schools are failing. But even when the news is apparently good, when pass rates or test scores move up, the public is being encouraged to believe in a very shallow and unreliable measure of what makes for a "quality" education.[53] As much as students are being dumbed-down by the lowered bar of high-stakes exams, their parents and the public are being asked to swallow whole that the complex, interrelated and open-ended process of education can be reduced to a single number, up or down, black or white. Standardized exams are equally adept at dumbing-down the American public—the very ones being asked at election-time to vote on school-funding levels, school-board candidates, and—yes, sadly—even presidential candidates.

11. We are undermining and losing our best people.

As an educator, I can attest to the increasing levels of frustration and dissatisfaction within the ranks of teachers. We are losing fully 50% of new teachers in the first five years of embarking on what they hoped was a lifetime career.[54] We are also losing a staggering number of veteran teachers, some through retirement, others through the frustration of seeing what has happened to education.[55] Think about it: are we really supposed to believe that a teacher comes home at the end of the day and says to her husband—"Honey, it's been an unbelievable day at school; our reading scores just shot up 2 percent over last year."

The real truth is that educators are made from a complex confluence of personal factors, and principal among them are a love of learning and a kind of reverence for making a difference in the lives of youngsters. By subverting that, by elevating merely routine performance to the front of what makes for education, we are actively undermining the very rationale for why good teachers want to teach.[56] And slowly, over the course of a generation, if we lose enough truly inspiring educators, we will lose their students too—the ones who see no particular reason to want to go into teaching themselves.

12. We are undermining essential American values.

Last, but not least, and perhaps most insidiously, high-stakes standardized exams support a very dangerous world-view. Jim Cummins, the intrepid advocate for literacy and second language acquisition, calls the NCLB mindset "an ideology."[57] It is one that believes there is a single measure of human excellence, that conformity to the designs of those in authority is mandatory and that deviating in any way from the norm is wrong and to be punished Had it been our principal educational impulse since America's inception, I believe there would not have been developments like Jazz and women's suffrage, or figures like Anne Sullivan, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony or Franklin Delano Roosevelt—that we would be today a much less confident, innovative and resilient people.

At its core, the high-stakes standardized testing movement is asking students not only to not think for themselves, but to passively accept that all knowledge is controlled by authority. That you exist only as an individual, not as part of some larger social whole, and that you will be successful or fail based upon your individual ability to do exactly what others expect you to. If you step outside of that and try to do something based upon conviction, creativity or critical insight, your academic record along with a raft of social opportunities will be damaged. In fully embracing a high-stakes standardized testing regime, we are subverting a substantial part of what makes America unique and productive: our ingenuity, our self-reliance, our faith that we make a better tomorrow through creativity and collaboration, not conforming to others' ideas about what we ought to know or be able to do. Instead, we are being asked to stay passively in our chair and make a selection from answers provided, obey all commands and regulations—no matter how punitive, ridiculous or restrictive—blithely accept the accuracy, fairness and lack of transparency surrounding the exams, and voice not a single word in opposition to the entire noxious enterprise.

Standardizaton versus Customization

To be fair, there are other voices, education experts, policy wonks and business executives,[58] who see it different and want to continue even more aggressively down the path of tougher standards, measurable accountability and doling out rewards and punishment based on test scores. They have their reasons.[59] They are well-educated (in a non-high stakes environment, of course) and they aim to convince: *We have to measure what is happening with public dollars. This is about system accountability. We need to keep up with what other countries are doing. Why should poor kids be left without options in the inner city?*

Two of the largest and best-funded of these groups are the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, and they have banded together to fight any major changes to the No Child Left Behind Law as it faces renewal. Their reason: "competitiveness." As Charles E.M. Kolb, president for the Committee for Economic Development, a Washington-based group of business, academic, and philanthropic leaders puts it: "Business is probably the largest consumer of American education", and the priority of learning should be "having people in the workforce who are capable and have the skills you need in the workforce today."[60]

I have already spoken to the issue of "real-world" skills: how quickly low-order thinking jobs are being outsourced abroad, and how 21st century workers will need a much more flexible right-brained skill-set—whole analysis, critical thinking, creativity, an aesthetic sensibility, and a host of collaborative people skills—not to mention the intellectual flexibility to constantly learn new things and be able to switch careers as the modern economy evolves and restructures.

