

## In My View

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# Sorry, President Obama, but High-Stakes Tests Can't Cure Cancer

by Daniel Tanner

### Abstract

*Successive nationalizing programs for school reform in the United States have centered on external high-stakes testing and charter schools aimed at closing the widening achievement gap between children of socioeconomically disadvantaged and advantaged families. But the chief cause of the achievement gap is poverty, and poverty cannot be cured by high-stakes tests. Charter schools raise a clear and present danger of splitting up the inclusive unitary school structure—a uniquely American invention.*

**Key words:** assessment/evaluation/measurement/testing, political/government influence

President Obama, it is puzzling that Race to the Top—your education reform program centered on external high-stakes testing and school restructuring by means of charter schools—is virtually identical to the reform programs of two of your predecessors. Both the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(2003) of George W. Bush and the *America 2000* manifesto (U.S. Department of Education, 1991) of George H. W. Bush were met by massive failure. So we seem to be left with the conundrum today of *Race to the Top and Leave the Children Behind*.

All three of these national education reform programs have targeted the same primary goals: (a) to regain America's hegemony in the global economic marketplace, (b) to close the achievement chasm between the socioeconomically disadvantaged and

advantaged populations of children in our schools, and (c) to raise America's ranking on external high-stakes achievement tests "to the top" among leading national economies. There is no evidence to indicate that your education reform program can succeed in attaining these goals. Yet by every indication, there is great danger that your drive for high-stakes testing and charter schools will split up the unitary school structure created in America to advance the ideals of progress and unity through diversity.

We must face the fact that cognitive and school achievement deficits of children in poverty cannot be remediated by high-stakes tests, but require a direct and concerted attack on poverty itself. Consequently, the time is long overdue to examine the causes of failure, past and present, and find the keys to solutions.

### Law of the Minimum

One cause of failure can best be understood by considering the Law of the Minimum, a fundamental principle of life science. The Law of the Minimum,

conceived early in the nineteenth century by German agricultural scientist Justus von Liebig, holds that the availability of the most abundant nutrient essential for plant growth is only as good as the availability of the least abundant (essential) nutrient. Hence, if there is a deficiency of, say, the essential nutrient of potassium in the soil, no increase in the amount of nitrogen will make up for the deficiency, with the consequence that the plant will not grow normally and reach its potential. Put simply, a deficiency of vitamin D in a child's diet cannot be corrected by a compensatory increase in vitamin A.

The Law of the Minimum explains why compensatory education has failed. It explains why high-stakes tests cannot close the achievement gap between socioeconomically disadvantaged and advantaged children any more than those tests can eradicate poverty, or any more than they can cure cancer. In the same vein, witness the policy of taking away education resources and facilities from existing public schools and reallocating them to charter schools. How can this practice have but deleterious consequences for our mainstream public schools?

### Widening Gap

Since the mid-twentieth century, leading democratic industrial nations have made great strides in eliminating poverty and adopting the American tradition of an inclusive unitary school

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structure—a structure capped by the comprehensive high school and governed by progressive educational practices as pioneered in America over the first half of the twentieth century. But now, under your program, America is splitting up its school system and abandoning the comprehensive curriculum to revert back to core basics paired with yet another layer of high-stakes tests. At the same time, the school achievement gap between children of advantaged families and children of low-income families continues to widen. Similarly, the income gap between the affluent and the poor also has widened in America over recent decades. Equal educational opportunity is nothing more than a cliché when economic and social disparity continues to grow between the privileged and the poor.

As a child of the Great Depression, I remember the tune and some of the satirical lyrics of a popular song echoing the widening income gap between the rich and the poor. A couple of stanzas will reveal the relevance of the song "Ain't We Got Fun?" (Whiting, 1921) to the growing income gap in the America of today:

*Every morning, every evening  
Ain't we got fun?  
Not much money, oh, but honey  
Ain't we got fun?*

*There's nothing surer  
The rich get richer and the poor get poorer  
In the meantime, in between time  
Ain't we got fun?*

Over time, research studies have revealed that demographic changes in the United States, along with the persistent problem of poverty, have accounted for low school achievement

in the largest minority populations. One of the most comprehensive studies was contracted by the U.S. Department of Energy, formerly the Atomic Energy Commission, to prove allegations of U.S. school failure and support the reforms proposed by President George H. W. Bush in *America 2000* (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). The research project, which came to be known as the Sandia study, was conducted independently by leading social scientists at the Sandia National Laboratories. Bearing the title *Perspectives on Education in America* (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993), the Sandia study found that when U.S. pupil populations were matched against commensurate (socioeconomically equivalent) pupil populations of other leading nations, U.S. students more than held their own in achievement. Further, the Sandia research revealed that the allegations of systemic school failure as put forth in *America 2000* were refuted by evidence to the contrary and that the proposals for reform were misconceived and misdirected. Among the conclusions of the Sandia study was that much of the blame for problems in the school system (real, imagined, or manufactured) was being dropped at the feet of teachers and administrators with demoralizing effects and that the system of public education was being used as a scapegoat by many agencies as cover for their own failures in the global economic marketplace.

