



4-2013

## Missing the Mark: Why Modern Efforts to Better Schools Through Standardization Aren't Working

Richard Knowlton

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Missing the Mark: Why Modern Efforts to Better Schools  
Through Standardization Aren't Working

By

Richard Knowlton

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
Socio-Cultural Studies of Education  
Teaching, Learning and Educational Studies  
Western Michigan University  
April 2013

Thesis Committee:

G Thomas Ray, Ph.D., Chair

Paul Farber, Ph.D.

Dini Metro-Roland, Ph.D.

MISSING THE MARK: WHY MODERN EFFORTS TO BETTER SCHOOLS  
THROUGH STANDARDIZATION AREN'T WORKING

Richard Knowlton, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2013

In the thirty years of school reform that began with A Nation at Risk, and continues today with A Race to the Top, the United States has rapidly increased its reliance on a standardized “one-size-fits-all” policy in regard to modern educational reform. This report provides a review of the empirical and statistical evidence to demonstrate that despite lofty and well-meaning intentions, modern reform has done nothing to significantly advance the quality of education in America, and in many cases have had a severe negative impact—blocking real reform. Many schools, especially those in low-income areas, have become glorified test-prep centers in the wake of decades of mandates that value higher scores over higher-order thinking. Further, many students are not viewing the learning process as intrinsically beneficial, as the commodification of education has made teachers and students more interested in meeting minimum benchmark requirements than demonstrating real educational goals such as the motivation to become a life-long learner. Despite mounting evidence that the standardization of A Nation at Risk was undermining meaningful learning, lawmakers misinterpreted or ignored much of the data and created an even more standardized approach with No Child Left Behind, leading now to a Race to the Top—further accelerating our push toward a national standardized regulation of the system. Finally, this study of school reform examines the 21<sup>st</sup> century trend toward benchmark-based on-line learning—complete homogenization that further erodes qualitative educational goals in favor of quantitative objectives. All of these reform efforts, as the evidence increasingly shows, don’t work, increase student frustration and apathy, and belittle long-term quests for real understanding in favor of short-term information acquisition that can be more easily evaluated on national assessments. Because of these, and many other issues, modern educational reform in America missing the mark, and unless we change direction or reform the reformers, we are destined to continue on standardized path that is both not effective, and in many cases, harmful for all of the stakeholders in our educational system.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by saying thank you to Dr. Ray (Okay, I will just call you Tom...). Thank you for inspiring me, encouraging me, and never giving up on me even when you had to spell out my errors on a chalk board prior to finishing my draft. I will never forget the work and time you put in to help me in each of my classes and in this process, as I sometimes stumbled into common sense, and worked to finish this thesis. I couldn't have made it this far without you, and I am forever indebted to you for all you have done for me.

Thank you, too, to the members of my graduate committee, Dr. Paul Farber and Dr. Dini Metro-Roland. Paul, I learned much from you, and every reference in this work to the grand philosophers of old is because your guidance taught me to go back there sometimes for real wisdom. Dini, thank you for opening my eyes to a world slightly bigger than I envisioned it, and for seeing the educational process in much the same way as I do as we begin writing more together.

Thank you also to the many educators, administrators, and researchers who continue to fight the good fight against standardized reform. There are many who believe that our system is headed in the wrong direction, but there aren't many willing to stand up and be counted among the dissenters. I am proud to stand in a long line of those who came before me: never willing to give in, and never willing to let the outrageous demands of a few right now outweigh the true educational goals we have for the students of tomorrow.

Thank you, specifically, to Mr. Steven L. Rogers, my 6<sup>th</sup>-grade, and favorite, teacher, who partially inspired this thesis. I will always remember the lessons you gave me about life, love, and learning, and I promise to work as hard as I can to pass those lessons on as best I can to every student that enters my classroom.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Gretchen and my daughter, Rory. Gretchen, you inspire me in more ways than you know, and you spent many days without me as I finished this thesis. Thank you for showing tremendous patience as I spent far too many nights in the library typing, editing, and researching. (often until closing time when the librarians politely asked me to leave). Rory, may this forever be a reminder that hard work pays off, and that if you put your mind to something, any something, and follow it with effort and determination, you will always be able to make your dreams come true. Thank you both for being there as I finish this chapter in my life and look forward to many more with each of you.

Richard Knowlton

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## CHAPTER 1:

### DEFINING EDUCATION:

#### A Framework for the Future Taken from my Past

*The conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind.” -- John Dewey (1916)*

I have always believed that aspiring teachers begin with their hearts in the right place. While it may be true that, for some, summers and holidays off are key factors in career planning, recent issues such as salary reductions, wage freezes, and increasing employee health care costs have more than convinced me that intelligent, young students aren't enduring the rigors of a college education because of the wonderful earnings or advancement potential in our modern education system over, say, an engineering degree. Most teachers I have met begin their careers with a good dose of optimism (something I subscribe to completely)—a wide-eyed hope that they can change the world, or at least make a small difference in it, by guiding the minds of those they would eventually teach. That potential to help others is at least part of why many want to be a teacher. What is also illuminating is that if you ask teachers why they teach in the first place, many will often have a story of inspiration—someone who influenced them to be a motivation for others. Becoming a teacher wasn't a business exercise, it was a drive based on something more—something deeper. Many teachers, once, were inspired too—motivated to go out and explore their world, to take another look at a pinecone and investigate the seed inside, to get lost in a particularly good book, or to take apart something just for the thrill of learning how to put it back



together again. They were inspired to become *learners* and *thinkers* and *do-ers*, and this type of inspiration is powerful because it is more than just a byte of data that one might easily find in a search engine on the internet, it is a substantive connection between teacher and student that produces that same connection between the student and the world around them. Because of the deeply-rooted connection many of these educators had with their former teachers, they gained a deep-seeded understanding of the mentoring relationship, and it gave them both a vision for their own path, and added meaningfulness for both teacher and student.

It is that connection, for many, that was the genesis of a career in education—one teacher who inspired another. For me, personally, it was Mr. Rogers, a sixth-grade task-master who had only slightly more heart than rules, and despite my aversion for doing any homework, he constantly inspired me to dig a little deeper into the content, and he allowed me to have that connection with him, and that gave that gave me personal motivation to excel.

Throughout my education, it was Mr. Rodgers' teaching that I remember most; he did not just give me standardized material, but transmitted his love of learning to me in a personal, meaningful way, and he made me want to learn even more than what he taught me. He would often relate physics, for example, to his work with my dad on the local fire squad. Not only was the material great, but I had more context to attach it to; after all who doesn't want to learn more about why others sometimes call your dad a hero? By hearing stories from about how scientific understanding was part of their work saving homes and people devastated by fires, I was able to, not only care about

the physics lesson more, but also to want to learn even more about it. After these experiences in sixth grade, my scores in all areas were up, but more importantly than that, I was reading more, doing more, asking questions more—exploring more. I even found myself once asking my dad the Latin name for “fern” because of a lesson in biology that was particularly good (*Acrostichum*, if you care to know; he bought me a book). It was this meaningful connection that gave me a personal motivation that became a powerful element that fundamentally changed my life.

I have been teaching now for just over a decade, and I always remember that year because it reminds me that I need to make education inspiring, relatable, and meaningful. I really believe that it is my job to inspire students to be intrinsically motivated to want to learn more. It probably sounds passé to even write an educational thesis anymore that uses the term *intrinsic motivation*. It is a buzz word that has approached “buzz kill” in recent educational philosophy, much like seeing too many Kardashians on television. When I think of what makes education work, however, I think of Mr. Rogers, and more than anything, I understand what that one word means to me. Look at *intrinsic* in any thesaurus—*built-in, deep-seated, essential, fundamental*, etc. All of these words could have described, not what Mr. Rogers taught me, but what he *instilled* in me. And that, more than anything, has guided my educational journey.

From that starting point, I move to now, the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and my second one teaching. But whereas I would hope that creating deep, relatable experiences to intrinsic motivation would still be the primary goal of education, I often find it is not. Research and personal experience have shown me that teachers are more

often than not asked to administer a standardized science test rather than engage in a science experiment, they are more likely to assign, as my principal told me to do, *parts* of books, rather than the whole thing. “There is no reason to read the whole novel,” she told me.

Further, my own objectives (required by the state), aren’t engaging, they are written every day in the form of a national common core standard. And if these don’t have me worried enough, what constitutes professional development opportunities at my school are mostly related to the acquisition and storage of standardized data for state collection and assessment, not actual classroom improvement. It seems that the one thing I held the most dear in my education, my motivation to learn, and my desire to pass that on to my own students has been removed from many 21<sup>st</sup>- century classrooms, replaced with a need to find collectable data to support national learning objectives that are often at odds with the values that I learned all those years ago in the first row of Mr. Rogers room—the values that became the basis for my teaching philosophy. We have been slowly replacing all of those lessons that made me want to learn more with bubble-answer multiple choice questions that have divorced learning from loving to learn. When teacher-educator Steven Wolk (2007) wrote “Why Go To School?,” he looked at his son’s pile of homework (400 worksheets for the year!) and said:

When our children’s school experiences are primarily  
about filing in blanks on worksheets, regurgitating facts  
from textbooks, writing formulaic five-paragraph essays,

taking multiple choice tests, and making the occasional diorama... we should expect the obvious outcome: Children—and later adults—who are unable to think for themselves. None of this should surprise us. Passive schooling creates passive people. If we want people to think, learn and care about the many dimensions of life, if we want neighbors who accept the responsibility of tending to the worlds and working to make it a better place, then we need schools and curricula that are actually about life and the world. Instead, we have schools that prepare children to think like a toaster. (Pg. 650)

Much like my own experience, Wolk has seen an increase in education that does not attempt to intrinsically motivate a student, but instead attempts to standardize the notion of educating a person so that the transmission and regurgitation of knowledge can be replicated again and again to produce assumedly consistent results. He takes it a step further, however, as he notes, quite adroitly, that this issue isn't just about teachers not feeling fulfilled in their jobs, it has actual negative consequences on our society. As we continue to ignore intrinsic experiences based on meaningful knowledge and relationships in favor of the vanilla standardization that comes with much of what we are doing, we continue on a path that the data is starting to show, will have substantial consequences. It is at this cross-section of education that this study begins. The more I teach, the more it seems that my ideology and understanding of what makes

education effective are becoming old-world, and are increasingly not what are being asked of me by changing educational reform agendas, new pre-packaged online curriculums, and textbooks aligned to wide-ranging national standards in opposition to localized, personal understanding. The more I teach, the less I feel that that is what I am actually doing. (following my belief and line of thought that giving students trivial facts for regurgitation is not actually teaching them anything...) All of this leads me back to the essence of John Dewey quote above. “What do we want our society to look like?”

As Dewey so eloquently pointed out, we need to begin any serious discussion of our modern educational practice with that one question. Given that education is our goal, and schooling is the means to that end, we need to see how modern school reform, presumably the effort to change schooling to better meet our educational goals, is actually working. What are our goals for society, and are our modern practices achieving those goals?

One might assert that 21<sup>st</sup>-century school reform began with A Nation at Risk (1983)—the beginnings of a now three-decade-old movement for the reform of the American education system. It began as a warning—a list of growing issues and an imperative for change, but it continues today in earnest with the media, the government, and even popular culture writing about, producing laws to regulate, and creating programs to alter the current state of schooling in America. Across the country, newspapers are running articles on how to “fix” our broken system, as American schools are ever-increasingly being perceived as failing when compared to their overseas counterparts and more and more teachers and schools are seen as broken thanks to

issues like dropping standardized test scores and achievement, uninterested student populations, and corruption and apathy from school administration and staff. Years after A Nation at Risk was no longer hot off the presses, the idea of imperative reform was still hot on the minds of government officials as Bill Clinton went on his “School Reform” tour, and George W. Bush created programs like “No Child Left Behind” (2001). As we look now on the second full decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we see Barack Obama’s “Race to the Top,” and even government-endorsed virtual high schools like ED2020 that take education out of the hands of local educators and make it standardized and national by going completely on-line. Like many actions and programs, these, too, are an assault on failing schools and failing agendas; they are more attempts to wrestle with, understand, and solve what many see as a precarious and growing problem. In a world dominated by news of American economic decline and the perceived growing preeminence of places like China, India, and others, people across the nation see slacking educational data as the writing on the wall, and are not sitting idly by—everyone wants a part in fixing it.

As such, Washington isn’t the only place where school reform is part of the national landscape. Authors and reformers like Ruby Payne (2005) are banking billions on a myriad of programs, in-services, and seminars—cashing in on our crisis by creating Tylenol for the headache. It has become almost cliché for a new person to take the field and create some new “process” or “series” to better the classroom, or to talk about problems in education or about changing schools and reforming the system, because such elements have infiltrated our modern conscience so completely. When Rupert

Murdock began his 21<sup>st</sup> century Ipad-only newspaper, The Daily, some of the largest parts of many of its first issues centered directly around the issue of educational reform—laying yet another claim to that fact that it is one of the biggest issues of our time. Locally, writers like The Kalamazoo Gazette's Julie Mack, *do* defend teachers, but still point out how hot this issue has become across the cultural spectrum: “In many states, including Michigan, the issues associated with school reform and public-sector benefits have boiled to the surface this past winter and spring. One reason was an influx of Republican lawmakers, some of whom it seems rather relish taking on public education and the people associated with it” (2011).

The topic of reform then, introduced to great fanfare in the 1980s, has gone from back burner, to front burner, to boiling point, and with current concerns such as dropping test scores rising against the backdrop of pay for quality teachers and collective bargaining in states across the country, many educational issues are only getting more intense as those involved are trying find creative and cost-effective ways to “solve” these complex educational issues and create better educational outcomes. Despite what lawmakers, textbook companies, and other riders on the bandwagon of reform might tell you, however, their changes aren't working. Not because they don't create a short term uptick in the informational knowledge base of some students (they sometimes do), and not because they might not show modest statistical growth in their own “indicators,” (again, sometimes they produce modest success in this fashion) but the real problems is because they fundamentally miss the goals we should have for society entirely. When my teaching is telling me what works, and when my own

experience with students is guiding me in right direction for creating meaningful, long-lasting experiences in them, many of these new, short-term “fixes” are pushing me away from that. In short, I see a long list of reforms and reform agendas over several decades, but a short, to almost non-existent, list of said reforms that help me become better as a teacher.

To this, we must address the last part of John Dewey’s point. *What do we want our society to become?* I remember clearly the day my boss made it apparent to me that students should not be reading whole novels and short stories because it was, in her terms, a “waste” of student time. I argued vehemently that students would not engage in the process of reading if they didn’t learn to like to read, and how could they like to read if they didn’t ever get to read a whole story? She responded that they don’t need to like reading, they only needed to be able to get the information that was required to move on, as that is what was tested on the MEAP (our state standardized test at the time). She informed me, quite authoritatively, that knowing the definition of historical fiction or science fiction, for example, was good enough, and students did not need to read any whole examples of them to be able to answer the MEAP questions that referred to those genres. In our efforts to improve our standardized test scores, I, as an English teacher, was told *not* to assign so many novels, as they weren’t as important as short textbook chapters, news articles, and other short non-fiction that students could use to practice their reading-for-information skills. I left her office devastated, on the verge of crying and quitting. Upon contemplating her comments on my teaching, I remembered all of my experience both as a teacher and a student. To



me, my best learning always happened when I was intrinsically engaged in the process. My best teaching occurred when students felt the same way; when we *wanted* to learn more about something—meaningful experiences. I learned best when I wasn't taught the Latin for *fern*, but was excited to learn more Latin words and decided to engage myself in the process of teaching myself more about it.

After that meeting, I remember thinking that education, as I saw it, was not the same as it was actually becoming—it was slowly, through standardization, reform, etc., becoming something I did not believe in; something that I thought was damaging students. I believed in that moment, as I still do now, that the right path for our society is not to reinforce a rigorous retelling of facts from an instruction manual (that was trivial work for Wolk's "toasters.") What I want from my students is for one of them to ask me to suggest *other* mystery books they might read, for example. It would be a unit of novels that inspires students to want to read more and explore more. To me, perhaps in opposition to many educational reformers, a greater educational stride would come from a personally-curious, continually-motivated student who asks to learn more about Agatha Christie, rather than a student who just memorized her name to fill in a bubble for answer 326 on his or her merit exam. One of these outcomes shows me a student who will be more likely engaged in the process of actually reading a book, perhaps even after they leave my classroom—someone who will continuously gain knowledge for the rest of their lives; the other shows me that I taught a person how to memorize a fact that they could have easily looked up on Google anyway.

Increasingly, this has been placing me at odds with the trajectory of educators and administrators who are trying to better the system in the different ways, as I see my role as an inspirer of critical thinkers diminishing under the weight of new reforms. This is tremendously important now as we see, quite distinctly, that although many reformers do follow Dewey in taking on the social process of imagining new pathways for education, many of them forget to address exactly where those pathways ultimately lead us as a society. They miss the mark by not asking the right essential questions regarding intrinsic motivation and meaningful connections. Do they assert that we are becoming a better culture for having filled out myriad Scantron sheets in completion of the standardized testing so often offered by educational reform? Do reformers think we are better able to solve the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century because I create students that can recite the facts and statistics we need for so many multiple choice tests? When we analyze the details so many of these educational reform agendas, are they really creating the society we want? the more I teach, and think about what I am required to do everyday in the classroom, the more I believe that we are actually hurting students more than helping them by displacing much of the focus away from intrinsic motivation and critical thinking skills as we try to incorporate all of the new garbage—a heaping pile of miscellaneous extraneousness that diverts are focus from the necessary skills that will actually help people in the real world. Think of the BP oil spill, as an example; in 2010, it became one of the most horrific environmental disasters of all time when the prescribed failsafe to prevent the catastrophe (blowout protectors) failed to activate. After many days of leaking, engineers devised a creative solution and modified several

undersea robots to move a containment chamber over the remaining leaks. Such a method had never been attempted at that depth. This problem, like many in our modern society, was answered not by people with a basic knowledge of particular science facts, but by critical thinkers and discoverers who addressed the problem in a unique and creative way. There wasn't a standardized answer, and there certainly wasn't a Google solution. This problem needed an ingenious answer, and it got one, from ingenious people.