But let's put that aside. Let's consider Kolb's claim that "business is the largest consumer of American education." This gets to the nub of America's lack of understanding about the goals of education. Do we really agree that children are going to school so that they can serve the interests of the economy? That is, that the goal of learning is to prepare students so that they can successfully work for a local business or corporation? Or, is

the goal of learning *to further that individual's—and their family's—own prospects*? That is, to help them discover who they really are, what they value, and prepare them to live a healthy, dynamic and meaningful life? I submit, by tradition and routine, that the goal of public education is the latter. That, in fact, student achievement is higher, more sustained and more valued when student identity and autonomy are affirmed and enhanced. And also, that the largest "consumers" of American education are the very people who need and use these schools—students, along with their families: the exact citizens upon whom all of us are dependent in a governmental system "of the people, by the people and for the people."

The core of this debate over whose interests education is meant to serve characterizes a simple but important distinction in our approach to how learning actually works: On one side are people who believe that education is centered in the learner, with their interests, passions and enthusiasm as the driving force. On the other are people who see learning as being more about the system and adults: developing effective structures that allow *the system* to manage, control and direct children to "achieve" what *the system* determines is important, measuring that and handing out rewards to those who comply.

The latter impulse, which generally falls under the rubric of "standardization," requires students to conform to a certain mold and become, more or less, products that are kicked-on from school when they "pass" a minimum level of uniformity with everyone else. The former, which might best be defined by the term "customization," asks that we listen to each individual, establish relationships, help them build identity and assets as learners and then provide assistance in determining a workable route—given their affinities and abilities—into the future. One side looks fearfully at young people as inputs to an economic scheme that might not be capable of achieving a minimally viable result (a la *A Nation At Risk*); the other looks optimistically at learning and seeks to maximize what students can become, create and provide the world.

Both sides say they want the best for children. Yet

only one side actually takes time to ask what children want for themselves—only one side supports getting students to confront their world honestly—in full possession of vital literacy skills and critical perspectives. And only one side has the professional training, background and experience to fully understand the complexities of human learning and how to make it happen. And this to me is the crucial difference between standardization advocates and genuinely effective educators. Who is willing to listen? Who is willing to go down the aisles of classrooms and discover what it is that kids really want for themselves, for their lives and the world? Who wants the truth, original and authentic, to emerge from a child's encounter with learning? And who, looking at the economy and education as a series of interconnected systems and policies to be controlled and managed, assumes an infallible knowledge about what every kid needs, then forces them to jump through the same ludicrous hoop no matter the human cost?

And it has to be said: the agents of standardization are not nearly as interested in the lives of poor and disenfranchised students as they claim. For the truth is this: well-to-do students and their families have access to fully "customized" learning experiences—tutors, charter schools, private schools, academic camps, test-prep centers, travel, enrichment of all kinds—whereas the poor are consigned to the dumbed-down standards of accountability and vacuous debates about whether they can obtain these low-level skills and out-dated curriculum from their local school, or, with government help, attend one further away.[61] In either case, they end up without an education aimed at furthering their unique abilities, but rather, curriculum and instruction designed to make them like everyone else who is not succeeding.

The agents of standardization have an awesome advantage in this debate: the American public does not have a high tolerance for nuanced discussions about education policy. Tell them that schools are bad, that numbers from test scores prove it, that the younger generation is about to ruin this country and a majority buy it. Ask them to consider a list of qualitative reasons why that scenario is a misconception and a massive fraud

and a majority will beg off for not enough time.

I am not suggesting that educating children is easy or uncomplicated. Nor that it is currently being done well or should be radically more expensive. What I am saying is that we are doing a dreadfully dumb thing in embracing whole-heartedly the standardized testing agenda. It is unproven, and a rotten educational strategy: harmful to kids who need education most, fundamentally unfair, counter-productive to brain development and ignorant of the demands the world makes on kids as adults. It also represents a fundamental change in the goals of public education: from serving the genuine needs of learners to catering to the demands of business concerns and an unjust economic arrangement. And I also submit that believing we can reduce the very complex, profound and multi-faceted process of educating a child to a single number, to see those numbers as everything we need to know about millions of professionals working to educate kids, and then to assert that all will be better if we just hand over control to bureaucrats in Washington is the height of arrogance and reveals a severely authoritarian impulse.

