

# “The Iatrogenic Consequences of Standards-Based Education”

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*Summary:*

*While standards-based educational reforms have increased the accountability of teachers and students, the movement has engendered unintended, negative consequences: 1) The propagation of a fixed curriculum, 2) De-emphasis on individualization, 3) Subversion of the teacher, 4) Focus upon measurable outcomes, 5) Creation of an expensive, expansive bureaucracy. The authors describe how standards-based educational reforms undermine learning and threaten the future of public education.*

# The Iatrogenic Consequences of Standards-Based Education

“One does not plan and then try to make circumstances fit those plans.

One tries to make plans fit the circumstances.” General George Patton

Recently, my father has been plagued with adult-onset diabetes, so his doctor prescribed a new drug that is supposed to help alleviate problems with his blood sugar. Last week while driving his car on the way to lunch, he became so dizzy that he pulled off to the side of the road and turned off the car until he regained his equilibrium. What my father experienced was an iatrogenic consequence of the new drug prescribed for diabetes. While the drug brought his blood sugar into balance, it had the iatrogenic consequence of dizziness, a dangerous side-effect when you are traveling 70 miles per hour in heavy traffic down the interstate highway.

Similarly, standards-based assessments were prescribed as the cure for the poor accountability of public schools. Billions of dollars have been spent on curricula, tests, and scoring rubrics so that federal and state agencies can rank schools in terms of student achievement. Over the past twenty years, standards-based education has become the de-facto, “one, true way” to address questions of quality in American public education. No other paradigm is even on the horizon. Despite its pandemic acceptance, the standards-

based solution has serious iatrogenic consequences. Some negative side effects include the following:

- 1) Propagation of a fixed curriculum
- 2) De-emphasis on individualization
- 3) Subversion of the teacher
- 4) Focus upon measurable outcomes
- 5) Development of an expensive, expansive bureaucracy unrelated to instruction

## Propagation of a fixed curriculum

While it is difficult to argue against providing students, parents, and the community with an indication of a school's effectiveness, the obsession with testing has pushed the boundaries of rationality. Students as young as five-years-old are probed, tested, and retested several times during an academic year. In many schools, the time spent solely on test-taking tricks is equivalent to a month of school days.

In most public schools, the state exam has become the basis for the content, delivery, and timing of the curriculum. Surprisingly, many test-makers and reformers claim this is a positive development. Gaddy, Dean, and Kendall (2002) assert, "For a unit to be truly effective, it should reflect...alignment among instruction, assessment, and the curriculum" (p. 12). *Curricular alignment* has become new eduspeak for teaching to the test. Nancy Grasmick, Maryland's state superintendent of schools recently remarked, "If

you're teaching to the test and you're mirroring good teaching that will enhance learning, then we don't see anything wrong with that" (Bushweller, pp 20-25). Grasmick is not alone in praising the practice of teaching to the test. In a 2001 address to Congress, President Bush declared, "If you test a child on basic math and reading skills, and you're teaching to the test, you're teaching math and reading. And that's the whole idea" (February 27, 2001).

A survey of teachers in 2002 found that 70% of teachers thought the state exam had too much influence on the curriculum and half admitted that they spent "a great deal of time" coaching students on test taking strategies (*Quality Counts* 2002). Recently, I was invited to consult with faculty at a school whose achievement scores in writing were among the lowest in the nation. As I conferred with the principal and the chairs of English and reading, I asked what was done to engage students and support them in their writing endeavors, the principal responded, "We teach 6-trait writing. That is what is on the exam; that is what we teach."

Any suggestions that I made, from warm-up activities to techniques for revision, were vetoed with the response that such activities "were beyond the scope of the exam." Indeed, when teachers heard of my plan for improving students' writing, they suggested that I come back in May. Why May? As the principal informed me, students would have already taken their standardized exams, so "it didn't really matter what I taught."