As I continue to think about Dewey's point, I continue to see reform's critical mistakes.

"what kind of society *do* we have in mind?" For me, it is a society where learning is discovering something new or amazing, when someone finds out a bit more about the world than was previously known, such as the engineers who stopped the leak. Learning that is part of a life-long process; a reciprocal process that allows the learner to be immersed in an experience or experiment and then interact with it—only to be stimulated more by its eventual reaction. The spirit of discovery that motivated the likes of the Wright brothers to learn to fly, or made Thomas Edison try one more time to create the light bulb, or even me to want to continue to teach and inspire others—these were even more moments of teaching and learning that drove and pushed these people intrinsically to think more about their world, and to work hard to change it for the better. It is not wrong to assert then that this spirit of inspiration and learning would be one of the goals of schooling as well. As a society, we need to create *thinkers* and *doers*—intrinsically motivated people who want to engage and learn more about the

many disciplines offered in our modern society—be it science or math; English or geology; culinary arts or auto mechanics; the goals of education should be to allow a person to find those things that drive them to learn more, and give them the food that nourishes that knowledge and the ability and desire to consume more still. This will help in many disciplines. Learning is a deeply personal and emotional process filled with excitement, wonder, filled with the joy of discovery. As Dewey (1916) himself put it, “Such happiness as life is capable of comes from the full participation of all our powers in the endeavor to wrest from each changing situations of experience its own full and unique meaning” (Pg. 128). It is because they don’t address this that so many reforms fail. It is because they don’t allow people to access knowledge in a relatable, intrinsically meaningful way, that they miss the mark. As we shall see throughout efforts for 21<sup>st</sup>-century educational reform, these last few decades have not worked toward the right educational ideals at all, and have in many ways, hurt our progress by putting the emphasis on high-stakes testing, ineffective universal benchmarks and other maladies that are in direct opposition to goals like individual, intrinsic learning and the power of discovery. When everyone from educational philosophers (Dewey and other ) to even children’s programming (*The Magic School Bus*, etc.) champion the happiness that comes from the powers of discovery and the intrinsic love of learning, it is amazing that reforms for education steer us directly away from that. As Steven Wolk (2007) so aptly noted “Creative and critical teachers are working more often in opposition to the system than with it” (Pg. 652).

What else should we be doing? Let's look at another example: Despite writing a book detailing a more scientific method for setting up curriculum, even Franklin Bobbitt (1918), a noted educational researcher, makes the point of what should and should not be valued in this way quite clear:

Education is now to develop a type of wisdom that can grow only out of participation in the living experiences of men, and never out of mere memorization of verbal statements of facts. It must, therefore, train thought and judgment in connection with actual life-situations, a task distinctly different from the cloistral activities of the past (Pg. 10).

It is true that there is some bevy of knowledge that can be quantitatively measured, and that standardized tests can assess that—raw data and facts; materials that society thinks are important and that its citizens should have at least a cursory knowledge about: World War II ended in 1945, for example; never start a sentence with a preposition; the value of Pi is 3.1415927, the list goes on. But education in our modern society needs to move *away* from merely memorizing such data that can be readily found on a spread sheet or the internet. Teachers need to create lessons that tap into a student's unique skills and ability sets to allow them to explore and experience learning intrinsically and wholly, not as a set of memorizable bullet points on a chapter review test. Rather than contributing to the knowledge of a student that might serve them as they watch Jeopardy at night, we, as a society need to be working to increase their *intelligence*, using Bobbitt's term purposefully—allowing them to use

the best parts of their cognitive ability to solve a problem—exercising their brain and fostering their ability to problem-solve, think independently, and use their own creativity (be it musical, poetic, artistic etc.) to “think outside the box” and find a rational solution to a dilemma. Rather than focus on the mere memorization of our students’ areas of study, we need educational reform that seeks to create independent thinkers that can, for themselves, use their new-found skills to enhance the society they enter once they leave school. When what we need is intelligent, self-motivated thinkers capable of adapting to the multitude of challenges we face in our modern world, decades of educational reforms merely create recitation machines that spew knowledge readily found on the internet already. With so much emphasis placed on such quantitative data from a miscellany of standardized assessments, the qualitative benefits from the actual growth of a student intellectually is compromised, and in many cases a true love of learning is squashed under the weight of the rules, regulations, and endless benchmarks of an educational system more ready to show your “deficiencies in certain areas” than to nurture the curiosity that would make you a better learner in the first place. We have continued to create educational programs, reform agendas, and pre-packaged “solutions” to address the multitude of “problems” seen in modern education, but as each of these comes forward, we see that in their attempts to fix the system, they further break it and move us more and more away from our original values, and away from the society that we wish to become.

Beginning with [A Nation at Risk](#), and continuing through first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a tremendous number of reformers both in the public and private sectors, and

at the local and national level have consistently failed to create the right kinds of institutional changes and completely missed the mark in regard to educating our society in some of the most meaningful ways. With each passing decade, state governments create new standardized tests to better assess the education of students, without recognizing that they are not good determinates of what many would call an *actual education* of a student. (See Madaus and Horn (2000), Madaus and Clark (2001), Nichols and Beliner (2008). Tests claim to assess student learning, and according to some modern researchers like Steve Gardner from the *Technological Horizons in Education* journal, tests can be objective “instigators of change.” They show us problems, and when we identify a problem in a classroom, school, or district we can then take active steps in correcting that problem. In addition, achievement data from tests provide teachers with valuable information to improve classroom and student learning (Gardner 2002). On paper this seems amazing—and such testing is something everyone should be doing in every classroom. The reality of new models of testing, however, is quite different. As we shall see consistently throughout modern practice, often tests are simply and significantly flawed. Some do not assess the right material, as Popham deftly demonstrates through a study done at MSU, where researchers found that as many as 50% of the items on a nationally standardized achievement test may cover topics that students wouldn't encounter in the classroom in a given locality (Popham, 2002), a big problem if you strive for meaningful, intrinsically motivated learning. Some, and virtually all standardized ones, use multiple choice, which “limits teaching and learning to knowledge, at the expense of skills and abilities, such as critical

thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving" (Haladyna, 161). While many tests designers have their hearts in the right place, their heads are not in the game as a great many of these new tests that target reform don't reform at all, as they do not adequately tell us much about actual student gains in learning and motivation to continue learning.

Further here, we see how much time, money, and energy is expended in the classroom "teaching to the tests" in opposition to teaching real educational goals. (see Au (2008) and others). Many critics of modern testing have called this "Testwiseness," where students learn only what is on a test, and how to take tests. Teachers drill students on what they will be tested on and they go beyond the curriculum only to teach test-taking skills (Burley, 2002). Many classrooms have curriculum narrowed like this, and this narrowing only increases as more and more governmental pressures from reforms make these tests the primary evaluation tool for students and teachers directly, pushing both groups to stay strictly within the desired parameters to get a good score, despite the consequences in other areas such as motivation for continual growth in learning. Because of this phenomenon, more and more tests look just like the quantitative goals of the reform agenda and students lose out on the critical thinking, problem solving, and discovery elements that come with an intrinsically motivated, well-rounded education. Further, what of those students who want to go further into a topic? Those that want to "dig a little deeper" into a particular area that interests them and might motivate them to learn more? More often than not, such "not-going-to-be-on-the-test" activities are pushed aside—left in the wake of the wave that pushes toward better scores on the



material that *will* be evaluated by the standardized tests (*please*, let me teach the whole book?) While I may wish to create society of passionate, free thinkers, it seems the reformers do not.

Even if we look past national and state levels (to try to find reforms that work), and focus on individual districts and the programs they are instituting, we see educators like Ruby Payne. Her “Aha!” process supposedly revolutionizes educational practice by addressing the needs of a multicultural, multi-economic class world. But like many of the reforms before her, she too doesn’t look at the forces that drive learners to engage, or addresses the need for us to have self-motivated, intelligent citizens for a better society; she instead has us looking at the poor from an ivory tower of conceit in an attempt to “understand” students of poverty better. Here, we are only left with even more standardization, whole district benchmarks, and all of the other hallmarks of educational policy failure, only this time it is wrapped in the sugar-coated ridiculousness of perceived multiculturalism—more of the same schlock, packaged differently so that it looks better to potential consumers. Just like other reforms these last few decades, however, just changing the packaging doesn’t change the contents. Reforms such as these may seem to have a shiny new wrapper, but they all contain the same old spam.

Thus we begin our dissection. Educational reform is missing the mark—so many people are creating so many reforms that are so far away from addressing what we really need to create the society we want. Many of these reformers come from a good place, and are indeed trying to make positive changes, and in doing so they inspire us by at least raising their bow and firing an arrow at the target of real reform, but no matter

what they and their Scantrons (or years of faulty research) tell you, the bull's-eye on the target of substantive, meaningful change stands empty as no one has seemed to get it right. Despite our attempts to regulate teachers more, and despite our insistence that students need to be tested more, and despite our belief that we need to understand poverty more, current reform efforts have not created better connections with students that produce intrinsic change within them. It has not created a path that allows people to learn and grow in the most basic of ways, and in many cases it creates systems that fight against those fundamental goals we set out to create in the first place.

The next chapters will examine decades of new programs and reform agendas showing how each has not addressed what we should be addressing in education in America—how each, despite their lofty and well-meaning goals, have missed the mark. We move next to chapter two in the 1980s with A Nation at Risk where we look at the beginnings of standardized national reform and how this Seminal document lays the groundwork for years of follies to come. Here we also see how Risk helped to create a national crisis that “needed” a unified, centralized, response, thus sending us on the dangerous path toward standardization at the expense of meaningful, intrinsically-motivated learning.

Chapter three starts at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with George W. Bush helping to form NCLB—an even greater focus on numbers and labels that again pushes a quantitative agenda over a qualitative one. Here too, we will continue challenging the notion that the hollow standardized testing required by the law is best for students, or that true learning can come from memorizing the mountain of textbook data that is also

required as part of NCLB. Further, this chapter examines the rules for the evaluation of teachers and schools showing how both don't fully address real issues or concerns, but rather continue to push us away from the stated goals we have for education.

Chapter four discusses Barack Obama, and how his administration and the legacy of NCLB too, have further eroded good educational practice in a focused "race to the top." Streamlined curriculum and national curricular homogenization are becoming increasingly normal, and have produced quantitative assessment data that win these "races," but many of these reforms aren't creating the type of students we want, they are furthering NCLB's push to speed up and streamline standardization at the expense of long-term educational gains in our students.

Chapter five examines Ruby Payne and other 21<sup>st</sup>-century reformers and speakers in the same way to show how they have diverted our attention away from many real issues in modern schools by offering quick-fix "solutions" that further damage the system with a litany of "tips and tricks." Such methods erode meaningful student-teacher relationships by offering easy answers to complex issues as teachers address classroom problems in a cursory way—producing short term gains that, while admittedly measurable, are also done at the expense of long-term learning and understanding.

Chapter six focuses on the commoditization of education in the on-line era. Specifically how our obsession with standardization has created an on-line learning craze where students are rewarded, not for deep understanding of a topic or idea, but rather information memorization. Again, this creates an increasingly narrow

understanding of real intelligence and understanding, as we see how modern educational reformers have used the internet to continue the search for hollow, yet easily-quantifiable results. With all of these ideas taken together, this chapter demonstrates that one of the great fallacies propagated by modern educational reform is the belief that insubstantial benchmark acquisition is actual education.

Let's start now with [A Nation at Risk](#) so that we can begin to demonstrate how three decades of reformers seem to start from the right place, but invariably get it wrong. As we get to the end, hopefully we will understand better the problems with these reforms bring with them so that we can see what we can do to right the ship.

## CHAPTER 2

### A SYSTEM AT RISK

*“In 1983, A Nation at Risk misidentified what is wrong with our public schools and consequently set the nation on a school reform crusade that has done more harm than good” – Richard Rothstein (2008)*

For myriad reasons, my first serious encounter with A Nation at Risk came when I began addressing the idea of school reform for my post-graduate work. I was only a 1<sup>st</sup> grader when A Nation at Risk was first released to the masses, and so I first read this referendum on school reform several years ago as a 32-year-old-man, in his 6<sup>th</sup>-year teaching. Whether waiting so long was to my benefit or detriment, I wasn't sure, but it felt good, at least, to be reading it like one might as a first-time observer in the 1980's— not as a graduate student, but as one on the front lines, so to speak—an educator seeing the whole gamut of performance, both good and bad—looking for what the issues were, what the data showed, and what I could do as a classroom soldier to help better my instruction. I am nothing if not an optimist.

Of course, I assumed that this seminal document of school reform would have charts, graphs, and good scientific research that demonstrated exactly where the problems were, and how we, as a society, had failed to hit the mark—thus creating a nation “at risk” of falling behind other nations. After all, shouldn't school reform be the based on hard facts and data? Sadly, when I finally began actually reading it, I found it to be a thirty-page document that was more of an overview than a hard look at hard data. Created by “the National Commission on Excellence in Education,” an assemblage

created by Ronald Reagan's secretary of education, Terrell Bell, it seemed more concerned with overarching policy than real analysis. While I will refrain here from making this a political debate, it was curious to me that such a tremendously influential document, one that purports to alter the state of our education system, had many conclusions based on faulty or non-existent data, and stereotypical generalizations of the worst kind. For a document that purports to show our decline against the backdrop of the rising preeminence of other countries, you would think this document would have more hard data. Berliner and Biddle (1995) note numerous times, however, of the lack of citations for the statistics used as evidence of the low quality of American schools. Continuing this, Robert Lowe, an editor for Rethinking Schools, wrote in 1993:

the strategy of A Nation at Risk ... hardly withstands close scrutiny. Its authors fail to note that their data suggest only a modest decline in scores since the 1960s. They do not acknowledge the upward trajectory of scores on several tests in the 1970s and 1980s, and they also ignore tests that showed no decline. (False Assumptions section. Para. 1).

Page 8, for instance, in the section “Indicators of Risk” (1983) mentions that “over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school.” There is no source for this data, no complete list of the tests used, nor the standards used to measure achievement in regular schools. The problem here with missing data is huge, but that isn’t even the greatest problem. It isn’t

just that the data to support this claim are missing, but rather that such cursory claims with no support miss digging into what could be an alternate theory about the root of our educational problem. Could it be that this is another example of Burley's "testwiseness," where students are great adapters and good at taking tests, but learn very little beyond this? Could it be that these gifted students do well when in the "ABCD" answer testing environment, but struggle to do as well when placed in the real world where solutions aren't as cut and dry? There is no evidence here to say, and it could very well be that the problem exists not in the results of these assessments and what they might say about our students, but in the methods of evaluation themselves and what those might say about what our greater educational system is evolving into. The problem here is that A Nation at Risk subversively proposes a move away from the basic building blocks of learning (discovery, inspiration, critical thinking, etc.) toward "tested ability" and "Comparable achievement in school." There is not discussion of the validity of standardization of tests, nor the nationalization of standards, those things are merely taken as fact. The problem isn't standardized learning or mass testing; it is the system that doesn't prepare students for many kinds of educational experiences. Inadvertently, the document designed to "fix" our educational system was partially responsible for destroying it, by making such standardized experiences the foundation for the educational reforms to come. The problem is with tests that only assess factual memorization in opposition to the hands-on activities that many classrooms were still providing. In many cases one might see a student whose ability to be "testwise" is well-established and demonstrated through data, but their actual classroom ability may

suffer because of their focus on only one aspect of their education. A student may very well be able to correctly answer a science question through memorization, but not be able to apply that knowledge in a practical setting where multiple environmental variables may institute unexpected changes. While A Nation at Risk doesn't specifically show this alternate hypothesis on failing scores to be true, it provides no evidence to support its own claims, and therefore cannot demonstrate that it isn't—making its assumptions just that, and clearly on shaky ground. A Nation at Risk continues to build its premise several possibly faulty assumptions that require a far more in-depth inquiry than was given in the commission's original report; and when one thinks about the nature of true learning and where it comes from (as discussed so much previously), it seems all the more likely that such trivial examinations and standardized experiences may not produce the authentic results that even A Nation at Risk itself purports to seek.

A Nation at Risk is like a scary movie where the terrors of educational decline are presented so starkly, that they build up a fear about the trajectory of the American Education System, and people are so caught up in the hoopla that they fail to see what might be behind the mask. People are so fearful of the end result, that they fail to look closely at fundamentals that underlie it, and they start to believe them to be true. One of the greatest negative legacies of A Nation at Risk will not be that it brought school reform to the forefront, it will be that it made the idea of performance as evaluated by a standardized process an unquestioned reality. In the three decades since "Nation," we haven't, in any major reform agenda, stopped moving toward an increasingly standardized process, one that seems on its very face to be at odds with the kind of



individual education that is directly related to the connection between a student and teacher. Here Alfie Kohn (2000) again provides a poignant point:

The Stanford, Metropolitan, and California Achievement Tests (SAT, MAT, and CAT), as well as the Iowa and Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS and CTBS), are designed so that only about half the test-takers will respond correctly to most items. The main objective of these tests is to rank, not to rate; to spread out the scores, not to gauge the quality of a given student or school.

(Para. 4)

In our modern standardization we create “testwiseness,” but we don’t create intrinsic motivation. We can better assess failures to make comparable achievement when we look at aggregated data from test scores as Nation implies that we need to do, but these hardly qualify as real learning. If education is producing terabytes of data, then we are achieving that goal daily; if our goal is the betterment of our society through the creation of motivated, creative critical-thinkers, then we are missing the target completely. Teaching, a qualitative process that was revered for centuries, is now fast becoming a quantitative exercise as teachers are not asked to engage a student’s appetite for intellectual growth, but rather the state’s appetite for consistently measurable data. A Nation at Risk is the document that has laid the foundation for modern education reform as evidenced by words it uses that are now synonymous with new reform movements. It set up “standardization” and “national assessments” by making

fear the motivating factor and these buzz words the solution. They set us on a path that removed much of the meaningful learning that leads to intrinsically motivated students in our classrooms by replacing traditional methods with overbearing national standards and testing that manipulated the system. Let's look at more statistics.