The high-stakes, measurable accountability advocates are in ascendancy, and with every indication that the system they put in place is not effective and not working, they demand more power and more control over how we teach children—while simultaneously decrying the scourge of taxation that sustains public schools. They variously blame teachers, parents, the bureaucracy and notions of public education itself. But never do they provide real solutions, real resources or new ideas on how we can restore America's faith in a dynamic public education sector—one that utilizes the latest pedagogy, curriculum, brain-research, technology and inspired instructors. Rather, they use the cudgel of "testing data" to flog everyone in their way and spout an endless parade of statistics to confirm what everyone already knows: we need real reform, real ideas and real resources if we want to change the status-quo in America's public schools.

But even before that, and now more than ever, America needs one thing above all: an informed, dedicated, and effective teacher corps. One willing to effectively combat outmoded,

counter-productive and wrong-headed educational strategies by using well-grounded research, experience and insight. One that has the courage and vision to articulate and create thoughtful, dynamic and highly relevant instructional programs that help every child in America realize their potential as full human beings. And, I believe, that must start with the set of teachers whose very job it is to engage multiple perspectives, enhance communication and build critical literacy; those whose job it is to work with language and human expression to further ennoble the cause of being human: teachers of the language arts.

Notes

1. Houston, Denver, and the state of Florida all approved programs to provide "merit pay" to teachers based on test scores of students. In Houston, the upshot of administering these bonuses resulted in a chaotic scene in which teachers complained bitterly about why, how and if the process approximated reality. Denver backed down from its plan to extend a pilot program across the district. Whereas, Florida is dealing with problems of testing errors and fairness to the extent that the legislature is revamping the original law only one year after it was implemented.

< http://www.susanohanian.org/
show_atrocities.html?id=6905 >

< http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.
qst;jsessionid=GrpHnymQd15mp2Bb6Vs6Tp
G0KW4YWk3Fw7CnWTZJkpxZX7psQR7P!-
646413792?docId=5009329158 >

< http://www.uft.org/news/teacher/reality/
pay_performance >

2. Currently, 27 states produce school report cards, most of them based significantly on test scores.

< http://www.nea.org/accountability/
reportcards.html >

3. Even the U.S. Congress is on the case of assessing the wisdom of using high-stakes testing for promotion.
< http://www.nap.edu/html/highstakes >

4. Both *Education Week* and the *New York Times* have recently raised serious questions about the quality of standardized tests given their rapid increase in number and importance.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/07/23/44toch_web.h26.html >

< http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/
education/22education.html?ei=5070&en=583026c
a0f9ed068&ex=1185768000&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=
1185655644-SIUKO8HwQ3c/Olangj+N1Q >

5. The *Fairtest* site is one of the few credible and independent sources of information about standardized testing.
< http://www.fairtest.org/facts/fallout.htm >

6. *Education Week* broaches the question.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/07/23/44toch_web.h26.html?levelId=
2300&rale2=KQE5d7nM/XAYPsVRXwnFWYRqII
X2bhy1+KNA5buLAWGoKt77XHI2terRpWBSgkt
LIAhcBHMqi8LK >

7. This is just one of many "wonks" who are willing to go there on trusting standardized tests more than the judgment of the professional educator.
< http://www.eduwonk.com/2006/11/
test-scores-and-grades.html >

8. The "free" market, as espoused by Republicans, is most often depicted as "the" savior for public education.
< http://www.heartland.org/
Article.cfm?artId=17727 >

9. How are young people supposed to learn and practice democracy if they do not see it and understand it from their experience in school?
< http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/
recordDetail?accno=EJ725990 >

10. *Fairtest* is considered one of the few unbiased sources of information about standardized testing.
< http://www.fairtest.org/ >

11. An extensive review of the literature reveals the one valuable role for standardized tests.
< http://www.fairtest.org/facts/
formulative_assessment.html >

12. Once again, *Fairtest* has the data and the quality information.
< http://www.fairtest.org/facts/nratests.html >

13. Criterion-referenced exams are sometimes called "standards referenced exams."
< http://www.fairtest.org/facts/csrtests.html >

14. Anyone who can prove standardized testing's efficacy would have lifetime job prospects. The National Academy of Sciences is no small player in this debate. Can you find any evidence in peer-reviewed studies?
< http://www.123helpme.com/
preview.asp?id=34046 >