The great advantage in having a fixed, controlled curriculum aligned with an exam is that student progress can be neatly charted over a period of time. It reduces the

cacophony of student disabilities, societal pressures, and cultural influences to a single, inarguable number. When the entirety of an education is summarized in a few digits, a student's circumstances, upbringing, dispositions, talents, and disabilities become irrelevant. In fact, many educational reformers consider such details, which used to be considered essential knowledge for teachers, to be nothing more than excuses for ineptitude (Pankratz and Petrosko 2002; Sowell 2002).

A second advantage of a fixed curriculum is that it virtually assures student progress. At the least, the month of instructional time spent on test-taking tricks, year-in and year-out, should be good for a few points. As teachers get to know the exam, they can continue to sculpt their lessons so that they precisely mirror the contours of the exam. Principals and superintendents, whose reputations ride upon students' relative success on the exams, will demand strict curricular adherence. Thus, the "teachable moment" becomes not a moment to seize, but one to avoid, as such interactions lead students and teachers into unsanctioned areas.

Perhaps the biggest problem with a fixed curriculum is that it assumes knowledge is static, that what is important to know now will be the same as what will be important thirty years hence. By its nature, a fixed curriculum violates the first law of teaching—making learning relevant.

"The curriculum should be conceived, therefore, in terms of a succession of experiences and enterprises having a maximum of lifelikeness for the learner.

The materials of instruction should be selected and organized with a view of giving the learner that development most helpful in meeting and controlling life situations. Learning takes place most effectively and economically in the matrix of a situation which grips the learner, which is to him vital—worth while” (Davis 1927, p. 8).

Mandating conformity to a single vision will not improve the quality of learning. Real learning is messy, involves much trial and error, and promotes experimentation and play. Standards encourage adherence, not innovation. In practice, the standards-based approach has taken the risk out of learning and replaced the unpredictable give-and-take of teaching with implacable, contrived, certainty. Long ago, Coleman (1965) warned against reducing learning to a fixed set of standards. “Real scholarship is active and exciting. But by fixing a standard, rather than providing rewards for greater and greater accomplishment, there is no opportunity for passionate action, but only for passive acquiescence. The adolescent has abundant energy, but he will not spend it on his studies unless there is possibility for positive action” (p. 54). Anyone who has walked the halls of a high school in the past few years knows all too well the stinging accuracy of “passive acquiescence” as a descriptor of student attitudes towards learning today.

## De-emphasis on individualization

Only recently has the mantra of “All Children Can Learn” been supplanted by “No Child Left Behind.” While both these slogans are admirable for their desire to bring everyone up to a minimal standard, one consequence of the new push has been to undermine support for students at each end of the academic scale—the gifted and the remedial.

Truly, one of the greatest challenges for a teacher today is grappling with the wide ability levels of students in a class. In a typical high school class, 5-10% of students will be so advanced that they would be capable of doing college-level work. Another 5-10% would still struggle, even if they found themselves in a fourth grade classroom. As the state exam and state-approved textbooks target students at the lower middle level of achievement, those who fall much above or below the mean receive less attention. As a principal recently told his faculty, “The smart ones will pass [the state exam] even if you ignore them all year, and the ‘ones who just don’t have the brainpower’ will never pass, even if you spent your entire life helping them study for it. Realize where the payoff is best and put your efforts there.”

With standards-based teaching, the gifted become superfluous to the purported goal—to insure that all children reach a minimum level of competence. When a gifted student first walks through the door in late August, he/she can likely already pass the year-end examination. One instructional technique to come out of the standards movement is the practice of using gifted students as unpaid tutors for underperforming

peers, now so pervasive, it is virtually ubiquitous. When America's most intelligent students place at the back of the pack when they participate in international academic competitions, such as TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study) and TIMSS-R (Third International Mathematics and Science Study-Repeat) (National Center for Education Statistics 1995, 1999), we should not act surprised. While gifted students in other countries have been studying the latest advancements in physics, American gifted students have been busy teaching their fellow classmates how to multiply and divide. Little wonder that parents of gifted children have begun pulling their children out of public schools and that private school vouchers and restricted-enrollment charter schools have gained popular support (Baines, Muire, and Stanley 1999).