In 2000, the National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century (NCMST) was formed. Nicknamed "the Glenn Commission" because it was co-headed by astronaut John Glenn, this was the antithesis of, and for many in the commission, an answer to, A Nation at Risk. The NCMST showcased serious concerns about what America's science teaching had evolved into.

Most science students spend much of their time learning definitions, or the labels that apply to natural phenomena and scientific processes...It is hard to imagine that students in these classes are gaining the conceptual and problem-solving skills they need to function effectively as workers and citizens in today's world (p. 23).

Here we see just the effect the legacy of "Risk" was having on the educational landscape. Despite many efforts on the parts of Reagan's reformers to better the education system, they were, in fact, eroding the foundation. A Nation at Risk (1983) noted, "There was a steady decline in science achievement scores of U.S. 17-year-olds as measured by national assessments of science in 1969, 1973, and 1977." This was perceived, by the Risk commission, as a failure on the part of schools, teachers, and students—these tests, not challenged themselves for their validity or practical

usefulness in teaching pragmatic scientific skills, were accepted as facts to support failing science education. Rather than attempting to address what might be a problem with standardizing such tests (and in many cases reducing them to merely exercises in knowledge acquisition), the commission assumes their legitimacy, determines that students are failing in science because they don't do well answering factual science questions on in a standardized assessment, and prescribe, you guessed it, more standardized assessments to give students more practice at answering those types of questions. This is where the Glenn Commission rightly finds fault. Rather than changing our course *from* "definitions" or "labels" in scientific processes, we move *toward* them. Rather than seeing that the underlying issue is lack of engagement and meaningful connection to the material, the commission for "Nation" bases its assumptions *on* such data and assessments, and Wolk's son gets 400 standards-based science questions as homework. When we should be doing "hands-on" science projects and experiential lessons to engage students with the inspiration that comes from discovery, students in the post-Nation era are largely asked to memorize facts from a book. Students are doing less real science, and more memorization. What good does it do us to memorize the scientific method if we cannot, or never have, applied it? What was once the inspiration that drove John Glenn to become an astronaut and national hero has become a formal exercise to define terms from a textbook. Where would the oil spill be now if only those with a cursory textbook education were responsible for a creative solution to its cleanup? The Glenn Commission correctly asserts that those "conceptual and problem-solving skills" are being standardized out of the curriculum as we move

away from meaningful understanding and replace it with trivial knowledge acquisition. It's positively medieval, like using leeches to "help" the sick—we take a patient already weak from blood loss, and remove more blood from them. When standardized testing isn't working, the prescription is more standardized testing. We don't look at the fundamentals of the system itself; we attempt to find out why people don't seem to "get it" our way, and focus on the patient, not the treatment, as we exacerbate the problem. We fail to see the forest for the trees, as the metaphor goes, because we continue to believe that it is the students, not the overarching methods for assessing their understanding that are the problem.

Also too, many believe that this issue can be solved through *more* national benchmarks and assessments, even if neither actually provide definitive evidence for actual understanding, nor any indicators that such methods produce any intrinsic motivation for life-long learning, creative, or critical thinking. Thomas Haladyna (2002), through the course of his extensive research into the creating and writing of standardized tests, wrote that many of these assessments are merely multiple choice tests (as both the Michigan Merit Exam and the ACT are), and that such assessments do exactly as the Glenn Commission asserts: "limit teaching and learning to knowledge, at the expense of skills and abilities, such as critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving." Both the Glenn Commission and many modern researchers say that one of the greatest legacies of A Nation at Risk is curriculum that limits the critical and creative thinking necessary for our modern society, and yet, A Nation at Risk itself says its goals are to promote: "life-long learning [which] will equip people with the skills

required for new careers and for citizenship” (pg. 24) and “prepare the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world” (pg. 12). Despite the lofty goals of the NCEE and its intent, modern research has shown that A Nation at Risk has had the opposite effect. As more and more educators made the push toward nationalizing, standardizing, and quantifying the fundamental educational process, as a response to the indicators of risk, they have continuously pushed our education system away from its necessary personal connections, and toward a problematic system of benchmarks and data that, many like the Glenn Commission, have determined work directly against that. A Nation at Risk exacerbates a growing problem by added more fuel to an already burning fire, even as it protests to be trying to put it out. The New York Times (2011) recently published data regarding declining attendance in national science fairs around the country. When trying to determine a cause, Amanda Alonzo a science teacher at Lynbrook High School in San Jose, California, summed it up perfectly: “I have so many state standards I have to teach concept-wise, it takes time away from what I find most valuable, which is to have them inquire about the world (Harmon, 2011, P. A1).”

It has never been my assumption that educational reformers, policy makers, and the like are out to do bad things. It is my genuine belief that one of the goals of many on the NCEE commission was, in fact, to better education to produce life-long learners. And much like some of the teachers that fully subscribe to modern systematic methodologies, I do believe that those who framed A Nation at Risk are doing harm while simultaneously having their hearts in the right place. A Nation at Risk, was, and is,

representative of a growing need among policy makers and educational reformers to “standardize” the way we look at education to make it better—to use national testing, SAT scores, and the like, as a tool for assessing the problem and, in turn, producing a result—all without asking the fundamental question of whether that is the best idea in the first place.

It seems radical almost to suggest such a regression away from benchmarks and standards in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially since the idea of standards-based instruction has been increasing so much in the last few decades, but I still believe the lessons I learned from Mr. Rogers hold true, and that while having data to support what I do in the classroom is important, and thus testing and assessments cannot go away entirely, it seems ridiculous to me that when so many negative effects like modern student apathy, lowering attendance in schools, and a continued reduced national competence in many of the core subjects, that we would stop looking at just the students who fail to meet the standards of our tests, and start looking at some of the problems associated with those standards and tests themselves. Having read [A Nation at Risk](#) fully, I am starting to believe that it was a huge step in the process that removed education from its original connections to local communities, people and place, those areas of learning that motivated and engaged students, and it moved us towards a centralized understanding of control of the system. Traditional relationships between students and teachers are being replaced with standards for both; the familiar role of schools in outlining curriculum are slowly being replaced with national understandings about what was to be learned and how a unified stance on such matters is going to help alleviate

the risk of our nation falling behind. The unspoken bond that was created when I deeply connected with both Mr. Rogers and his teaching, is, for today's students, being severed—replaced with an over-arching curriculum to fulfill a grade-level expectations. One of these is actual education, the other is memorization and unification disguised as such, and their increasing relative starkness makes it easy to tell them apart. In his 13<sup>th</sup> “Bracy Report on the Condition of Public Education” for Phi Delta Cappan, Gerald Bracey (2003) cites Ralston who suggests that “Improving education will always improve scores on well-designed tests. But when the central aim is just to improve test scores, improved education is seldom the result.”

Another way A Nation at Risk moves us away from the positive educational foundations we want is that it puts such a narrow piece of the entire educational spectrum in the lime light, thus diminishing the importance of so many other crucial elements important to the student teacher relationship and a student's overall development as a human being. When subjects such as math and reading are shown as the most important by policy makers and stake holders, other areas, with perhaps just as valid a claim to the overall development of a student, are reduced or eliminated.

Richard Rothstein (2008) a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute, writing A Nation at Risk 25-years later, notes:

Perhaps the greatest damage has been done by narrowing the curriculum in an effort to boost math and reading test scores. The trend is most notable since the enactment of NCLB, as schools have diminished attention to history, civics, the sciences, art,

music, physical education, character development, and social skills, to make more instructional time available for test preparation in math and reading. This distortion of the historical breadth of American public school goals has been most pronounced for minority and other disadvantaged children. These are the children who most need a broad curriculum, as well as further gains in math and reading.

This is a severe problem. While many teachers, students, parents, and others talk at length about the need for music, art, and the like in developing future generations of young people, those programs are slowly being removed from modern curriculum. When A Nation at Risk most wants us to go “well beyond matter such as industry and commerce [to the] intellectual, moral and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society,” it sets up a system ill-equipped to do so, and many would argue actually fights against those beliefs as schools rapidly remove “extra-curricular” activities to make more room for standardized reading comprehension and math tests to mitigate our “risk”. Here we see an article in the New York Daily News (2010) which shows just one of many examples of this effect:

It's not a pretty picture. Spending on arts supplies and visits by cultural institutions has dropped drastically at city schools over the last three years, even as overall education spending has grown, a new report shows. While education spending increased by about 13% between 2006 and 2009,



funding for arts supplies, musical instruments and other equipment fell by 68%, the report by the Center for Arts Education found (Kolodner, 2010).

The aftermath of A Nation at Risk has put so many programs at risk. As Rothstein points out, our current reduction in arts, music, and extra-curricular education is directly linked back to the foundational premises set up in the seminal 1983 document. A Nation at Risk doesn't detail methods for maintaining a well-rounded education, it focuses on our risk of falling behind in *core* subject areas. Unfortunately, this narrowing of the curricular focus has led to a reduction in the perceived-importance of the arts in relation to core subjects. Standardization in the core areas is already eroding traditional relationships and reducing intrinsically motivating experiences, and now subjects such as art and music, which for many students are essential parts of their love of school, are being taken away. In many cases this is happening to make way for a greater focus on mandated studies for standardized assessments in core areas. This is an erosion of the basic foundations of education that created many life-long learners using these disciplines. Multiple intelligence theory has taught us for years that students learn best when they are engaged using all parts of their brains, from the creative centers to the logical ones, and that best practice comes from those teachers that incorporate kinetic, visual, musical, etc. lessons into their classrooms (Gardner 1983: 1993). Such lessons engage the learner, and allow them to full participate in a meaningful ways. And although many of the sentiments found in Gardner's work, and much of the ideology of helping students better learners, is not lost on the members of

the NCEE, their fundamental approach for how to better our system is. They create such a precision laser that so directly aims our focus on a specific set of problems, that we forget that solutions are rarely that focused, and must encompass much more than just a few small segments of a larger problem. The “risk” perhaps isn’t in what A Nation at Risk addresses, it is what it fails to address completely. It was a meteor that landed with authority in 1983, and many were rightly focused on the problems in math, science, and reading education, but left in the crater were the fragmented remains of many other subjects destined to take a back seat in education reform. Areas like art, music, and social development, have all taken a back seat—relegated to side-kick status in the footnotes of reform agendas. Soon, we would see, citizens would create advocacy groups like the Center for Arts Education in New York, and the California Alliance for Arts Education, just to protect the rising tide of arts education cut backs. You know there is a problem when society has to band together in groups to protect itself from the onslaught of governmental intervention, and these advocacy groups, like many, are trying to protect the true education of their students from the schooling that the government is providing for them. As our efforts to mitigate the risk of falling behind in reading, math, and the sciences have taken center stage, some of our deepest connections to a meaningful, well-rounded education has slowly been stripped away, and people are fighting to stem the tide.

As I think about the relationship between students, teachers, and learning, I am always reminded that intrinsic motivation and meaningful learning come from a deep connection between all three of these entities. The teacher must engage personally

with the student and the curriculum, and the student must engage with the teacher and what is being taught. It is a tight triangle where all of these things meet together. For many students, especially those that are creative thinkers to begin with, the removal of much of the creative elements of education (art, music, etc), removes part of that triangle, and weakens their connection to the whole process. It creates less of a connection, or even worse, severs it completely. In many cases, teachers, too, are disconnected. They feel very little relation to the “required” texts given to them by their school boards, or the pre-packaged lesson plans created as part of their schools “standardized” curriculum. In many cases, such as all-online curriculums, they have no connection to the material at all. This often leads to apathy where students *and* teachers find it hard to engage, and learning becomes less a love of the discovery of something new, and more a chore to be completed. When Grand Rapids Public Schools started its initiative to allow students to take all of their classes online, I remember thinking that this was another step in the evolution away from the human connections of learning, and the personal stake that students had in their education. No longer was education about actual learning, it was more about total credits earned, benchmarks mastered, and completion dates. Education wasn’t about personal development and growth as a critical-thinker motivated to better themselves, and their society; it was about knowledge acquisition and being able to “demonstrate ability.” It is assembly-line education—knowledge regurgitation for the masses, and unfortunately it is rapidly becoming the modern standard.

A Nation at Risk is the cornerstone that built the modern reform movement. Unfortunately it is a monument to destructive practice that keeps people looking at a marble statue dedicated to the false belief that nationalization and standardization are the best methods for creating a powerful education system capable of addressing the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When we find we need critical, creative thinkers to address modern problems, we find that our “by-the-numbers, ABCD answer” students, bred on multiple choice tests and knowledge acquisition, aren’t able to solve them. John Glenn has to create a commission show us how science classrooms aren’t working, and states have to create coalitions to “save” instruction in arts and music, as these things slowly die away. As a society we know what values are important, and yet our educational goals move us away from them and we need to create lobby groups to fight back. For years, education that did not create such well-rounded students would have been scoffed at for being incomplete—at what point did the pendulum switch and move us away from *educating* our young people, in favor of merely *schooling* them? The answer is A Nation at Risk. When we want our students to be intrinsically motivated to learn and grow, we take away the meaningful parts that most motivate them most, when we want our students to be creative, critical thinkers for the betterment of our society, we implement a “circle-this-letter” nationalization that ill-prepares students for the true rigors of modern life. A Nation at Risk has put our system at risk—at risk of destroying a nation of young people by having the learning beaten out of them by the process of schooling.

## CHAPTER 3

### NCLB OR HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE TO WRITE TESTS

*"We went from a system that valued producing good citizens for a democracy to one that worshipped at the temple of high test scores," ...We should be asking, what were we thinking?" - Gerald Bracey*

The legacy of A Nation at Risk, with all of the educational policies it originated and inspired, has continued on and grown much since its early eighties beginnings, and its seeds have borne fruit in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with George W. Bush's 2001 policy reform No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In much the same way that Risk did, NCLB has carried the torch of standardization and nationalization proudly—continuing a harrowing tradition of a flawed reliance on nationalized standards and assessments, and even added ineffective and destructive teacher assessments, as well as new rules for educational funding based on a host of faulty principles. Much like Risk, each of these, too, fails to stand up to Dewey's test for what kind of society we have in mind, and, much to the dismay of many dedicated teachers, further removes the craft of teaching from personal situations with individual learners that produce critical thinking and intrinsic motivation and replaces them with weak content acquisition and memorization based on test-giving and taking. In NCLB's Lost Decade for Educational Progress (2012), Guisbond, Neill, and Schaeffer put it succinctly:

Instead of helping to create circumstances in which schools can provide a rich, well-rounded curriculum and address the needs of individual students, the law has pressed schools to narrow curriculum, teach to the test,

and resort to deceptive and unethical ways to boost test scores. It has done so by defining student learning and school quality in the narrow terms of standardized exam results. (P. 2)

This is clearly disheartening, but the full extent of this narrowing is much worse than many even realize. The statistics don't lie, as this example from Wisconsin, representative of what is occurring around the country, exemplifies:

In the last few years, Wisconsin has expanded its state testing to comply with NCLB. WKCE reading and mathematics tests, formerly administered to students in grades 4, 8, and 10, are now given in grades 3, 5, 6, and 7 as well... In 2004–2005, Wisconsin students spent a total of about 1.4 million hours taking state tests; with full implementation of NCLB testing, that number will more than double, to 2.9 million. These figures do not include the time spent distributing and collecting materials, taking practice tests, giving instructions, and addressing other logistics of testing. (Zellmer, M. Frontier, A. & Denise P. November 2006)

More and more, schools are drifting away from the art of teaching and replacing it with the art of test administration. More and more, teachers are not asked to

educate, but to dispense; When class time should be spent circling the globe in search of new cultures to study, it is instead spent circling in ovals on one of many state tests. The fundamental ideology that asserts that students learn best in meaningful, relatable, ways is being stripped away. Marcia Gentry (2006), associate professor at Purdue University adroitly states:

Perhaps, over the past two decades, we have spent too much time and energy trying to conform and comply with the reform-of-the month and too little time and commitment to the art and science of educating children and youth for life-long learning so that they can become productive citizens in our democracy. In doing so, we have bought the idea that education in America needs the federal government to fix it, and now we have NCLB (pg. 24).

Further she states:

This one-size expectation does not account for variation among individuals on variables that affect learning such as socioeconomic status, environmental experiences, aptitude, school readiness, and home environment (Pg. 25).