15. Test scores have either inched up within the margin of error, stayed the same or declined.
< http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MJG/
is_1_6/ai_n15969879/pg_12 >

16. Why would test scores be going down for our best and brightest? Perhaps because we are focusing on minimum standards instead of achieving excellence.
< http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F60
E15F93A5A0C738FDDA10894DE404482 >

17. International comparisons have their own problems but clearly the U.S. is not exactly sprinting to the front of the pack in the standardized testing era.
< http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-
Differences/2007/05/should_data_matter.html >

18. NAEP scores show little movement nationally, leading many to suspect states are lowering their standards to give the "appearance" of improvement. And Gerald Bracey has had

to work overtime to swat down claims made by Education Secretary Spellings about the success of NCLB testing.

< http://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/commissioner/remarks2007/5_16_2007.asp >

< http://64.233.169.104/search?q=cache:oMmAkvW5dqIJ:www.america-tomorrow.com/bracey/EDDRA/k0610bra.pdf+The+16th+Bracey+Report+on+the+Condition+of+Public+Education&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us >

19. America sometimes believes that it can ignore, avoid and transcend the long history of humanity: Campbell says otherwise.

< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Campbell's_Law >

20. Berliner and Nichols demonstrate conclusively the fatuousness of the standardized testing myth.

< http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=13828 >

21. Compiling all the individual states and their errors would be a heroic undertaking.

< http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/21/business/21EXAM.html?ex=1185768000&en=4f6b0c6b305ed4a2&ei=5070 >

22. Their missions may vary, but the focus of their vision does not.

< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_school >

23. Captured from http://www.blakeschool.org/academics/index.html on 7-28-2007.

24. The original report makes an interesting read in light of the 1990s economic success.

< http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html >

25. Gerald Bracey has the data to reinforce his ideas about why *A Nation At Risk* was way off base.

< http://www.susanohanian.org/show_atrocities.html?id=492 >

26. There has never been any country or school system in the world that has recorded 100% proficiency on any mean-

ingful exam.
< http://schoolsmatter.blogspot.com/2007/03/
nclb-0-chance-of-meeting-proficiency.html >

27. There are many players calling for "tougher standards" on students and teachers, but the Aspen Institute's NCLB Commission is among the highest profile.
< http://www.aspeninstitute.org/site/c.
huLWJeMRKpH/b.938015/k.40DA/Commission_
on_No_Child_Left_Behind.htm >

28. Dropouts are notoriously hard to measure, but many people believe it has reached an "epidemic" level amongst the urban poor.
< http://abcnews.go.com/US/
story?id=2667532&page=1 >

29. Harvard's Civil Rights Project weighs in with authority and long experience on this question.
< http://www.edletter.org/current/ferguson.shtml >

30. We have known the shortcomings of programs like NCLB for a long time; in fact, this is an old idea wrapped in a new cover.
< http://www.amazon.com/Many-Children-Left-Behind-Damaging/dp/0807004596 >

< http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0807004596/
ref=sib_dp_pt/104-8955214-6838341 >

31. One of the premiere thinkers about literacy, Jim Cummins, knows a bad thing when he sees it.
< http://www.dailykos.com/
storyonly/2007/7/26/131722/394 >

32. Maintaining profit margins in today's economy means a race to the bottom.
< http://www.susanohanian.org/
show_commentary.php?id=473 >

33. Some business leaders "get it", and are attempting to move education into the 21st century.
< http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/
index.php?option=com_content&task=
view&id=254&Itemid=120 >

34. Applied thinking, creating new knowledge, critical thinking—we know what kids need to be successful but we are not doing it consistently at the K-12 level.

< http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/01/17/19global.h26.html?levelId=1000& >

35. Among many books and thinkers espousing "human development" above the need to sort and measure, Thomas Armstrong stands out.

< http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=13942 >

36. Dr. David Walsh, who lives here in Minnesota, is a leading thinker about adolescent brain development.

< http://books.google.com/books?id=YOaR4angPQkC&pg=PP5&lpg=PP5&dq=david+walsh+adolescent+brain+development&source=web&ots=41uUFpg5LB&sig=LxHSVz5pR1Btaedu2660fz1g0M0 >

37. Dr. Eric Jensen is also a leading thinker on brain development, particularly as it relates to educational design.

< http://books.google.com/books?id=iftjAQAACAAJ&dq=Eric+Jensen,+Enriching+the+Brain >

38. Neuroscience is quite clear, united and convincing on the needs of adolescents relative to brain development. Why don't we listen to their recommendations more often?