At the other end of the academic scale are difficult children who may require delicate handling and intensive one-on-one teaching—emotionally disturbed, retarded, learning disabled, and those possessing other special needs. Because these children may have physically or emotionally debilitating conditions that hinder their performance on exams, a teacher who wants to maximize test scores would be better served spending time with other children. Because “No Child Left Behind” and “All Children Can Learn” emphasize the mean of the group over individual advancement, students far from the mean—at the high and low ends of the academic scale—become extraneous. There is a name for coercive enforcement of communal goals over individual achievement—it is called communism.



Indeed, if the same logic implicit in standards-based education were applied to America's Olympic track team, the goal of the team would not be to win gold medals, but to insure that all runners finish the race. The awards and ribbons would go to the teams of other nations whose coaches did not view utilizing talent or helping the needy as hegemonic practices that subjugated the infirm and obese. If the federal government really wanted excellence, they would scrap "No Child Left Behind" for a slogan along the lines of "Excellence, Innovation, and Individualization." However, in the current standards-based paradigm, excellence, innovation, and individualization are at odds with the mandated communal goal of minimum competencies.

## Subversion of the teacher

Over the past few years, the management philosophies of schools and mega-discount store chains have become startlingly similar. Discount stores such as Wal-Mart realized long ago that they could not hire expert employees at the salary offered. So, Wal-Mart's corporate leaders put all their money towards designing and implementing a foolproof, employee-proof "system" of management. The major responsibility of a store manager is to teach the system to employees and to make sure that they abide by it. Employees who follow the system to a T are rewarded with nominal pay increases and those who do not follow the system are fired.

Today, most schools operate the same way. Principals (Managers) give teachers (employees) an approved curriculum, an "aligned" textbook, and test bank. Throw in

some pre-fabricated work sheets aligned to the test and presto! Anyone can teach. In this way, administrators factor out expertise, personality, and teacher/student interactions that might prove difficult to control. Such a philosophy permits administrators to move teachers around like so many interchangeable parts.

Similarly, the Wal-Mart employee working in the housewares department one day might be in lawn and garden the next day. He/she may not know the difference between peat moss and a lamp shade, but it doesn't matter. Customers can read the displays and everything is coded and pre-priced. All the employee has to do is scan the purchase into the register, stow the money, and give the indicated amount of change. Likewise, all a teacher must do is cover the material (and many districts have instigated a lockstep, "teacher-proof" curriculum), administer the exam, and keep the students quiet and in their seats.

By utilizing textbooks built around the mandatory state exam, teachers and students have little chance to exercise authority over what might be learned. The traditional rewards of teaching—fostering relationships with the future generation, "making a difference," thinking up creative ways of delivering content, playing around in a field you love—are still there, but barely. They are being pushed aside by layers of regulatory edicts and a general panic over test scores.

Standards-based education has taken the focus off of the child who is learning and the adult who is instructing and instead invested total confidence in a stack of papers lying on the desk of a nameless bureaucrat. If the teacher is Einstein, he must teach

science according to the standards. If the student is Einstein, he must learn science according to the standards. In either case, it is plain that Einstein doesn't matter; what matters is that damn stack of papers.

## Focus Upon Measurable Outcomes

As a diagnostic assessment of student strengths and weaknesses and a momentary measure of relative academic success, state exams may have some use. However, it would seem unwise to base an entire curriculum on the predicted contents of a single exam, silly to measure teacher effectiveness by the percentage of students who pass an exam, and preposterous to punish schools and students who do poorly. Is it such a revelation that the schools and students who score the lowest might benefit more from help than punishment?

Standardized exam scores are supposed to serve as a general indication of intelligence or competence; they were not designed to measure ethics, common sense, artistic or musical talent, altruism, or patriotism. With as much opportunity to practice as public schools provide over the course of a K-12 education, students should eventually become better test takers.