Why is it that one can find millions of copies of thousands of books and articles that demonstrate the need for curriculum that relates to the student, and uses their

own pre-existing knowledge and understanding to increase learning and retention, and yet we impose tests created in an environment virtually devoid of such connections, and rapidly increase the class time we spend doing them? Students are spending less and less time on meaningful, experiential opportunities, and more time on high stakes assessments that students have little connection to. 2.9 million hours on testing in one state? Is this really what A Nation at Risk (1982) had in mind? It is ironic that one of Nation's goals for addressing our risk was made clearly as "Administrative Burdens on the teacher and relating intrusions into the school day should be reduced to add time for teaching and learning." Is 2.9 million hours of testing really "reducing our burden," or "adding time for teaching and learning"? How can we, as a society, hope to achieve our goals of having self-motivated, intrinsic learners, capable of addressing modern society's deepest and most troublesome problems if we spend so much time on administering testing in opposition to our own *stated* goals of increasing time for teaching and learning? How can we hope to address the Glen Commission's wish for more hands-on science when we continue to promote bookwork and memorization because it gives more positive answers on the increasing number of tests? We say we want a better system, but we do the opposite to get there. Reforms aren't a step forward, they are two steps back. It is funny, too, that many of the reformers seem to agree that teaching and learning is inhibited by intrusions to the school day, and yet, more and more testing is doing just that. In fact, as noted by Zellmer, et al, many of the numbers don't even include the time spent in test preparation. If 2.9 million hours are spent just to take the test, how many hours of educational time are spent just in



preparation for those tests? The numbers are staggering, and they are further pushing us away from what is really important. As a teacher, I have little connection to the content on the MME (Michigan Merit Exam), the standardized test that determines my “effectiveness” as a teacher. I, of course, did not help write it; I am not allowed to see the current version of it, and I am not even the one who administers it to my students, in most cases. Such standardized testing is a trivial experience that doesn’t demonstrate a true connection with my students. It contains a body of information, and it assesses a student’s temporary knowledge of that information, but the true connection between student and teacher, and, more importantly, between student and material, is lost. There is no way for such a test to determine critical thinking “outside the box,” because the box is clearly defined. There is no way to determine a passion for learning or capability for learning beyond the test because of its multiple-choice nature. And even if a student has memorized enough material to pass the test, or even do well on it, there are many who say such memorization fails to produce any lasting results. When I continued to learn beyond Mr. Roger’s classroom, it was because I was inspired to continue my learning and discovery. Is there anything on these tests to indicate that a student will retain the memorized material they learned from the test? Many researchers argue against standardized testing this because of its trivial nature, and in fact, a 2001 study published by the Brookings Institution found that 50-80% of year-over-year test score improvements were temporary and "caused by fluctuations that had nothing to do with long-term changes in learning..." (Olson). The only connection students have to the material is the test and its high stakes nature, and even though

they take it, it doesn't improve long-term learning. Often, students have no real-world application to attach to it—it is just another test. In many cases, teachers aren't able to teach concepts in a detailed way because they are forced to “get in all the material” required for national standards-based testing. This creates a “let's just get it done” mentality for both students and teachers. Teachers feel little connection to assessments they didn't create so they merely require memorization as it is the best way to produce results, and students feel little connection because they aren't “experiencing” the information, they are merely memorizing it and circling the corresponding oval. NCLB requires national testing and constant assessment, without regard for whether or not such systems actually work toward creating the students we want, and without regard for the loss of class time needed to facilitate the collection of NCLB's required data. It is an endless circle that keeps kids distracted from actual learning by keeping their focus on the inane process of constant assessment. A 2001 example may help us see a flaw in standardization itself, but what of NCLB as the source of change? Is it in fact working? If NCLB were providing the kind of education we want, it would follow that we would see gains in student aptitude and performance based on these changes. In June 2006 the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University released a thorough review of NAEP score trends before and after passage of NCLB (Jaekyung, 2006). In this study they compared trends from 1990 through 2005 and found many examples of little to no change. Here is one of many examples:

When comparing the average gains in reading achievement scores before NCLB with gains made after NCLB, we find no differences

in the amount of gains made in grade 4 reading scores. Reading scores did not improve after NCLB and made only modest improvements prior to NCLB. In grade 8, there was a marked decline in average reading scores after NCLB compared to the pre-NCLB period. In contrast, math achievement scores showed significant improvement both before and after NCLB in both grades. However, the post-NCLB achievement growth pattern was not different from the pre-NCLB growth patterns (pg. 20).

This is only one of many pieces of data demonstrating NCLB's ineffectiveness, but even by itself it demonstrates two significant points. One, that NCLB's increase in testing and accountability through standardization hasn't been providing large-scale increases in their own methods for evaluating performance, and even in cases where increases were happening, it cannot be proven that the legislation caused them, as they were on the rise anyway. This is a critical distinction because it helps support the case that teaching is not just a quantitative enterprise, but a qualitative one. It is quite possible that in both cases the increase (or lack thereof) was due to factors such as individual teacher effectiveness, intrinsic motivation on the part of the learners, and individual school efficacy. Years after NCLB was implemented, many schools at many grade levels have not yet improved, and that brings the question, what is the problem? If the premise holds true that teaching is an enterprise grounded in the personal connection that a teacher has with a student, and if intrinsic, life-long-motivation is related strongly to that connection, then a reform like NCLB and its standards based

assessment of education is ill-equipped to determine the quality of that connection. NCLB doesn't work for myriad reasons, but one of the biggest ones is that it is looking in the wrong places. Students with good teachers have been growing at good rate before and after NCLB, and those not making strides have not done so en masse since the law's inception in 2001. While we cannot say certainly what is the cause of the lack of change, we can certainly say that NCLB hasn't been the catalyst many thought it would be. When our society needs to create critical thinkers and well-rounded citizens capable of processing and evaluating the complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, NCLB uses limited data based on achievement scores to try to evaluate growth. It is a model that doesn't work because at best all you could show is that based on narrowly-construed standards-based multiple choice testing students performed higher than previously indicated on the same measures, and while this might indicate a teaching to the test, it is not indicative of actual learning, and even in this situation, NCLB provides little overwhelming evidence of growth across the spectrum as a result of the testing it implemented. In short, it doesn't work—even under its own faulty premise that you can teach critical thinking skills and deep understanding through basic content acquisition.

To be fair, not all testing can, nor should be removed from education. It is true that not all tests are terrible in scope or form, and many, myself included, would agree that a certain amount of assessment is necessary to show growth among students in our educational system. Despite this, however, the time spent testing in our modern classrooms is growing past pragmatic usefulness, and is skyrocketing towards an extremely outrageous portion of class time. When testing used to be a small percentage

of our overall time in school—a break from other learning activities to demonstrate competence at certain expectation levels, it is now (as demonstrated by the Wisconsin example) a woven part of the very fabric of what teacher’s do. It would be hard, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to separate any lesson a teacher teaches from a corresponding state standard. Teachers now are structuring their entire curriculums around preparing students, not for life skills or gaining an intrinsic love of the process of learning, but merely for such assessments— with teachers knowing that these tests will be more rigorous, more frequent, are more important, for the evaluation of both students and teachers moving forward. What motivation is there to teach anything other than “what will be on the test” or to learn in this same way, when the NCLB’s methods for evaluation are strictly tied to specific testing? Often, schools sacrifice real learning to satisfy the requirements of NCLB. A great example comes in 2002 from Lubbock, Texas where school Administrators told its teachers in the wake of both NCLB and the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, that one needed priority over the other:

In many classrooms, the anniversary (of 9/11) was not an opportunity to explain history in the making, but a distraction. Pressed by strict curriculum demands and standardized tests, Stephen Johnson, an American history teacher at Monterey High School in Lubbock, Tex., and president of the National Council for the Social Studies, did not discuss the anniversary with students today, but stuck

to his lesson plan. "We're fighting the French Indian War,"

Mr. Johnson said (Shemo 2002).

While still living in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, students weren't discussing the monumental events that had, and were still, unfolding in the wake of a national tragedy; they were continuing their book work. Students weren't engaging in meaningful discussions about the history they were living in, they were continuing on with a textbook-based lesson on a 200-year old war. Rather than teach students about war through the one they were living in, and whom many had family members serving in, they were memorizing historical facts from a war they had no connection to.

Obviously, even the most current assessment tests would not include 9/11, so it seemed extraneous to teach about something that wouldn't "be on the test." When it might seem obvious to many that students would be using September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002 to engage in discussions of the history these students were experiencing *first hand*, their education had them instead following a curriculum map that left little wiggle room, and kept them from what many would call actual learning. How can a teacher engage in a meaningful way with their students? By answering and posing questions regarding the history both were living that was equal parts of their shared experience, of course. But because school administrators had prohibited a discussion of 9/11's anniversary at the expense of previously-mapped curriculum, students were robbed of such an experience, and they continued with their original plan instead. A relatable, personal, and social educational opportunity was disregarded because what teachers locally knew was right did not fit into the "box" that had been created for them nationally by NCLB—teachers

weren't participating in personal relationship of connecting with their students and the history happening in society around them, they were part of uniform process—one that necessitated continued conformity at the expense of a greater connection to what the world was dealing with at the time.

This brings in another of Dewey's points. As we see that true learning and understanding comes from meaningful, personal experiences, it is also important to note that such experiences are often inherently social —part of a greater connection to society and the individual's place within it. John Dewey (1897) famously writes in his *Pedagogy* :

I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs. (Pg. 3).

People learn through social interaction and becoming a member of society. Here, Dewey points to a person's ownership of their role in the collective group in which he or she finds his or herself. Education is more than just memorization as we have seen, but more than that, it is a process by which a person comes to understand their place in society, and how they fit in the grander picture. Also to it is a growing self-awareness of how their actions affect the people around them, and how what they do

can have great positive or negative impacts on the people they meet and encounter. In a class where your personal relationship with 9/11 is discussed, such a learning and social connection is more than just available, it is fostered. In a classroom that delves deeply into a student's personal relationship to current societal events, students create more meaning by having more personal understanding to attach new learning to. They are able to more effectively engage in the learning process by understanding their relationship within the social group they are a part of. With 9/11's anniversary as the example, they are able to connect with others who are feeling the same emotions as them regarding the tragedy, they are able to process these ideas, and even discuss them with a teacher, who can provide prospective, historical relevance, and quite possibly a relation to previous or future lessons. All of these together help to create authentic learning experiences for students, and these are far more meaningful than the bookwork that was overlooked for a day. Dewey rightly points out that true learning only occurs when students find themselves in social situations such as these, and the fact that such obvious moments for teaching and learning are overlooked says a lot about the where our 21<sup>st</sup>-century reforms like NCLB are moving us, and why many are starting to think that it is in the wrong direction.

Clearly, if pressed, no one responsible for the framing of NCLB would advocate banning the discussion of the anniversary of 9/11 in favor of another standard, but the facts don't lie. The pressure on schools to perform is increasing so rapidly, and with more and more of school funding relating to the Annual Yearly Progress tied to NCLB, that schools are finding themselves in horrible lose-lose situations. Do I use this



opportunity to teach about 9/11 even though it comes at the expense of a lesson that could possibly determine my evaluation at the end of the year? In so many cases like this one, teachers are forced to choose the latter because the former is not anywhere on some nationally-recognized standard that will be assessed.

When the framers of NCLB wished to create structure and consequences for the betterment of schools, I find it hard to imagine that they foresaw all of the negative consequences that it would create. Experiential learning is slowly being replaced with standardized testing across the board, and opportunities for engaging the learning process are being swept under the rug as such rigorous standards are removing time for anything other than test-preparation lessons. More and more, teachers feel unable to engage in non-curricular learning opportunities, despite the positive impact that such things might have on the educational development of a student. When students might gain tremendously from a discussion of the current events surrounding 9/11 and the resulting war in Afghanistan, teachers were instead discussing historical timelines from the 19<sup>th</sup> century which had far less connection to what modern students were thinking about. Imagine a student who had a family member in the military about to fight in Afghanistan. Memorizing facts and dates from a 19<sup>th</sup> century war out of a textbook creates only vague connections to learning, and perhaps none at all if the student might be more apt to be worried about that family member's deployment than a school lesson. A detailed discussion about war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, might contain many of the same themes as the French and Indian war (why we go to war, the human and monetary costs of war, etc), and would be *personal*—relatable to both teacher and

student in a very real way. Students would have more connection to the material because they were living it, and a day of discussion about it would enhance the learning. It is possible too, that teachers could go back to discussing the French and Indian war the next day, and relate that war with their previous discussions about Afghanistan. Those kinds of real-world connections have the potential to create much better retention of ideas than a test, and more than that, a teacher can delve deeper into the nature of war itself, and why we fight—detailed and critical-thinking concepts that are something students can rarely get on a standardized test, and many would argue encompass a better form of education than merely a rote memorization of the start date for the French and Indian War. One gives us a cursory understanding of history that ill prepares students when they have to face real situations in their own lives, the other allows them to deeply and movingly process the history happening around them which influences their thought processes and allows them, when they look back into the French and Indian War, to understand it more completely and from a personal, meaningful level. Students who engage in such a deep way understand more about the nature of the topic (war, in this case) and are more apt to be intelligently engaged in what is happening—both as it relates to the modern war *and* the French and Indian one. Don't just memorize facts, they gain understanding and that is an important distinction. Schools in our society have the choice of what type of student they graduate into adulthood—one student is a reciter, one who can temporarily recall a date or fact as it was presented in a book, the other is a critical thinker who understands and interacts the world in a meaningful, intelligent way. Despite the fact that even framers of NCLB

might choose the latter over the former, their policies are, nonetheless, directly creating a society that look more like the former, through legislation that puts a greater and greater emphasis on curricular testing and assessment in opposition to actual learning. All this, in the name of increasing standardized test scores. We continue to miss the mark, but we do nothing but shoot more arrows at the same target.

Each of these previous examples is part of a malignancy that continues to “pile on.” Again, if the standardized cure of America’s schools doesn’t work at first, feed it to them again. When Nation’s risk factors inspired standardized changes that didn’t work, reformers added more specific rules and tougher regulations and consequence in the form of NCLB to more closely address those who weren’t on board. Rather than realizing that the fundamental problem may be our reliance on current standardized methods for educating our society, reformers continue to add more standardized tests to the mix—the problem isn’t the tests, they say, it’s the people who cannot pass them. Where one might assume that reformers would learn their lessons from the failures of A Nation at Risk, and attempt to reform education in different ways, the reverse is true, and we get more testing.

While one of the greatest problems for NCLB has been its increased reliance on standardized testing as an indicator for learning advancement, another issue that is equally problematic is how such tests, and their high pressure nature, create a negative feeling about school among students. Learning is supposed to be a positive experience, something to be cherished and sought after (as an intrinsically-motivated young student might be to read a Latin-to English dictionary, for example). It has, instead, become a

chore for students, who are pressured to achieve, not nurtured to want to learn. In an interview with PBS Frontline (2001), noted educational researcher James Popham said:

To me, one of the most frightening things about the preoccupation of raising test scores is the message it sends to children about what's important in school. Rather than trying to make the classroom a learning environment where exciting new things are required, the classroom becomes a drill factory, where relentless pressure, practice on test items, may raise test scores—but may end up having children hate school (Tulenko 2001).

A cry often heard in education circles revolves around “burn out,” as teachers are frustrated with students who “don’t care” about their education, and who don’t work hard to learn all they need to in class. This is perceived as failures on both sides—some look at “burnt out” teachers who, frustrated with unwilling participants, don’t do an adequate job to engage them, while others look at “burnt out” students who need to “sit up straight” and just “do their work.” Often neither side looks at the fundamental nature of schooling that is creating negative effects on both sides. In light of Popham’s argument, it can be said that one of the great failures of our modern educational system is the removal of qualitative experiences that expand learning in exciting new ways, replacing them with tedious quantitative experiences like test taking. It is not that students are becoming worse every year, and it is not that teachers who were effective are all of a sudden no longer so, it is that both teacher and student are less engaged in

the process and have no love for the practice of constant testing. Eventually, this has eroded the love people have had for the process of education and left in its wake a list of chores to be completed. It is not that the young person takes pride in having beautiful flowers in the garden, and wants to work to make them better, it is that they have a list of chores to do, and gardening is one of the ones on the list. A person who takes pride in what they do will do it better, do it more often, and love what they do and the end result. A person who is merely doing what is required of them will often do only the minimum required, and won't gain any personal satisfaction from it, and thus has little motivation to exceed the mandate, or to delve deeper and try to understand it more. NCLB's continued reliance on standardization had increased our dislike for the process of schooling by continuing to make it more and more about completion of tasks, and less like the true learning that education aspires to. In Reasons of Love (2004), Philosopher Harry Frankfurt writes about what we love, and why we love it: "Love is the originating source of terminal value. If we love nothing, then nothing would possess for us any definitive and inherent worth." This is especially important here. How can we possibly have true learning if students don't find any inherent worth in what they are doing. If all they see is a test, and if that test has little or no bearing on their lives after school, (and for those not on an immediate collage track, it often does), what is the motivation to learn in school? If schooling is increasingly just a preparation for the test, and if you have no love for or connection to the test, they why do it? If you don't love the process of learning, then you see little value in actually doing well at it. Many students find themselves hating schooling in the way Popham describes because they

increasingly see little of themselves in it, and thus they consistently find little to love about it. When they continue to hate the process of schooling they continue to think that such knowledge acquisition is all there is to schooling, and for many, they tune out. Perhaps “burn out” is the operative word here, but it is not burn out because of who they are, or who their teachers are, it is not, as some might argue, inherent in the student or the teacher, it is inherent in the modern process—the increasing standardization of the education system that continues to create such meaningless experiences that it creates little point for someone to care deeply about it. As we find ourselves not loving what we do, we don’t do it very well, and unfortunately schooling is removing that love from students and educators and increasingly making them hate the process. Testing is increasing, as is the number of students and teachers disinterested in the process of schooling. As many have correctly surmised, these two are certainly related and not in the way we would like.

Another significant issue that has arisen in the wake of NCLB is the rise of cheating to get ahead. Sophocles famously said, "Rather fail with honor than succeed by fraud," but he wasn’t required to take the ACT. Because of the intense pressure to meet the increasing progress goals of NCLB, both students and teachers are increasingly willing to do whatever it takes to increase performance data. In Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools (2008), Nichols and Berliner use Donald Campbell's law to show how NCLB has negatively altered our current system.

Campbell's law states: "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more

subject it will be to corruption pressures, and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor."

... Under the current system of high-stakes testing, this is exactly what is happening. The pressure to score well on a single test is so intense that it leads to nefarious practices (cheating on the test, data manipulation), distorts education (narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test), and ends up demoralizing our educators. (p. 42)

We have already seen how NCLB and other standardization distorts education by narrowing the curriculum and disregarding teachable moments because of a need to teach to the test, but now we begin to see another terrible downside: cheating—The rampant cheating that comes from the intense penalties and rewards of NCLB, and teachers' and students' lack of meaningful connection to its insistence on repetitive testing. Examples come in from everywhere.

"In Pico Rivera, Calif., a Los Angeles suburb, students at Montebello Gardens Elementary School jumped from the 17th percentile statewide in second-grade math in 2005 to the 85th percentile in third grade a year later. Similarly, second-graders scored in the 40th percentile in math in 2007, then jumped as third-graders to the 93rd percentile in 2008. In both cases, the gains were lost in fourth grade.

... In the past decade similar score spikes...led state officials in Texas and Georgia to conduct major probes of hundreds of schools. Most recently, Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Beverly Hall announced she will step down in June, following inquiries by federal and state investigators of alleged cheating at 58 Atlanta schools (Toppio 2011).