< http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/template.MAXIMIZE/menuitem.459dee008f99653fb85516f762108a0c/;jsessionid=GspsLDRgRdocCndo2dbvFWL25bhc0yRccqabbo5NwJorOnK79GCd!-1298136751?javax.portlet.tpst=d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_ws_MX&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_viewID=issue_view&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_journalmoid=3079b465e4013010VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD&javax.portlet.begCacheTok=token&javax.portlet.endCacheTok=token >

39. If we want a better future, we have to equip young people now with the tools and skillfulness that will allow them to get there.
< http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/greatergood/current_issue/suttie.html >

40. Why does no one ever invoke public policy to undo the "wealth gap", the "health care gap" or the "income gap", given that we know quite well what educational impacts those gaps have on children?
< http://www.news-record.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051009/NEWSREC0101/51009006 >

41. Once again, David Berliner has the data that proves this point clearly.
< http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=12106 >

42. Dropout numbers, when they can be obtained, are quite damning in regard to America's overall educational program.
< http://www.csba.org/csmag/csMagStoryTemplate.cfm?id=103 >

43. There are many such studies: closing the achievement gap when there are other significant gaps is not at all likely.
< http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F10B13F93E5A0C738EDDA80994DE404482 >

44. England has just recently come to its senses and moved away from such an extreme testing regime. When will the U.S. wake up?
< http://www.susanohanian.org/show_atrocities.html?id=7101 >

45. Some states are worse than others. Massachusetts was among the early offenders in high-stakes testing profligacy.
< http://www.susanohanian.org/show_atrocities.html?id=6114 >

46. If you page through the "Outrages" column at www.susanohanian.org, you will find many examples, like this, of what is being done in the name of "good for the children."
< http://www.susanohanian.org/ >

< http://www.susanohanian.org/show_atrocities.
html?id=6952 >

47. Our children are being manipulated by a system that clearly has little regard for their overall emotional and educational health.

< http://www.susanohanian.org/
show_atrocities.html?id=6806 >

48. This was from two years ago. Recent trends suggest the percentages, both in terms of the number of schools and of the time on math and reading tasks, has increased since then.

< http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30
713FF3F540C758EDDAA0894DE404482 >

49. Thomas Toch writes for *Education Week*.

< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/07/23/44toch_web.h26.html >

50. This story is being repeated virtually everywhere around the country.

< http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.
cgi?file=/c/a/2006/06/30/MNG28JN9RC1.
DTL&type=printable >

51. *Phi Delta Kappan* has done extensive surveying in this area.

< http://www.aei.org/publications/
filter.all,pubID.25667/pub_detail.asp >

52. One of many surveys that reveal essentially the same data. "Our" schools are okay, it's the other ones that don't measure up.

< http://newsroom.msu.edu/site/indexer/1844/
content.htm >

53. Bill Spady, veteran educator, gives the lowdown on America's 19th century thinking about education.

< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/01/10/18spady.h26.
html?levelId=1000& >

54. Some states and districts lose less than 50%, which means that some must lose more. Ouch.
< http://www.csba.org/csmag/csMagStoryTemplate.cfm?id=101 >

55. Brookings has the numbers on supply and demand for teachers.
< http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2827/information_show.htm?doc_id=468990 >

56. This scene is being replayed over and over across the country.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/07/18/43gill.h26.html?tmp=1579681080 >

57. Four standing ovations for Mr. Cummins at a recent meeting of literacy educators.
< http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2007/7/26/131722/394 >

58. The Business Roundtable has led the charge in favor of No Child Left Behind.
< http://www.businessroundtable.org/newsroom/document.aspx?qs=5976BF807822B0F1ADD408422FB51711FCF53CE >

59. The profits from publishing and testing companies have improved greatly over the last six years, in direct proportion to their coziness with Congress and the Bush Administration.
< http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/bushplan/test192.shtml >

60. Business leaders are not shy about what they want, and why.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2006/10/18/08biz.h26.html?levelId=2200& >

61. The duplicity of the Department of Education will eventually be uncovered, but, for now, we only have the voices of renegade administration officials.
< http://www.ednews.org/articles/7315/1/NCLB-tweaking-aids-voucher-wish-list/Page1.html >

Annotated Bibliography

Berliner, David and Nichols, Sharon. *Collateral Damage: How High Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Press, 2007.