The emphasis on measurable outcomes excludes electives such as art, music, physical education, and vocational training. Once considered integral to a well-rounded education, electives and vocational programs have begun to disappear from the curriculum. Recently, I visited a school district in Georgia where a single art teacher

provided one thirty-minute art lesson once per month to every student in grades 1-3 in the district. As the sole art teacher in the district, he saw over 1,000 different students per week. Because art was not an option after third grade, adolescents would often happen by his classroom after school in hopes that he might offer some spontaneous, pro-bono instruction. In two adjacent counties, there was no art teacher at all. Part of the unintended fallout from standards-based instruction has been the slow disappearance of all areas of the curriculum that do not get tested. In poor performing urban districts, electives have become an endangered species.

Sternberg (2003) argues that wisdom may be a far preferable outcome than high test scores, especially in light of the myriad complexities of contemporary life. If wisdom were the goal of public education, then standardized test scores would become one of several indicators of success, not the sole criterion. As a citizen of the United States and an inhabitant of planet earth, we need to ask ourselves who we want to make the decisions for our nation and our planet: a neurotic, unstable, egomaniac who scored 20 points higher on the high school exit exam or the wise, experienced, trustworthy, reliable student with abundant common sense. In the standards-based environment, all spoils go to the student with the higher score.

Development of an expensive, expansive bureaucracy unrelated to instruction

In 2002, all 50 states tested students and 27 states held schools “accountable” for student performance. Twenty-four states required students to pass a test to receive a high school diploma and by 2003 seven states will require students pass an exam to move up to the next grade (*Quality Counts* 2002)

Some have maintained that standards-based education will guide the way towards professionalizing teaching as a career. After all, throughout the twentieth century, the American Bar Association and the American Medical Association worked mightily to professionalize their fields. Today, a host of accrediting agencies has arrived on the scene to save teachers from themselves. The result has been the spawning of a plethora of standards—state standards, subject-field standards (promulgated by the National Council of the Social Studies, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, the National Science Teachers Association to name a few), National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), regional accrediting agencies such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and North Central Association (NCA), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support System (INTASC), and others. The U.S. Department of Education, state governments, commercial test publishers, and myriad professional organizations collectively have spent billions (perhaps trillions) of dollars on nothing but testing and the reporting of test results.

Most states have had to create additional bureaucracies just to keep up with the paperwork. These burgeoning bureaucracies are expensive, personnel-intensive, and they are not likely to go away anytime soon. Importantly, the cost to maintain these state bureaucracies represents a significant chunk of the education budget. More money for testing has meant less money for teaching, supplies, and buildings. Many governors who claim to be “education governors” often point to an increase in education expenditures as an indication of their allegiance to K-12 schools. Even in prosperous times, funds devoted to instruction may actually decline, even with fatter budgets. During budget crunches, instructional and athletic programs may get axed, but rarely does testing.

In many states, teacher education programs have suddenly become accountable to state-run agencies whose personnel may have little knowledge of K-12 or higher education. In Colorado, for example, a newly created agency called the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) was created by legislative order in 2000. Once created, CCHE mandated a complete, immediate revision of all teacher education programs in the state by 2001. They announced that state colleges and universities could either abide by the decree or they would be shut down. A characteristic shared by the vast majority of employees at CCHE is their complete lack of experience with K-12 and higher education. Few, if any, are certified teachers and none have ever worked in higher education. Despite the astronomical costs to maintain these massive bureaucracies, governmental “monitoring agencies” have had little positive impact on student

achievement, yet it was under the guise of student achievement that they were created in the first place.

## Conclusion

What does a standards-based education provide? For parents, standards offer an indication of the average achievement level of students in a particular school. For teachers who do not know their subject matter and have little instructional competence, standards offer a place to start. However, for teachers who have a mastery of the subject matter and formidable instructional prowess, standards represent non-negotiable marching orders—a bureaucratic intrusion on the sanctity of the classroom. For students, standards represent an edict against individualization, a giant step backwards. Indeed, standards-based education harkens back to 1894 when the Committee of Ten unanimously agreed “...that every subject which is taught at all in...school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil” (p. 17).

Standards-based education may address the question of accountability, but the corresponding iatrogenic consequences have been devastating. The joy of learning has been buried by an avalanche of paper and statistics. The dismal, dizzying consequences of standards-based education are threatening the very survival of public education. Perhaps it is time to step back and regain our equilibrium before we drive ourselves over the cliff.

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