Here we see just a few of what are many examples of cheating popping up around the country. What causes such rampant cheating? In many cases, the schools investigated were attempting to increase scores on requirements for assessments required by NCLB. NCLB gives schools until the '13-14 school year to be "proficient" on all state tests, with adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals set before then. With schools rapidly approaching the deadline, and with progress goals increasing steadily and rapidly, schools not fitting the bill are under increasing pressure to find a solution.

Teachers, administrators, and even the states themselves, working hard and making modest gains, have rapidly realized that such improvements haven't been good enough, and that they wouldn't be able to make AYP without intervention. What is especially telling here is that it is so wide spread. It wasn't just one outlier against the system, it was whole groups of educators, across the board, and in every kind of school district (rich, poor, big small; new teachers, tenured teachers; administrators). In teaching we learn that if one person gets an answer wrong, question the student, when the whole class gets the answer wrong, question the question. Such widespread errors indicate that the assessment is the likely culprit, not that everyone in the room is in



error for getting it wrong. Is it really true that all of these teachers are immoral and/or lazy and are actively looking to take the easy way out and cheat? Or is it just as likely that the nature of such high-stakes testing has gotten the better of them? I would never argue that cheating isn't wrong, and I see it often in my classroom, and need to punish it; but if I noticed that a large percentage of my students (remember it was no fewer than 58 schools caught cheating in Atlanta) were resorting to cheating, I wouldn't be looking at them exclusively, I would also be looking at my own assessment tools—what is it that makes these kids feel like they cannot be successful at this test? Again, if it were one person, I might assume that person didn't study well, or is behind and still needs additional help, etc. , but if such occurrences were so prevalent, I would also consider that I had erred in my assessment, not that my entire classroom was full of incapable students. It is interesting to note here that the standardized tests given in these situations are tests teachers had little or no part in creating. It is far easier to cheat when you have no connection to it. Stealing from your own grandparents is much harder than stealing from a big corporation like Walmart, for example. Because these tests are seen as formalities, and not something created as a deeply-rooted meaningful part of a learning experience, teachers and students find it easier to cheat as a way to placate the national and state requirements because they are not actually cheating a real person. Students who respect and engage with a teacher over many years, are less likely to cheat out of respect for the teacher that has worked so hard with them—it still happens, for sure, but real, meaningful relationships create more connections and thus make such disconcerting behavior more problematic if you directly know the person

who you are affecting with your behavior. For a lot of students, guilt kicks in. Students who take state and nationally-created standardized tests, however, have little connection with the test, their creators, and often some of the material on the test, and thus it is easier to justify dishonesty when it comes to such endeavors. Students find little to love, and thus it has little, as Frankfurt put it, “inherent worth” to them, making it easy for them to find an easy way out. If education had more meaningful experiences, perhaps the opposite would be true. Not only would cheating go down, but engagement would go up.

Imagine, on the other end of the spectrum, taking a test that you know a teacher put personal time into, and was directly related to what he or she was teaching you, and what they wanted you to gain educationally from the class. An intrinsically motivated teacher creates a personal experience that is designed for you to gain from educationally,—that experience contains within it, far more chances for a student to attach love and meaning than something that is far removed from both teacher and student. When NCLB adds more and more national requirements and more and more pressures for educators and students, it creates more and more reasons for those students and teachers to be dishonest to the system—especially when the rewards and punishments for success and failure are so great. When a well-meaning teacher is doing his or her best and still falls short, they find they have little wiggle room for error and resort to under-handed tactics to keep balance. Certainly one should not condone such activities as being right, but when cheating of this kind becomes so widespread across

an entire system, one has to ask whether there are that many horrible teachers plaguing the system, or if the horrible system is plaguing that many teachers.

Instead of high-stakes testing, what we need is more authentic classroom experiences that give students and teachers a better change. Rather than a consistent insistence on hours and hours of time preparing for and instituting standardized testing, we need more classroom lessons that engage the multiple intelligences and critical thinking skills of our students. If we want a society of intelligent, engaged citizens, if we are going to weaken a culture of cheating, and gain the intrinsic motivation for the acquisition of knowledge we want in our students, we need to find ways to inspire them, not reward or punish them as NCLB is doing. NCLB creates so many pervasive quantitative assessments, that it rewards those teachers and administrators who take the easy way out and shrink their curriculum to insane levels of mere test preparation to make goals happen, what we really need to achieve Dewey and other's vision is to create a meaningful, connected experience between teacher and student. In my classroom, for example, the best time of the year comes when we do a Shakespeare play together. I have a variety of props that range from cheap foam swords and flimsy paper crowns, to an anatomically-correct skull from our former science teacher that works especially well for Hamlet. All of these are either handmade or hand-me-down, but unlike other materials I own that have not survived year-to-year, each of these props has managed to survive my entire tenure as an English teacher. This happens for one very important reason—connection. I begin each Shakespeare unit with a discussion of years past, and how much acting out a Shakespeare play means to me, and

often many students (who did a different play with me last year) chime in with how much it means to them, as well—they show their connection to it. Students hear stories, often not even from me, about who last wore the paper crown (it was made by Patrick, at home on his own time, to “enhance” his performance as Macbeth in 2007), and why it is significant. Students love so much that another student personally made the crown and wore it, that it has attained “artifact”-level status in my room. Students handle it with reverence, and even the most hardened of students, don’t damage it. They have *connection* to it—it is meaningful to me and soon it gains meaning for them, and despite its raggedy nature, it is like a child’s favorite teddy bear—no matter how many times the buttons fall off, you never trash it, and still regard it as your best friend. Students engage tremendously in our unit because of moments like this. They feel like they are a part of a tradition in my classroom, and they feel more connected to me and to the curriculum. Unlike the questions on the Michigan Merit Exam (which I am not allowed to know or read in advance), they know the exact material I am teaching, what it means for them and me, and how I will be assessing their knowledge of it. I regard the literary analysis essays produced from our Shakespeare unit as the best assignment of the year. Consistently, the most “A”s that I give out come from their writings on Hamlet, Macbeth, or Othello. While I often say that Shakespeare’s amazing plays more than contribute to my students’ inspiration in this regard, what also contributes is our class’s sense of community and togetherness, our connection with each other and the process of learning and how that creates a meaningful experience that makes such a difference. Much in the same way that Mr. Rogers connected with me in a deep way to

instill in me a life-long love of learning, I am instilling in my own students a sense of connection to the material that is not found in a textbook, a connection not found on the other end of an ABCD multiple choice test, and a connection that is only created when I and my students gather around that paper crown, and I tell them that this year will finally be the year that someone performs “To be, or not to be” speech better than Patrick did (It happened, and I think Kaitlin is the current winner in that race). Because of the deep, meaningful connection I create in my classroom, students are the most intrinsically motivated when we do this lesson. Unlike other days where I am constantly asking for their attention, or fighting with them to write down notes, students are asking me which idea for their essay sounds better. They are asking me to help them find more examples of betrayal in Hamlet so they can augment their point. Often, you can hear a pin drop in our computer lab, as students comb the book to quote that one last line that will complete their idea. While such a rosy picture doesn’t always portray the struggles I have in my classroom, I can say categorically that this is where you will find my class at its best, and it is where I, as a teacher, find the greatest long-term learning. Learning, however, is not quite the same as results—particularly when NCLB is the evaluator of what constitutes results, and it should be noted that this unit is only a small part of my current curriculum. When I write lesson plans, each day must, according to our new teacher evaluation rules as set up through NCLB, include a state benchmark. Each day must include a specific reference to a corresponding code such as CCL 1.A. (Common Core Language, Section 1, Standard A). It is hard to justify, based on the new national standards implemented after NCLB, reading more of the play on day

two or three, let week two or three, when it doesn't cover another of the benchmarks from the list. To spend two weeks performing and analyzing a Shakespeare play in an alternative education classroom may have been seen as amazing even ten years ago, but now it is seen as a waste of time. The benchmarks I teach don't prohibit teaching Shakespeare, but they place a much greater emphasis on skills such as skimming a text for information, and practicing that skill over and over to be able to replicate it. Also, grammar and spelling have changed much since the Elizabethan period, and many have argued that using such an old text is not the best tool for teaching such concepts. When the pressure is greatest to completely master a specific list of concepts and information, it often seems extraneous to teach anything else. In fact, after my Shakespeare unit this year, I was strongly counseled by my principal, as she again questioned my use of too much class time to read an entire work by an author, or to actually act out a play. What I considered my best teaching moments, already relegated to just one unit in the entire year, is now under heavy scrutiny. I have a huge amount of pride in my ability to stand my ground on the issue with her, but with all that is required by NCLB, soon the day will come when I will no longer be able to win this battle, and this unit will be lost as I do more and more grammar and reading for information at the expense of a deep reading of Shakespeare. All of the critical thinking gains that I make with my students, and all of the love for reading that I instill in them are removed. I do admit that some people would argue that in today's society, 16<sup>th</sup> Century playwrights are not as necessary as the more "pragmatic" reading-for-information and grammar benchmarks that are filtered throughout my state curriculum guidelines. I would argue, however, that just like my

work with Mr. Rogers, the connections I make with my students, and their increased interest in the love of reading that come from a different approach will have more long-term effects, and less cheating, than merely doing the drills necessary to better scores on the MME. Last year, when our *transitions* class spent one whole month on “test taking skills and strategies,” I was reminded of my boss’ anger at me for spending almost that much time on William Shakespeare. I asked myself then, as I ask myself now, where is education going that this is even an issue?

“Sterling Garris, principal at Blaine, has plenty of such low achievers at his school. As he walked down the hallway on a recent spring day, an elated reading teacher came rushing up to him with a third-grader who, she exclaimed, had jumped four reading levels. Garris offered the boy his hearty congratulations, but later he ruefully noted that the achievement won't be recognized under the terms set by NCLB. ‘This child has had tremendous growth, but he'll still bomb the PSSA test because he isn't on grade level,’ says Garris. What's worse, a child who has worked so hard will be stuck with a sense of failure. At test time, says Garris, ‘some kids get so frustrated they cry.’” (Tehrani 2007). Education in 21<sup>st</sup> century America is ever increasingly looking like this. The evidence comes from all around—anecdotally, as here in Time magazine, specifically and quantitatively, as we have seen from mountains of educational data, and even personally, in my own classroom, where I see the negative effects of NCLB daily. When I would rather be engaging in critical thinking exercises centered on Macbeth, I am instead instructed to find more from the textbook that practices test-taking skills themselves and reading for information. When I notice that students are not engaged

in yet another drill designed to increase their proficiency at locating pieces of information in the text of a news article, I find few ways to respond other than “It will be on the MME, and it will benefit you greatly to do well on that test.” I know from experience as both a teacher and a student that more meaningful, personal lessons and curriculum will benefit my students greatly as intelligent individuals trying to find their place in an ever-changing world; I know that a more rigorous examination of complete texts (instead of just excerpts, as my boss wishes) will help students love reading more and develop better reading habits that they will use the rest of their lives; I know that complex problems need complex solutions, and that our push toward standardization that leads to education as information acquisition is not going to achieve that; I also know, unfortunately, that I am increasingly not on the right side of many of these things—I am not committing practices that are best for my students. Even though I know that what I teach is not what is best for them as people, how can one argue against what I do when so many of NCLB’s punishments and rewards are now inherently tied to this system of numerical accountability? As Au (2008) eloquently put it: “There are segments of the US New Middle Class who find themselves in the contradictory position of supporting antiquated forms of standardized assessment because such assessments still provide upward mobility for their children, despite the fact that modern day schooling built around standardized testing simply does not prepare their children for the intellectual rigors demanded within the globalized economy” (Pg. 502). We want people who can find a creative solution to fix the damaged rig associated with the gulf oil spill; we want a new generation of intelligent leaders to help solve issues



financial issues related to the national debt, health care, and social security, and while our math curriculum, for example, does indeed create numerous benchmarks relating to the actual equations that could solve for “X”, it doesn’t produce leaders with the critical thinking skills necessary to address the real underlying issues necessary to address the real problem behind these most pressing issues. We have created a cursory solution to a deeper problem. NCLB, much like the students living in the shadow of it, will look good on paper, but will fail to live up to the scrutiny. NCLB’s attempts at reform, much like Risk’s, are hurting an already damaged system, replacing meaningful student-teacher relationships intended to create intrinsically motivated, thoughtful citizens, with approximations of such—We are not producing quantitative data that shows real education, we are creating quantitative data at the expense of any real education. Yet again, American educational reform has missed the mark.

## CHAPTER 5

### BARACK OBAMA AND THE RACE TO NOWHERE

*“Where is the life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”  
“The Rock” – T.S. Eliot*

In Notes Toward the Definition of Culture (1948) T.S. Eliot, author and educator, wrote: “It would be a pity if we overlooked the possibilities of education as a means of acquiring *wisdom*; if we belittled the acquisition of *knowledge* for the satisfaction of curiosity without any further motive than the desire to know; and if we lost our respect for learning” (Gamble 2007 pg. 616)

As we enter the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are now more than ten years removed from the implementation of NCLB, and almost thirty years removed from the foundations of standardization begun with A Nation at Risk. And despite our constant tinkering of the system with millions of hours, and billions of dollars, spent, we are no better able now to help students acquire the knowledge that satisfies their curiosity and creates the future we want than we were 30 years ago—especially using the current measures we have created to assess that growth. In April 2011, education secretary Arne Duncan pointed out that “his department estimates that four out of five schools in the United States will not make their ‘No Child Left Behind’ benchmarks by the law’s target year of 2014,” going on to say that he “blamed that failure rate on the law itself, not on schools” (Holland 2011). Changes are not working, and the methods to evaluate those changes are not working. If anything, time, research, and the analysis presented

here has gone a long way to prove we are taking steps *backward* in this regard.

Students are motivated less as they fail to meet arbitrary benchmarks and standards, and they are learning less as they navigate our increasingly standardized view of the educational process. If we only could give them more in-depth moments built around the joys of educational discovery, we might already be stemming the tide and creating more intrinsically motivated students, and thus more capable adults, but instead, we continue down a different and far more dangerous path. Along this nearly 30 year journey of educational reform, the primary theme has not been a renewed commitment to true knowledge and understanding for future generations; it has been a marked increase in the homogenization and commodification of education that is often at the expense of these ideals. As we further push a quantitative solution, we neglect the qualitative process that Eliot and so many others have shown us is so vital. Despite the fact that myriad educational researchers have published a litany of articles in the last decade demonstrating the many weaknesses and failings of NCLB's continued push toward nationalized curriculum and assessment standards (one that often narrows the curriculum and diminishes deep intrinsic engagement with the subject matter) America continues to press on with this same agenda. Rather than re-tool this law in the wake of its controversy, or as some have suggested, throw it out entirely, our current legislators have made a new edict. They have deemed it better to "race" toward an even more standardized process of achieving a victory through standardization. You are going to drink the castor oil whether you think it will help you or not.

Race to the Top (2009) is our nation's most recent attempt at bettering America's schools through a national reform agenda, but much like previous generational attempts, it isn't working. If Einstein's theory that insanity is trying the same thing again but expecting different results, then our "Race" may be to the asylum. Diana Senechal (2010), teacher and guest writer for the Washington post said this of Barack Obama's signature education policy: "To compete for funds, states must embrace reforms that haven't been fully tested, reforms rife with problems, reforms in which they may not even believe. In other words, thoughtfulness and integrity are pushed aside." Despite glaring issues, we are pressing forward at an ever increasing rate. This creates a huge issue. Any good scientist knows that when expected results are not as predicted, perhaps the hypothesis or the experiment *itself* is the problem. In current educational reform, we see a situation where the outcomes of NCLB are not producing what we would like, as even admitted by the administration itself, and the measures we are using to assess student growth are not showing the gains we had hoped. Rather than *assume in either case* that NCLB or the standardized assessments we are using might be at fault, we instead speed up the process of administrating these misguided reforms and give states more financial incentives to be the first ones to achieve them. Even though many see inherent problems in the system created by NCLB, it seems that few people are ready to admit that the standardization process isn't working, and are much more willing to throw more time and money at the current system in an attempt to fix the problem. In this chapter, we will examine Race to the Top's direct connection with NCLB (and its recent renewal), and how Race, too, is

missing the mark by not producing the kinds of learning we want for our society, and is not addressing some of the fundamental failings of past reform (read: standardization and commodification), and even added some ridiculousness of its own (linking teacher evaluations and pay to faulty standardized test scores). Instead of critically and thoroughly examining what has worked and what hasn't in NCLB, Race to the Top instead asks us, as stake holders of the future of our educational system, to put our blinders up, strap in, and hold on as we race toward a pre-determined, inevitable educational future, whether we like the destination or not.

Much like NCLB, A Race to the Top is grounded in the belief that through standardized testing one can demonstrate true understanding and achieve the necessary educational goals for society. This is of course, wrong. Again, if what we want are intelligent, creative thinkers motivated to engage in their world in meaningful and unique ways, Race is not a solution; it is more of the same, and doesn't even come close to accomplishing these goals. On this current increase in standardization and testing, Alfie Kohn (2011) states:

And then along came what should've been called the "Many Children Left Behind Act," which ramped [testing] up on a national level, forcing schools to test every kid, every year, from third grade to eighth and again in high school, with punishments for the schools that needed the most help, which did, and is continuing to do unimaginable damage to kids and to schools, particularly low-income

kids. And we thought it couldn't get much worse, and Obama has, with the help of the Gates Foundation and Arnie Duncan, has taken the Bush administration's attack on public schooling to levels that the Bush administration never dreamed could happen. They have taken that corporate approach to new levels, and it's really an assault on public education. They've turned a number of schools all over the country into glorified test-prep centers.