A well-researched, thorough and devastating exposition of the role of standardized testing in America's K-12 schools. Invoking "Campbell's Law", Berliner and Nichols scrupulously document the folly behind the idea that standardized testing can be used over and over as a legitimate measure of learning outcomes, school effectiveness or a teacher's instructional ability. They maintain that such "high stakes" measures have historically led to corrupt practices wherever they have been attempted and are doing so now across the United States. Excellent reviews of this book can be found at http://www.hepg.org/page/40.

Dorn, Sherman. *Accountability Frankenstein: Understanding and Taming the Monster*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2007.

Sherman Dorn, one of the country's pre-eminent education historians, looks at the accountability movement in a broader, historical perspective. He posits that the system's need for accountability has become so all-encompassing that it has become a rapacious beast whose outrageous demands must be satisfied before all others—including educational excellence or innovation. A good book for understanding the political contexts in which education policy is determined.

Pearlstein, Linda. *Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007.

Pearlstein, a former *Washington Post* reporter, spent a year at an elementary school in Silver Spring, Maryland, documenting the efforts of students and staff to "make the grade" in terms of No Child Left Behind. Her account describes well the impact that standardized testing has on both the human beings and the programs of our nation's schools. This is an excellent qualitative look inside the reality of NCLB at a typical school. A longer review of the book may be found at http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/7/23/61531/6495.

Wood, George and Meier, Deborah. *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging Our Schools and Children*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.

A short book of essays with a foreward by Linda Darling-Hammond, including work of Meier, Wood and the masterful Alfie Kohn, this book reveals once again the perfidy and twisted motives that seem to lie behind federal education policy in the age of George Bush. These authors are well-known for practicing a "whole child" approach to education, and share no love for the idea that more testing will lead to better schools or outcomes for children.

Ohanian, Susan and Emery, Kathy. *Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* Boston: Heinemann Publishers, 2004.

Susan Ohanian and co-author Kathy Emery peer inside the box of corporate America to ascertain the hidden motives behind wanting to disparage public education

through over reliance on standardized testing. Both authors have long been advocates for non-standard students and the educational practices that allow for individual excellence to emerge across a broad spectrum of unique individuals. Radical but well-grounded in reality, this is a book that should give every educator pause in regard to the current rhetoric around accountability, charter schools and the quest to move toward a voucher system.

I would also like to recommend two very important articles that have come out over the last couple years. The first, again by David Berliner, is *Our Impoverished View of Education Reform* (Published through Teacher's College Review, it is available online at http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=12106). What makes this article so important is the clear linkage Berliner is able to establish between results on standardized testing and a child's corresponding level of affluence. The correlation is unmistakable: the higher the level of income, the higher a student's score on standardized tests. No amount of massaging statistics or of faulting public education can undo this key fact: test scores are part and parcel of a society which has generated significant disparities in wealth. Fighting the "achievement gap" while simultaneously doing nothing to fight the "income gap", the "health care gap", the "incarceration gap" is simply a shell game in which schools are made scapegoats, politicians are elected and nothing fundamental changes in America's social contract.

Second, an article published by Richard Rothstein, Tamara Wilder and Rebecca Jacobsen, entitled *Proficiency for All: An Oxymoron* (also published by Teacher's College Review and available at http://www.epi.org/webfeatures/viewpoints/rothstein_20061114.pdf), goes a long way to clarifying terms, numbers and hype surrounding student scoring on the oft-cited National Assessment

of Education Progress (NAEP) exams. In short, Rothstein, et al, scrupulously recount debates around the "cut scores" of the NAEP exams and show how they are set unrealistically high and have been repeatedly criticized by the government's own agencies, including the Government Accountability Office and the National Academy of Sciences. Despite repeated findings that NAEP results are "flawed" by the government's own researchers, the National Assessment Governing Board continues to use the exam and promulgate their results which the media then swallow without a second thought. This article is essential reading for those who need ammunition, facts and research to refute the "crisis" type language so commonly used when NAEP results are announced every fall.