While his critique on the increase in the amount of testing we do is quite damaging enough, it is important here to note his use of the term "test-prep centers." Teaching and Schooling have increasingly become *commoditized*, they are less an art designed to instill a love of learning and a critical understanding that comes from in-depth studies of various disciplines, they are more just a commodity—a value placed on the recognition that certain benchmarks of knowledge have been transmitted to the student, and that those benchmarks have been assessed and/or can be replicated in the same manner. Teachers transmit data, students collect data and give more back, and schools report data as the resulting discrepancies between what was given and students recall on a test. Education is rapidly becoming the notion that learning is the measure of the percentage of taught knowledge has been, at least temporarily, regurgitated as an answer. Every day in my classroom, I see students ask "how many points is this worth?" or "is this worth as much as a quiz?" I often see students counting points as a number

approaching 60%--students not trying to learn anything, but rather trying to meet an arbitrary number. Students are told in our program that they need to pass at least 70% of the benchmarks, and must have a 60% on assignments covering those benchmarks, and many students work just enough to cover both of those bases. Education as a qualitative process of learning and understanding is being replaced with education as a quantitative currency. Modern schooling is rapidly showing not that you are a critical thinker, or a lover of reading, or even an inquisitive mind—the kinds of skills that produce mathematicians, authors, or scientists. It shows that you have a certain capacity for memorizing data and can provide that data in a multiple choice setting, or that you are good at doing just enough of the work to slip above the passing line. As Kohn quite clearly points out, reforms aren't attempting to help failing schools actually improve, nor do they work to find ways to help low-income or disadvantaged students to want to make real educational gains, they are increasingly becoming testing centers that administer facts and data, and determine to what degree someone has met an ever increasing standard for reciting that data. Reforms aren't out to help, they are out to evaluate. This does not help, it hurts. Arne Duncan, Barack Obama's education secretary, has famously adopted the phrase "no excuses," and has called on many occasions for more rigor and more accountability for schools and teachers. The idea that what we need is more rigorous standardized curriculum (more of this same reform, only more intense) is wrong-headed. For the Washington Post, Teacher and administrator Marian Brandy (2009) wrote a list of false assumptions made by Arne and [Race to the Top](#). She correctly calls out the current administration by pointing out that several

assumptions they make about the failings of modern education. One assumption is that:

"Rigor"—doing longer and harder what we've always done—will cure education's ills. If the young can't clear arbitrary statistical bars put in place by politicians, it makes good sense to raise those bars. Because learning is neither natural nor a source of joy, externally imposed discipline and 'tough love' are necessary.

(Para. 5)

Race assumes, as its predecessors did, that learning cannot come from a natural place, that it is not something that can come intrinsically, but must be created through outside force. It was not my relationship with Mr. Rodgers that made me a better student, it was some other incentive I must have had to do well in school. Frankly, they just don't get it. Rather than understanding teaching and learning as part of a meaningful connection between teacher and student, Race continues to assert that students don't want to learn on their own, and must be forced, or in some cases economically persuaded, to want to learn. In some cases this becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy as students are told by their teachers that learning isn't a natural need, and so students automatically start looking for teachers and others to provide them an outside stimulus to begin work. More and more, students assume that learning should not be done for learning's sake, but should be part of a structure that includes rewards for the learning that used to be a reward itself. Mr. Duncan and Mr. Obama incorrectly assume that the problems associated with NCLB and our current trends toward standardization



are the result of their not being enough reward or punishment in the system. When the system is clearly not working, they merely provide a greater number, (or more severe) penalties for failure, along with potential access to billions of dollars as a carrot for success. It is lunacy; when the rat doesn't reach the end of the maze in time, do we always have to assume that the piece of cheese is too small? Why is it that no one questions the nature or validity of the maze itself, but merely assumes that the lack of significant rewards and/or punishment must be the problem? When I go to a restaurant and the food is bad, no amount of discount on the bill (in this case a financial incentive) is going to make it taste better. I might be satiated by the knowledge that the restaurant paid me to eat my dinner, but I still didn't gain anything substantive from the experience other than indigestion, and perhaps it makes me like pasta a little less because I had such a bad serving of it. The short term reward does not outweigh the overall bad experience, and most of the time, I am not going back to that restaurant again. Adding rewards and/or punishments to a system to ensure compliance does not in-and-of-itself make the system better, and often it makes it worse. Rewards and punishments like those in A Race to the Top might, as an example, increase participation, as teachers scramble to test all of their students to get full funding, and it may also create a short-term uptick in scores as robust test-preparation is a daily occurrence for many schools prior to testing, but these methods fail on just about every level to produce actual educational results. Much of the statistical data coming out is showing: the restaurant has indeed fixed the immediate issue, but the food on the menu is still just as terrible. Jaekyung Lee (2006), in research done at the State

University of New York at Buffalo, notes that independent tests like the “nation’s report card” test, the NAEP, which has been given in the decades before, during, and after the current movements in reform, gives hard data that shows how NCLB and in turn, Race to the Top have not statistically improved scores in the core areas they attempted to when the laws were first enacted. Summarizing the research, fellow scholar Gary Orfield interprets years of statistical results and writes:

This report indicates that the basic trends in both achievement gains are almost exactly what they were before the act [NCLB] became law—modest gains in math, flat achievement in reading. There are now modest gains on the NAEP in math, but the growth pattern is the same as that which existed before NCLB. Achievement on reading tests is basically unchanged. It shows that continuing the current trends will leave the nation very far from reaching the 100% proficiency goal. In Shakespearean terms, we’ve been experiencing a massive process “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

This, and other data like it, shows that the increased emphasis on standardization has not worked. Independent measures (where teachers are not directly teaching to the test) are showing a flat line—the patient is not getting better, and all of the medicines we are administering are not helping. In the decade since the passing of NCLB, measures both inside and outside the system are demonstrating that

we aren't making the gains we hoped, and in some cases aren't making any gains at all. Why are we funneling more and more time, money, and resources into a system that hasn't been working? When linked to its origins with A Nation at Risk, the ideology of standardization has had over 30 years to create unified national policies to better reform the education system, and yet, time and time again data shows that we are not significantly better today than we were when Reagan declared us "at risk."

The failure of decades of school reform to produce long-term statistical growth in core areas is indeed a glaring issue, but it is made worse as state and federal agencies aren't questioning the reforms themselves as the culprit, but rather the motivation of people working under the system. It is as if our representatives believe that those in education are not doing well with the requirements of NCLB because there weren't enough incentives (both good and bad) in place, and thus they have created Race to up the ante and ensure the longevity of Duncan's "no excuses" ideology.

In the recent 2010 Governor's Education Summit in Michigan (Murray 2010), State Superintendent Mike Flanagan stated quite frankly that he made mistakes in failing to secure money from the "Race to the Top" grant.

"Michigan wasn't among 15 finalists shooting for a slice of \$4.3 billion in federal money, and Flanagan said there were several key areas where the state fell short. Among those was working with universities to develop an educational data base of the state's students and failing to get stakeholders, mostly teachers union presidents, to sign

memorandums of understanding committing them to reforms.”

Sign a memorandum? Do they really think teachers, administrators, and schools were not taking education or the reforms of NCLB seriously? In my school, as a good example, almost everyone, from administrators to teachers to counselors, has been putting in mountains of time and effort trying to adhere to the requirements of NCLB. It is not always universal motivation and love, as it never could be, but fresh turnover has yielded many young, enthusiastic, and recently-trained (read: highly qualified) teachers who are both familiar with the contents and requirements of NCLB, and strikingly motivated and ready to tackle the challenges within it. While it is true that sometimes the staff feels begrudged to perform a perfunctory exercise just to fulfill a paperwork requirement, more often than not, teachers in my school work tremendously hard in their attempts to better scores and improve performance—all in the true spirit of the law. They really are actively trying their best to help students perform better on the assessments posed by NCLB. They are motivated in this endeavor by the knowledge that they themselves are evaluated on this, but also by the many rewards that directly apply to their students’ future chances for success in the modern system—they really do (despite the implication otherwise) want their students to be successful, and they are already giving rigor to match. Because of this, A Race to the top is seen by many in my building as a slap in the face because it now add more incentives and punishments to mix. We are *already* fighting the good fight, trying hard to improve (in the face of budget cuts, staffing cuts, and mounting student issues out of our control), and now the

Obama administration says that is not enough. Because of some of the measures in Race to the Top, if states and schools want more (or in some cases, even the same amount of) funding, they will have to further fight to get it. Class sizes are increasing; some students are entering the classrooms with a weakened skill set; teachers are seeing more issues relating to home life creeping into the classroom, and yet these aren't the issue: the issue is that teachers don't have enough incentive to meet increasing statistical requirements. They aren't working hard enough to make this work. Perhaps, they say, if we gave them more punishments and rewards, teachers would do more. It is almost barbaric; many educators are already pushed to the limit, disillusioned with the ever-increasing standardization of the system, and rather than be given the opportunity to voice their opinions about what is working and what isn't, or be given the help they need to combat the real issues they face every day in their classrooms, the reform agenda created by Race to the Top, has them frantically scrambling to ramp up the current reform system (That they may not think works, or even believe in) in an effort to keep or get money just to meet the increasing financial demands of their schools. As budgets decrease in our currently-slacking economy, schools and state governments are under an even greater strain to find sources of revenue—teachers know it isn't right for schools, but they “play the game” to make the best of a bad situation and take what they can out of the system.

What teachers really want is help with the mounting issues they face (like class sizes), and wish they had more class time to work with students to address other issues (like problems at home that lead to academic or behavioral issues), but they are “locked

in” to a system of standardized testing and student benchmark and performance goals, because the evaluation of their work is inextricably linked the testing of nationalized reform. Schools are increasingly not even able to question the current trajectory towards standardization and commodification, these are merely facts in evidence, and the job of school officials and educators is not to decide what education is best for their students, but to better compete within the rules of the current system just to stay in the game.

To give credit where it is due, President Obama is trying, it does appear, to do the right thing. Once again, it would be hard to argue against more Duncan’s “rigor” in our classrooms if students aren’t demonstrating the abilities we want from them. Clearly too, evaluation, can and should be a part of that; It has been for thousands of years. But do we think that Socrates evaluated Plato as a student by giving him a multiple choice test? Did Aristotle demonstrate his intellect to the other masters by taking a philosophy exam written and administered by the Greek state? Such analogies seem laughable, but that is exactly where A Race to the Top is accelerating us—not towards a reciprocal relationship between student and teacher that fosters a deep understanding of the world through complex thinking and detailed examination stemming from a love for the acquisition of knowledge, it is toward a world where such things are devalued and/or eliminated as we press further into a narrowing of the curriculum and a commodification of the system as we are, more and more, rewarded for our adherence to a faulty system, and punished for being out of line. Why all of a sudden do I feel like Pavlov’s dog?

While A Race to the Top indeed falls victim to the same destructive lure of the standardization and commodification of education that plagued its predecessors, that is not its only, or even perhaps, its weakest flaw. While continued nationalized testing and standards-based learning is a deep and fundamental blemish on this reform agenda, what is even more egregious is how these already faulty measures are being used in new, terrible ways. Increasingly, as we shall see, students and now teachers alike are having a greater and greater chunk of their overall evaluations based on flawed measures for performance. Whereas such standards were used in the past as instructive points for how to improve the system, they are now being used directly to determine how teachers are paid and evaluated. More than ever, teachers are pressured, not to teach for meaningful understanding, or intrinsic motivation, but to a test that will directly affect their paychecks and job security. Increasingly embattled teachers, often those that work with the lowest level students who struggle the most, are given less reasons to benefit those students with personal educational gains, but are rewarded instead with superficial, often temporary, gains in information regurgitation that yield better evaluation scores.

The second major issue associated with Race is the increase in how standardized testing is being used to evaluate and pay teachers. While no one would argue that teachers shouldn't be evaluated, and that the eventual performance of students is in many ways related to that, the inherently flawed nature of both the measures, and the nature of standardized testing in the first place, has made this even more problematic for teachers who do well with their students, but fail when placed against the targets of

standardized testing. Currently, teaching contracts in Three Rivers public schools in Michigan includes a mandatory evaluation that contains a rubric. 50% of the total score on that evaluation comes from the MEAP (Michigan's state standardized test for elementary schools). Even if a teacher were observed to be "highly effective" by their principal, if standardized scores were low, that educator could be rated poorly, or even fail the evaluation. What students say and/or do in the classroom, and even what the principal says of classroom performance, counts for only half of the total evaluation. To move forward in one's career, a teacher must make sure that students master, not the material, but the art of standardized test taking. Increasingly teachers know that rote memorization and benchmark acquisition aren't the best ways to teach, but when their own evaluations and paychecks are on the line, what is a teacher to do?

James Horn, Education Professor at Cambridge, offered up this recent blog on the subject.

The winners of the Race to the Top will not be teachers, who will be further humiliated by having meager pay raises to their embarrassingly low salaries now dependent upon test score production work. Again, in Mr. Duncan's words, "states that explicitly prohibit linking data on achievement or student growth to principal and teacher evaluations will be ineligible for reform dollars." It doesn't take a genius to figure out what effect this will have on which teachers will end up with the lowest test performing students.



The issue here is two-fold. First, teachers, because of evaluations linked to performance, aren't being allowed to do what is educationally sound for students if that conflicts with national and state standards, and second, teachers with low-income or otherwise at-risk students are punished more for tackling the toughest educational problems. Let's address the first issue. Because of the new strict evaluation requirements of NCLB and RACE, teachers aren't allowed to use a growth-based model to tailor their teaching to what would be best for a student. Rather than discovering where a student is academically, and using that as a guide for how to teach a student the skills they haven't mastered yet, teachers are often only able to place a bar—a very high bar for some students, and hope that students can grab it. I see this often in my classroom. Over the years I have had several students who could barely read or write. Spelling, often at a most basic level, was often a problem, and many have had writing levels tested to be as low as 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>-grade. Because of this, students who are significantly behind and are placed in my advanced senior English class is a major problem. But in our 21<sup>st</sup>-century system, a growth-based model cannot be used. Despite the fact that many need curriculum to “catch him up,” and despite several heated discussions with my administrators where I begged to get them more help and/or a different and more personalized curriculum, it was made clear that all students were going to have to take the MME, and thus all students needed to be just as prepared for the rigors of it. My priority, I was told, was to teach to the test, and to make sure every student could pass it. Student issues are often numerous, and one might recount any of a hundred outside-of-school factors as to why you might not see them alive and

attending, let alone eager to finish school and graduate, and yet, rather than being able to help my students personally grow as I know I can (perhaps even two or three grade levels if given time and the right material), they are routinely placed with no other help in a high-level English class and expected to perform—expected to work hard to “race to the top” and not “be left behind.” The irony here is that much like the principal’s example from earlier where he felt sorry for the student who would receive praise for comparatively modest gains, many of my students’ gains were significant last year, and although they end up improving dramatically, they still often struggle with Senior-level work, and become frustrated with assignments that were unrealistic for them, and many even began to hate the process because aren’t successful at it according to the standardized measures. By the end, many still failed to pass the MME (although they sometimes do far better than they have previously), and as a result of the stress and frustration, end up hating the process of school. It is in these cases, that I regret what I have to do to so many of my students.. Because of the race to get ahead, we don’t slow down for those students who need the most help; we grab their arms and pull them along (sometimes kicking and screaming) hoping that they will make it to the end—the result often, however, is a bumpy ride that turns the art of education into a roller coaster that hurts more than helps, and very rarely creates the type of intrinsic motivation we want. My students aren’t given a chance to grow, they are given a bullet train racing toward an evaluation they are not ready for as they skip over the lessons that would do them the most good. Horn’s quote reminds me that teachers often are pulling and tugging in this way because they feel an intense pressure to make students

perform. It's not about taking a gymnast and bringing out the best in them, it is about winning a gold medal. Only in this case, there are penalties for both athlete and trainer if you don't get to the medal stand.

Is every gymnast a gold medalist? Shouldn't we all try for that, though? Shouldn't our goal be a race for the top, not the middle? One can't argue that setting students up for the pinnacle of success should be our primary goal, and that lowering the bar for those able to reach a higher one does no one any good, but when a student already behind several grade levels finally comes back to school on a regular basis, why can't teachers be rewarded for the gains they *do* make? Or in an elementary classroom where a non-native speaker struggles but makes significant advancements, shouldn't we be able to say "good job"? Shouldn't we be able to create a situation that allows for remediation without the pressure to perform immediately? Under the current administration's push to have 100% of all teacher evaluations be linked to standardized test scores, we don't allow for a growth-based model to exist. Instead, we ignite a fire under teachers and tell them to teach more to the test, and give more rigor, and even more memorization, even if it is not the best for the student. You are evaluated not on how much your student grows, but on badly they missed the bar. For teachers and students, it is not a lifting up, but a breaking down. The opposite of the experience I had with Mr. Rodgers. I was, through him, able to love school and the process of learning; my students are, through me, growing to hate it. And me? I am just sick about it. I know the round peg doesn't fit into the square hole, but I am told to continue shoving until it does.

The second problem that Horn (2010) brings up is that A Race to the Top's emphasis on teacher evaluations hurts teachers the most when they help the students who need it the most. Teaching in my school, I have come to see, is less like building a new car, and more like repair work. By the time students enter into my alternative high school education program, they are often behind their peers in several areas, notably NCLB and Race's focus areas— reading and math. Often, I am not adding new information to a student who is already at grade level, but rather I am repairing damaged parts on a student who doesn't, for example, no what a noun or verb are. Despite my belief that such knowledge should be a basic part of your skillset as a high school freshman, the facts in evidence prove otherwise, and I often have to teach basic skills to my new students. This type of "repair" is common in my program, and I don't mind doing it— especially when, for a whole host of reasons, it is a necessary component of student advancement. The sad part is, however, that there is little reward for me to do so. There isn't room with all of the other materials I have to cover, for me to spend a lot of time on remediation. Students in my classroom are already expected to know things such as the basic parts of speech with my high school benchmarks building on that knowledge (which is assumed to be pre-existing). What happens when my students don't have those skills, however? Further, what do you do with a teacher who, instead of discussing adverbial phrases or misplaced pronoun antecedents, takes two days to teach basic parts of speech? Often they are punished by the system because they are working with the students who need the most help. Their evaluations do not growth-based, they are performance based, and it is hard to win Daytona when you have to

spend the first 10 laps repairing your car just to get it race-worthy. It punishes both the teacher and the student, hurting their motivation, as many see little hope at meeting such stringent benchmarks, and some even quit the Race altogether.

Recognizing some of the issues, many schools are now using “value added models” (VAMs) to evaluate teacher performance to gain funding from A Race to the Top. These are based on both current test scores, and the previous year’s scores (assumedly addressing at least some of the issue). This seems like a good system, and even perhaps a compromise for those looking for a growth-based system, but it too reveals numerous flaws, as Mandiante (2011) writes:

Researchers have cautioned that serious difficulties can arise when VAMs (value added models) are used as a high-stakes evaluation mechanism of teacher effectiveness or as a measure of the effects of instructional practice in schools serving low-income populations (Ballou 2002; Andrejko 2004; Raudenbush 2004; Kupermintz 2003). Schools serving low income, minority populations face challenges in attracting and retaining quality teachers who provide effective instruction (Darling-Hammond and Post 2000; Darling-Hammond 2004). As a result, one potential problem when attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers using

VAMs is the frequent turnover of teachers in schools serving low-income, minority communities. (p. 42).

Teachers, knowing that their assessments are, at least partially or in some cases mostly, going to come from student assessments, have little incentive to even take on the challenge of teaching those with the most needs. Turnover rates are highest in these urban, low-income schools because the best teachers don't stick around—either they leave to find more capable students to get better evaluations after a couple of years, or they are forced out because they could not meet the increasing demands with the neediest students. Often, this places new, inexperienced teacher in the classes that need the most experienced help. The veteran teachers who could provide the most help get out, or are forced out by a frustrating system. It is a vicious cycle that only gets worse as more and more schools tie more and more of a teacher's livelihood up in student-determined evaluations. Further, when turnover is so high, accurate data cannot be established. If a teacher were to stay at a school for five or more years, then longitudinal data might show an increase, but often they move on to other positions before any long-term growth can be established. Their stepping stone worked to get them another position, and they aren't around for the data to catch up with them.

What is striking here, too, is that so much of what occurs that affects these evaluations is out of the control of the teacher. Imagine you are a welder creating a brand new aluminum panel. Your craftsmanship is outstanding, and you are proud of your work. But, before it is evaluated the next day by your boss, you have to set that piece outside for the night by the side of the road. Rain, sleet, cars driving past, etc.

may damage the panel, but despite those variables you will still be evaluated on how your work looks tomorrow *after* the storm. This metaphor seems extreme, but the example is relevant—teachers aren't in control of what their students do for 80% of their lives. Often, students go home to terrible circumstances (homelessness, little or no parental involvement), or they deal with unimaginable hardship (the loss of a family member, abuse, etc.), and then, when they return to your class the next day to take a test, they are tired, mentally disengaged, etc. This taints much of what we consider good educational data. How can we create *valid* measures of teacher's performance with their students when so much of what a student does is out of the teacher's hands? And the tests themselves? With testing times, dates, and material covered being so standardized, teachers are often placed at a huge disadvantage simply because their students are so. To recall our metaphor, The panel is still being damaged, but there is nothing the teacher can do or could have done to prevent the damage.

A good example of this came when I gave the Michigan Merit Exam last year. Two things about this experience stood out. One was that several testing students had only begun their tests before falling asleep on their desks, and when I inquired later (I am not allowed to interrupt the student testing as long as they are not snoring and disrupting others), the running theme was that in their home lives they had pressing personal issues (that I told our counselor about and she was currently addressing). These issues kept them from being fully engaged in the process. During the test, I noticed that this dramatically affected their ability to focus and do their best work. For the ACT (part of the MME now), strict in its policies for test-taking rules and regulations, there aren't any

make-up days for tiredness, and there aren't any retakes. They were going to have to suffer the test and do their best despite one student who had, that previous night, become homeless. The show must go on, as they say. The second thing I noticed is that there were three students taking the writing portion of the test that were new that semester— I had only just met them three weeks before. My annual evaluation as an educator for those students was going to be based on exactly three weeks of teaching them. The assessment system is faulty. It is so standardized, that it doesn't take into account the individual variances that affect results. As an individual teacher, I would clearly know not to evaluate myself on the writing of a student who had been in my class for less than a month. But that ludicrous notion was exactly what the state was doing to me. It cared only that these three were students at my school, and that during the period that they took the test, I was the teacher of record. Because of that, my evaluation was based, not on my performance in teaching any of these three students for a meaningful length of time, but their prior experiences in English before coming to Michigan Avenue Academy. Not only is our aluminum panel left outside overnight, but you may be evaluated on the panel that another welder fabricated that you only get a little time to work with. Again, what motivation is there for a teacher to stay in my program and help the lowest-level learners? With such a transient population, teachers in programs like mine are often evaluated on the most ridiculous criteria, with the toughest of students, and using skewed data that is faulty and misleading.

In programs designed to help at-risk students, ironically part of the legacy of A Nation at Risk, this scenario is a nightmare for all parties involved. I get the students



struggling most, who come to our program often after not being successful somewhere else, and I get them for only a short time, often with exaggerated amounts of home-life difficulties, and even with all of that, the current trends in school reform don't wish to help me with a struggling student that I just met, but rather, they wish to evaluate me on that student's performance. This flawed collection of data doesn't stand up to scrutiny, but in our ever-increasing push toward standardization in the Race to the Top era, such outliers that don't compute with the state standard aren't even taken into account. The equation for the evaluators is simple—I was the teacher of record during test day; there was the student who failed—I suffer the effects. End of story.

Barack Obama carries the torch of NCLB Proudly, and despite tweaks and changes that they consider are for the better, they still carry with them the banner of standardization that has irrevocably damaged our educational system. From the race toward and increased homogenization of the system to faulty teacher evaluations that tell us little about how effective teachers actually are, all that Barack Obama has done to help the system is add more wood to an already burning fire. We were slowing scorching our system—attacking it from all sides, but now we have created an inferno threatening to turn the entire thing to ash.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE ONLINE REVOLUTION

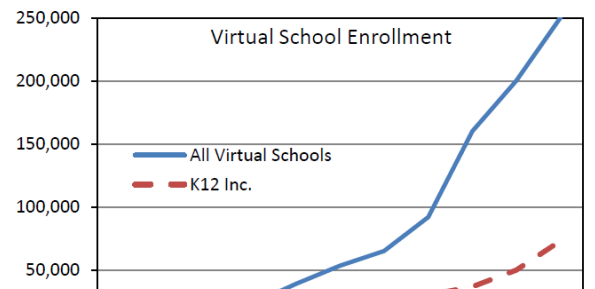
“Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in.”  
— Leonardo da Vinci

As we have seen, the national reform agendas of the last 30 years have clearly accelerated us toward an educational future built on the principles of standardization, homogenization, and quantitative assessment. This movement, with its national uniformity, emphasis on knowledge acquisition and standardized assessment tools, has had its share of successes, but it has brought with it a whole litany of other issues and problems for virtually everyone involved in the process. In a new-millennium race to find quantitative solutions to the qualitative process of education, we have crippled much of the system we have tried to make better. Schools and teachers helping the lowest students are punished worst with assessments tied to unrealistic or misleading performance; students that need the most help are belittled and have the greatest hurdles to climb as growth-based models are largely ignored, and learning that leads to long-standing goals for students (like intrinsic motivation and critical thinking skills) are being eroded by fast tracks toward the simple knowledge acquisition that comes with standardized testing and the unified structure that it encourages and mandates. This is a troubling trend. We are rapidly taking the “education” out of schooling, as we are removing the real learning that happens when students become highly-motivated through curriculum that relates to their lives, benchmarks that they can (and want to) meet, and teachers that can take time to focus on a student’s individual success. Many

of these hallmarks of the educational process throughout history have been worn down by a modern system that looks more at numbers than at people—verifiable statistical growth (which it has yet to achieve in large numbers), not actual learning (which they don't measure effectively as it is harder to assess this in a purely quantitative way).

Despite the preceding issues, the progression of standardization continues in our modern system, and despite a mountain of evidence demonstrating that such quantitative reforms are either not working or actually harming the system, new and even more harmful education reforms in this manner are rapidly becoming an integral part. Here we look at the next level of complete standardization in our current reform movement—the trend toward on-line learning and the creation of the wholly-standardized “virtual” classroom.

Virtual classrooms are environments where students gain access to downloaded programs or online websites that administer content from a computer. Although some still require program software, most modern examples run in any modern web browser and can stream educational content to any internet-capable computer. This set up allows classes to be offered either on-site (where the student takes classes at a school in a computer lab), or even off-site, where schools administer the programs, but students can take their classes from home. Three of the largest on-line providers in this manner are K<sup>12</sup>, Education2020, and OdysseyWare, and like many, offer wholly on-line courses and curriculum that are aligned to both the



**Figure 1. Estimated Enrollment Trends in Full-Time Virtual Schools**

state and national Common Core benchmarks. While these are relatively new programs in the bigger picture, the National Education Policy Center (November 2012, figure 1) notes that “Enrollment in full-time virtual schools has been expanding rapidly in recent years, reaching the current estimate of 250,000 students, compared with fewer than 20,000 less than a decade ago” (pg. 2). One of the largest program companies, OdysseyWare ([www.OdysseyWare.com](http://www.OdysseyWare.com)), claims on its website to be in operation in over 2,500 school districts, further lending credence to the fact that more and more, online learning is not just a passing fad, but a growing part of the educational landscape.

Products that come from these companies can range from offerings that give partial credit in a course (credit recovery for someone who just needs a semester of English to catch up after missing due to illness, for example) to full blown courses that teach an entire year of curriculum in a particular subject (a full year of Algebra 2, or physical education with all of that year’s lessons taken on the computer). Students, sometimes in lieu of a teacher in a classroom, take the entirety of their course at a computer desk connected to a web server. The benefit is that these programs are self-contained, all-inclusive, and consistently updated to fit the ever-changing requirements of new laws and regulations called for under NCLB and Race to the Top. Further, these are seen as beneficial because they remove the variables of traditional teaching such as variations in content rigor, instructional time, behavioral disruption, and teacher quality. iNACOL, the *International Association for K12 Online Learning*, a third-party accreditation company for virtual and hybrid schools, states that online education provides a “proven, practical method to enhance the critical learning experience...

Online learning levels the playing field for all students to access high quality courses and teachers.” Indeed there are many who see the value in such experiences. There are fewer differences from school to school, class to class, or student to student because every lesson is exactly the same, taught in the same way.

Further, these programs contain specific multiple choice quizzes and tests that often correspond directly to the state or Common Core standards. Students will receive the content knowledge required for passing standardized tests in a very uniform and reliable way, and acquisition will be tested through the program using the same multiple choice-style questions that they will actually see on any of the national and/or state tests that are part of the new educational reforms (like the SAT or ACT nationally, or the Michigan Merit Exam, at the state level). According to the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Illinois (2011), the use of testing that has multiple-choice questions can provide "highly reliable test scores" and an "objective measurement of student achievement." On paper these seem like the ultimate solution—a standardized way to manufacture learning, and guarantee that all parts of the new 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum are being taught and assessed. Assuredly, these programs are the ultimate outcome of the goals set forth in A Nation at Risk and legislated in No Child Left Behind: perfectly uniform standardization that yields reliable, measurable results that are fair across the board.

While this may seem like a great solution, (easy to implement, consistent assessment, guaranteed alignment to the benchmarks, etc.) it, like the other major educational reforms since Ronald Regan, doesn't produce the kinds of students we

want, not even close. As detailed previously by numerous people in and outside education circles, Intrinsically-motivated students with skills in critical thinking and understanding are at the core of our educational values. These skills are necessary for the prosperity and continued advancement of our society, and used to be part of the backbone of the educational process. The push for online curriculum is a further standardization that erodes this process, and is just as terrible for real education as the previous reforms were, or worse. As we shall see with the on-line education movement, the more we get away from meaningful teacher-student relationships, and the more we quantify the *qualitative* process of education, the more we miss the mark and muck up an already damaged system. The trend toward online education fails as a 21<sup>st</sup>-century reform for many reasons, but among most heinous are: Students remember little from the rote memorization they do in these programs or merely become “test-wise,” and figure out the system to get right answers; they see little relevance in what they do because lessons have no connection with the real people involved in their education; the lessons are linear, rigid, and not differentiated; and the increasing commodification of education removes in students a qualitative desire for understanding and discovery, and replaces it with a quantitative desire to complete only the basic benchmarks required for credits and completion.

The first problem with our current trend toward online learning has to do with basic comprehension. The question is simple. We put students online, we align the content that is placed in front of students to the Common Core national standards, and we hit “go,” but do the students actually learn anything? Do online schools produce long-term

growth in student comprehension of the required material? Although there are some sporadic successes, these are outliers, and the data shows overwhelmingly what Leonardo da Vinci famously said: “Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in.”

Gay Miron and Jessica Urschel (July 2012) from the National Education Policy Center analyzed years of student data from K<sup>12</sup>-enabled schools and noted that

“only 27.7% of K<sup>12</sup> schools reported meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2010-11. This is nearly identical to the overall performance of all private Education Management Organizations that operate full-time virtual schools (27.4%). In the nation as a whole, an estimated 52% of public schools met AYP in 2010-11.” (pg. v)

This is hardly a good result. Obviously, 27% is terrible, but even when compared with the overall average of 52% (which is everyone else’s success at mastering this art of standardized testing), it is woefully inadequate. Students take course work, continue to “pass” segments in K<sup>12</sup>, but still fail when given traditional standardized tests when they have finished. While we might decry the standardized tests themselves again, if those tests are the new measures, and online educational software like K<sup>12</sup> is supposed to be great at preparing students for those measures using similar techniques, shouldn’t scores reflect a growth in comprehension as it relates to such knowledge-acquisition-based questions? And it gets worse. In a long term study done of Agora Cyber Charter school in New York, the New York Times (Saul 2011) reports that “Nearly 60 percent of

its students are behind grade level in math. Nearly 50 percent trail in reading [and] a third do not graduate on time.” Again the data shows a vast gap between what such programs want to accomplish, and what they actually do in real world scenarios. Not only are we far removed from the critical thinking students we want qualitatively, we can’t even make on-line learning work quantitatively. And this is but two examples of many. Numerous amounts of data are now being compiled that shows many failing schools. It is a complete mess, and despite all of the seemingly great advantages to having an online curriculum, the end product is the same, students do worse when taken out of the traditional classroom environment and placed in a virtual setting—with the virtual classroom creating virtually no results.

Nowhere is this more evident than in my classroom right now, where on-line learning is more predominant than ever, and demonstrates many other problems that sometimes don’t appear on a statistics log. I began last year studying and collecting data in our virtual environment. More than any other evidence I have come across in all of my research, it was my own classes, and how they performed using only computers, who showed me the most profound reasons why our modern trend toward online learning is such a terrible failure.

I have a morning lab of 20 students all taking various classes in Education 2020 (our current virtual environment, although last year we were using OdysseyWare). Students are completely independent, working through online course material created by professionals at Education2020 with me serving as merely as a proctor—monitoring their progress, unblocking tests, etc, as they finish their material (Students must be on-



site to take tests, to prevent cheating, but otherwise they can theoretically do lessons anywhere). Most of our students are hybrid students (those with both traditional and online classes), while others, indeed an ever growing percentage, are truly “virtual,” (those who take all of their high school classwork online). Of those who are virtual, only a handful ever come into a class to work, most stay at home unless they need to take a final test. It should be noted that in my rural setting, students are predominately low income (more than 70% free and reduced), 90% white, and 6% Latino.

In was in this environment, working day to day with my students that I noticed the first of many specific trends — that a great percentage of students don’t wish to actually learn the material they are presented, they just want credit. A vast majority of my students try to find “workarounds” to move on from a lesson. Many students ask me to help them by having me tell them which questions on a test they got wrong. (The program allows me to see how they answer test questions in real time, as they are working). The issue is that many don’t submit the test for computerized grading before they asking this question, and thus I immediately figured out the issue. They were cheating. Students were in no way attempting to learn the lesson, often they were waiting until the virtual teacher finished speaking (the program requires you to watch a *whole* lecture video with no fast forwarding), quickly clicking random answers, and then coming to me hoping that I would go over the questions with them. By doing this, they would know the ones they already guessed right, get the right answers from me on a few questions they didn’t, and could luck their way into completing the test easily. From this, Students have rapidly become “wise” to the test and how procedures on our

tests work. They have figured out that if they are crafty enough, they can get from a teacher, just enough “help” (right answers) to increase the chances that their other random guesses are right and they can pass the final test, even if just barely, with a 60 percent or better. Many find it easy to guess and with the optional retakes that teachers give across the board, passing with a 60% is often an easy exercise. Not an exercise of the mind for knowledge, of course, but of the wit for deception and strategy—many have figured out how to manipulate the system and get a passing grade without having to engage with the learning at all. In fact, monitoring MP3 Player usage has become a major problem for our school now, as many students try to not even listen to the virtual teacher, and instead plug their headphones directly into a music player of choice during on-line lectures. Teachers think they are focusing on their virtual lessons, but instead students are engaging with a playlist from Billboard’s Top 40, knowing that there is a good chance they can luck their way into a passing grade anyway. Our increase in standardization has led many schools down a path that leads to this. It doesn’t produce learning, but students with a 60% still get credit; they still pass, and they still move on.

Much like the national statistics on the matter, my students are not learning the material, and the reasons are becoming obvious. The rote memorization required is not meaningful, and has no context for many students. Often they care little for the actual process of learning and care more about how they can manipulate the system to their advantage and move on; their “test-wiseness” was being tested to the maximum, but they are gaining little else. No teacher connects with either the student or the lessons.

In Mr. Rogers' class, I had a teacher who cared about the material, and about me, and he impressed upon me the importance of learning and growing—the foundations of a good education. I gained important skills like critical thinking, grew to love learning, and became more intrinsically motivated as a result. In my current online classroom, already-behind students don't connect with the material, and the teachers, who didn't create the lesson and are not all history-certified, also don't connect with the material, and that vital connection that created the learning that propelled me when I was in school has become severed. In this world full of data, the essence of a good education is being lost. A student today can create a scenario where they demonstrate competence without actually gaining anything, and the student-teacher relationship that facilitates true learning is eroded away. Cheating in this way is easy for two reasons. First is the nature of computer-based learning (with a short list of answers, and the ability to retake the same test), but more important is that because all of the material is on the computer, the student is not harming another person. It is much harder to cheat when you have to be dishonorable to a teacher, mentor, or parent, etc. Gaming the "system" is easier to get around morally, and the lack of a human connection in on-line learning is what facilitates that. In many cases, both teacher and student gain nothing from the online learning experience, and they don't care much at all as the entire process is all done in the name of checking off yet another box on society's list of benchmarks.

Another point to be made in this scenario is that I was the only teacher in my staff of eight working in the lab to bring up this issue, despite the fact students had been

perpetrating this scheme in virtually every class, every hour of the day, for months. Teachers were either unaware of the problem, or, more likely, knew students were slightly manipulating the system, but continued to “help” despite that fact. In either case, this allowed for a full-scale circumventing of the system, as it was easier for everybody to simply move on and continue working ahead than for teachers to take 20 minutes each time to deal with the issue that a particular student hadn’t really learned the lesson, but was instead gaming the system.

On our report cards, students moving forward in their online classes are marked “P” for progressing; are they really progressing? Are they really gaining important life skills that they need for the betterment of themselves and our society? Progressing indeed— We say so, but the fact is many of them, are *not*.

Since the start of the 2012 school year, I have encountered no less than 50 confirmed examples of such cheating, and much to my dismay, I found this rampant “testwiseness” to be a consistent trend around the country, as my school is not the only one where online education has encouraged unique workarounds. Take this scenario from a school in Tennessee as reported in the *New York Times*:

“MEMPHIS — Jack London was the subject in Daterrius Hamilton’s online English 3 course. In a high school classroom packed with computers, he read a brief biography of London with single-paragraph excerpts from the author’s works. But the curriculum did not require him, as it had generations of English students, to wade through a tattered copy of “Call of the Wild” or “To Build a

Fire.” Mr. Hamilton, who had failed English 3 in a conventional classroom and was hoping to earn credit online to graduate, was asked a question about the meaning of social Darwinism. He pasted the question into Google and read a summary of a Wikipedia entry. He copied the language, spell-checked it and e-mailed it to his teacher. (Gabriel, P. A1)

In Memphis, it seems, students are trying to “get away with it” just like students in Paw Paw are. In much the same way, and for many of the same reasons, in both instances failing students placed in online classes wished, not to learn what they missed the first time, but to “get-by-and-pass” the second time around. In this case, what did teachers do about it? In Memphis, the teachers missed it, just like they did in Paw Paw.

Sixty-one students are in the courses this semester, including Mr. Hamilton, whose average in English 3 is below passing. Melony Smith, his online teacher, said she had not immediately recognized that his answer on the Jack London assignment was copied from the Web, but she said plagiarism was a problem for many students. (Gabriel, P. A1).

Much like our previous examples, Mr. Hamilton and numerous examples from my classroom prove again why our moves toward standardization are failing. In my experience with students in lab, and in examples from around the country, online learning encourages cheating, as students game the system and use it to their advantage. This is only part of the issue, however. One of the reasons why this cheating

is allowed to flourish has to do with nature of the technology itself (copy and pasting answers, multiple “guess” questions. etc,) but the other reason is again that that it provides little-to-no student/teacher engagement, which is the major point. I did not create any of the lessons in my lab class, so I don’t specifically know what each lesson is currently teaching, and thus I am not specifically engaged in what each student is learning. The essence of why I love to teach—to use my knowledge to help a student grow as an intellectual—is gone.

In a class of 20, I currently have 15 different courses among them—some are taking freshman English, some are in sophomore, or senior. Some too, are in history, or even advanced math or physics (both of which I am not certified in). Imagine trying to teach and be current in fifteen different lessons every hour: different areas, subjects, *and* disciplines. It is impossible for me as a teacher to follow all of the strands that are currently happening in my classroom at any one time. And it is “happening” too, as if I am merely a bystander in the order of events—I am not teaching at all, merely monitoring as they attempt to move ahead in the program while I use classroom discipline to keep them on track. And this is the point, as the “salesperson” for Education 2020 touted the fact that teachers would not have to know the material because the program would do the “heavy lifting.” I want to help my students be successful, but often I don’t even know where they are currently in their lessons. The system is designed to only alert the teacher when a student fails and needs a retake, or needs permission to move on. Under this scenario, It is possible for a student to guess his way through multiple lessons, units and tests, ask for help on only a smattering of

answers to “pass”, and have virtually no contact with the teacher at all as they make their way through.

Under this system, both students *and* teachers don't have any connection to the material because they have never encountered it before. It is worse when you think of an English teacher like me facilitating a class entitled *Advanced Physics*. Having never taken the class before in college (much less being qualified to teach it), I am just as much at a loss as the student. This is a horrible situation where both student and I struggle to force our way through pages of notes and online materials to memorize data and apply it to a multiple choice question. It doesn't teach, and it doesn't create critical thinking or life-long learning. In short, it may demonstrate the craftiness necessary to “get by” in the real world, or to check the box called “progressing,” but if what we want is an actual education to go along with our schooling, it doesn't work. For them or for me.

Unlike my experiences with Mr. Rogers, where I felt connected with a teacher and engaged in the process of wanting to learn more about a subject he was passionate about, the process of online learning, for both student and teacher, is *disengaging*. The student is given, in this scenario, little reason to do more than the bare minimum, and little reason to engage at all in actually gaining true understanding, he could simply memorize some (if any at all) of the material, get “test wise” to how to manipulate the system, and ask a teacher to help with the rest. The sense of discovery and the joy of learning are removed from the equation. The individual student-teacher connection that made me want to be a better learner, and eventually a teacher myself, in a key

missing element in my teaching in this online environment. Altogether, this process of taking a class in ED2020 will guarantee only that the student has demonstrated a passing grade on its own test, and even then it might only show that all they learned was how to cheat the system. Now with Miron and Urschel (July 2012), showing us that only 27% of many on-line students actually meet AYP on outside assessment, even if there are actual gains, these short-term upticks on individual tests will have little effect on my student's long-term learning and performance. In a great many ways, and across the spectrum, our current reforms continue them. Students resort to cheating to meet some illusory, arbitrary standard that means little to them, but it won't even give them the skills needed to pass be successful in life, or even to the standards-based test they needs to demonstrate the proficiency they are trying to master. The ultimate standardization has proven itself to not work on just about every level.

It is interesting to note what can be gleamed from this. Besides the obvious and already stated argument that little to nothing is learned in this manner, the increase in the use of online learning brings up another point that is, in many ways, at the heart of the entire issue of our modern push toward standardization, the commodification of education. In this case, like so many others, students in standardized situations feel less like they are gaining meaningful experiences, and more like they are monkeys in a lab trying to replicate specific results. They are not compared to their own growth model, they are compared to an arbitrary standard that exists to show them where they should be in relation to everyone else. "Advanced Physics" has a list of X number of terms and skills that need to be memorized, and students need to hit that bar. Academic success,



in this model, is not a personal endeavor, it is a prize to be won—it removes the idea that education should be done for its own sake, for personal intellectual growth, and replaces it with the idea that education is a commodity that can be bought and sold. Take this test, click this button, fill in this oval, (drink this potion?) and all will be better! Finish this .25 credit, and you too will never have to take math again! It demeans the process of learning and turns it into something it is not. True learning is a life-long process, as many have pointed out, and like the popular phrase, it is more about the journey than the destination. Is learning ever really done? When we quantify education by giving so much importance to the completion of a benchmark or the gaining of a piece of credit issued in Education 2020 or K<sup>12</sup>, we demonstrate that we don't care about the real educational growth of the student personally, only that they can jump through a specific hoop and meet a standard generally. The connection that allowed Socrates to engage with Plato is lost, the sense of discovery that inspired DaVinci is missing, the lesson that I learned twenty years ago from Mr. Rogers about the nature of learning that inspired me to be a teacher is all but absent, and any hope I have ever had to reach the students in my classroom sits on the other side of a fiber optic connection at a data center in Ohio. Online learning programs that tout their “personalized” curriculum are, oddly, not really that personal.

I once blew up a beaker in science class. I was a ninth grader, and I measure things more carefully now in all aspects of my life because of that experience. When I think of online learning and all it represents, I go back to that time when the sound of that glass shattering imprinted a profound memory on me. I never wanted to make that mistake

again, and for the rest of the year, I measured *much* more accurately. I used to *experience* high school. In our modern education trend toward online learning, we allow kids to lose interest and become “testwise” because we make science out to be something disconnected from the real world of advancement and discovery; we commodify it to the point that it loses much of the joy of discovery that made us want to engage with it in the first place. In many ways, (as I have noticed in my classroom and has been mentioned by the Glenn commission, and many others), we have taken the process of learning and distilled it into the commodity of knowledge acquisition in small increments and credits on a computer screen. In doing so, we have taken true learning out of the equation and replaced it with online quirks and workarounds, graphical widgets that “virtually” represent items such as beakers and microscopes, and have taken much of what made science and other subjects so engaging and have replaced it with numbers, graphs, and AYP percentages. My students could probably more readily tell you what a benchmark is than a micrometer, and that is a serious problem.

For modern students who might take their entire high school curriculum online, this trend could mean that we would give a diploma to a student who may not have ever actually handled a microscope, or read a real book, or seen an actual historical artifact. Would we give car keys to a student who has never been given an actual road test? Why then, do we belittle the experiential methods of teaching in this way? And it is not just science, or history. My school offers a complete online-only physical education course. Yes, *all* online. The physical components (workouts every day,

physical conditioning, etc.) are either non-existent, or on an honor system where I *assume* the student did them outside of class. We also offer English classes where you don't have to read any whole books (excerpts or reading comprehension strategies only, please), and physics classes with manipulatives only on the computer—no real world experiments required. No beakers broken, but no minds open either. 21<sup>st</sup>-Century reforms have legislated, not learning, but acquisition, and thus many schools are racing toward creating situations that provide just that: benchmark collection at the expense of real education—trim the fat, as they say.

For many in this fight, however, the tide is shifting, and perhaps in a good way. Data is beginning to show us that online education doesn't provide the consistent results it promised; teachers in the trenches across the country note rampant cheating, testwiseness, and a lack of understanding among even motivated students enrolled in online environments. We are starting to learn that when we remove actual real-world experiences from the table, we lessen the overall experience, and we reinforce the idea that learning is not a process, but a product to be obtained, and this commodification of education is part of a downward spiral that has led us to where we are now. The question is, when will we start acting on it? We went from A Nation at Risk of failing, to a nation actually doing so; destroying itself from within. When will we look at the mountains of data and step away from the precipice, not willing to fall into a chasm from which we cannot return.

CHAPTER 7  
CONCLUSIONS

*“Apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” – Paulo Freire (1970)*

Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education, recently wrote in a blog post titled *Finding Our True Center* that:

“The heart of the classroom is found in the unique relationships between students and teachers. In the same way that a family turns a house into a home, a physical and emotional transformation takes place when teachers and students work together in community to reach common goals. We see it in the trust, the expectations, the experiences and the knowledge of every person in the class.”

He is right. And across the country, researchers, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders in many parts of the educational system have expressed same sentiments. And yet, even as we *say* all the right things, it is what we *do* that defines us, and while we may want many of these ideas to be at the heart of our classrooms, our current standardized system is continually missing the mark by fighting against these

very beliefs that he stands for. Here let us look at the details of what he says, one by one—evidence contrary to the argument.

He first mentions *relationships*. Are we really creating better relationships with our current reform efforts? Am I really having relationships with my students that are as meaningful and impactful as the one Mr. Rodgers had with me? Are relationships between students and teachers really getting better?

He mentions *physical Transformations*. Are physical transformations even possible in an OdysseyWare online class that teaches about physical wellness but does not have a teacher to monitor and encourage it? Isn't that like firing the coach and giving all five players the basketball rule book and asking them to play the game? Does knowledge acquisition that teaches us about proper eating really provide us with the understanding and goal setting that makes us better eaters? When young people most need mentors to show them the results of a healthy lifestyle, is emphasis on simple facts in a standardized test really going to create the changes in our students' lives that we want?

He mentions *emotional transformations*. When students one year after the attacks on 9/11 wished to discuss the tragedy in a rational, intellectual way, to deal with the issue that was still affecting their lives, only to have administrators instruct teachers to "stay on track," are we really helping the emotional needs of our students? Doesn't such a declaration further the gap between what students want and need in their education and what they actually get? Isn't that like a student continuing a dialogue with Socrates, only to have him abruptly stop it? Aren't we encouraging the idea that schooling and learning are different things? And when we create standardized tests

that don't cover critical thinking skills, aren't we devaluing the critical thinking that comes from emotional attachment to learning?

He mentions *Community*. Does he really think we can have a relationship with a testing site, or with a computer? Both of these are increasing exponentially, despite the fact that he means neither. Duncan and others would like for the *community* of education to flourish, and yet, teachers are doing *far* more test preparation than ever before, and pupil numbers for online schools are on the rise across the country. Is our increased standardization helping to increase our ability to connect as a *community* of learners? Does a group of students in a testing room or a computer lab really count as togetherness?

He mentions *common goals*. Our modern *Race to the Top* places increasing valuation on the statistical merits of standardized testing and learning even as researchers, teachers, and others decry the horrors of reducing meaningful learning to rote memorization and knowledge acquisition. Numerous authors write about the problems associated with the implementation of reforms like No Child Left Behind, and yet we continue to accelerate toward a future that includes even more of the measures it put in place. Are these the goals of everyone? Are the goals he speaks of really all that common?

He mentions *expectations*. What does a benchmark expect of us? What does a computer expect from us? Isn't education better when we say, "What does Mr. Rodgers' expect from me?" One is a personal expectation built on a relationship (which Arnie champions here), but when the expectations come from a manual, or when the

final grade is calculated by Education2020 computers in another state, can we really connect to the expectations? And what about growth models? Can we create reasonable expectations for students who need more help than others? Is a unilateral approach to expectations really the best? NCLB was built on expectations. Are they being met? Are they working? Are we as a society better because of expectations that not everyone meets and not all people agree are the best for our students?

He mentions *experiences*. In an educational environment where research shows art, music, and other extra-curricular activities being eroded, are we really creating experiences? Are computer-based classes with no manipulatives and science classes with no microscopes really experiences? Can a teacher teaching from a rigid pre-packaged curriculum really create a meaningful experience? Are classes where the sheer amount of benchmarks to be covered remove many of the hands-on activities really creating a good experience?

He mentions *knowledge*. Is memorization knowledge? Is the copying of vocabulary terms knowledge? Is being able to use testwiseness to “guess” the right answer on an online program, knowledge? Is the ability to withstand 2.9 million hours of testing in Wisconsin without passing out, knowledge? Do any of the reforms we accelerate toward really push us toward more knowledge?

Finally he mentions *every person in the class*. The goal we all strive for—educating everyone so that we all can be a part of a successful tomorrow. It is a lofty ideal, and one that even Arnie Duncan strives for. It is clearly not the case that all of the current reformers are out to commit heinous acts of terrible misfortune on our educational

system. Indeed, I agree that our nation was, and is, At Risk. Who can even argue, that *any child* should be Left Behind? And A Race to the Top was most assuredly written and implemented with many good intentions. Despite all of this; however, is the obvious and the not-so-obvious research, data, and other evidence that shows how despite our good intentions at removing Risk so that No Child is Left Behind in our Race to the Top, we are harming, not helping the system with these reforms.

The data here shows in each case that reforms haven't worked, or are in many ways, hurting the educational advancement of students our current system. Independent assessments from all over show many students becoming less intrinsically motivated and disengaging in the process of schooling, still not meeting performance expectations despite increasing numbers of standardized tests, increasingly attending online schools that neither helps them intellectually, nor increases their chances of meeting the new requirements, and that the state of the system as a whole is either worse, or at least not significantly better, than it was 30 years ago.

I remember Mr. Rodgers' room on the left side of the hall. It was a small but inviting place, with lots of interesting posters, and I remember it felt, as Arnie mentioned, like "home." Even though I mostly remember missing math assignments, dirty desks, and a sea of "Rich is smarter than he demonstrates" comments on assignments, I felt like part of a community in his room more than I ever have since. I always remember the feeling he gave me—the feeling that if I worked hard enough, did a bit more, and pushed my mind to the limit, with his help, I could achieve anything. I always try to instill that in my own students, and every day in my classroom, I remind myself that instilling the idea of



wanting to learn more and having the desire to understand deeply and discover is more important than any single fact, or concept, or story, that I teach. But as I move on and approach my 10<sup>th</sup> year teaching, I see my ability to do those things being stripped away. When I desperately wish to teach new novels to my students, my boss tells me that reading the whole novel is expensive, superfluous, and not on the Michigan Merit Exam. When I would really like to teach a lesson that is not part of the curriculum because I notice that many of my students are behind in a certain area, I always pause and think about the benchmarks that I will have to push back to make that happen. When a student whose father just passed away asks me earnestly how to tie a tie (important, but certainly NOT a part of the curriculum), I have to pause to think about whether or not I can fit it in with all of the other requirements I have to meet as a teacher. Perhaps it is because of a love for teaching and learning that Mr. Rodgers instilled in me when I was in sixth grade, that I still stopped and taught “Neck Ties 101” for ten minutes two weeks ago. I am the educational optimist whose fire hasn’t yet gone out, and I can still picture the best days of my time as a student and how I want to make those moments that matter with my students. This critique on our modern reform is inspired because such days are fleeting now, and more and more I do what I consider the “right” things less and less. More often now, you might find me in my room doing a reading-for-information-comprehension exercise with students as they diligently circle answers. It is not what I want to be doing, but what I am required now to do. Don’t judge; I know that all of these reforms miss the mark, and I often push back against the most

egregious ones, but we all have a new sandbox that we must play in. One of my students once said, “don’t hate the player; hate the game.” I take him at his word.

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