This study, drawing data from such accredited sources as the National Center for Education Statistics, National Science Foundation, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Bureau of the Census, College Entrance Examination Board, National Assessment of Educational Progress, and various international agen-

cies, also reported that dramatic and accelerating demographic changes have been taking place in U.S. schools for decades as a result of increases in immigration (both legal and illegal), representing more than 150 languages, with the concentration of these minority populations in disadvantaged, congested, inner-city schools. These demographic trends have continued to this day. The Sandia study also reported that a majority of American families with children under six years of age had both parents in the workforce and that more than 40% of children were being reared by a single parent.

Unfortunately, the Sandia study was effectively suppressed and never published by the federal government because the findings directly contradicted the allegations of school failure and proposals for school reform in *America 2000*.

### Market-Driven Reform

In seeking programmatic school reform, our national leadership has turned to economics, Wall Street, and big business, which have endorsed and promoted the policy of turning the public schools over to a market-driven doctrine and its attendant mechanisms: high-stakes tests to measure production outcomes, and restructuring to create an alternative system of schools in competition with our existing school system. The establishment of an alternative system of schools is, of course, far cheaper than providing the needed investment in facilities and resources for the established schools, which must serve all the children of all the people. But sapping resources and expropriating facilities from the established schools only exacerbate existing deficiencies instead of correcting them.



With regard to the doctrine of free-market economics in justifying a so-called competing system of charter schools, we might look to the lessons of history when, in the nineteenth century, England provided state funds to support charter schools, with the result that the education system reflected and reinforced the traditional divisions of society by social standing and economic status. Fast forward to 1974–1975, when I was a visiting scholar at the University of London. I followed the progress as England moved away from the divided social class system and created unitary, comprehensive secondary schools. Despite subsequent efforts by the Margaret Thatcher government to revert the system to charter schools, the comprehensive model succeeded in gaining popular support. In earlier years, similar successful transformations toward the comprehensive model took place in Sweden and elsewhere.

The doctrine of market-driven economics allows for the dangerous practice of treating education as a manufacturing process and children as products—measured in value by external high-stakes tests, which in turn fix the level of success (or failure) of the teacher, the principal, and the school. These tests not only lack predictive validity, but also assess just a narrow band of established-convergent learning with prefabricated answers suited to the multiple-choice format. The tests neglect idea-oriented, emergent learning in which the student constructs answers in his or her own words.

Standardized tests are invalid for constructivist learning as well as of low validity for predicting college success. Actually, the grades assigned students by teachers remain the most valid single predictor of academic performance

in college. Yet the use of standardized tests as a determinant of college readiness continues, perhaps because it provides the most convenient and intimidating instrument for rejecting the college applicant. An intimidated applicant, certainly, is not likely to appeal.

### The Needed Transformation

Although nothing short of a real war on poverty is needed, the unifying role of the school remains critical to the American democratic prospect. It is not by accident that other leading democratic nations have discovered the value of an inclusive and comprehensive school structure. School space must no longer be measured by the number of seats, but as an environment for exploration, investigation, and application of knowledge as connected to life experience—with students working together with teachers in a cooperative, consultative, and collaborative relationship. This approach requires adequate learning resources and inviting facilities.

The American public school system must no longer be made a scapegoat for shortcomings or failures of other institutions, sectors, or agencies, including those under the presidency. The power of the school in the democratic transformation should not be undervalued. We must remember that the struggle for civil rights and against racial segregation was not really won on the city bus or at the lunch counter, but in the public schools by the rising generation working with ordinary teachers.

### Role of the Teacher

The business of public education is to serve the cosmopolitan public interest in advancing American democracy. The great gains made after the mid-

twentieth century in the long struggle for the professionalization of the American teacher have been reversed. The role of the teacher in curriculum development and in the exercise of academic freedom has been diminished and demeaned, and is being recast to that of a low-grade technician whose job is to produce higher and higher pupil test scores under conditions of external pressure and coercion. Any success is temporary and gained at the expense of real progress in achievement. In contrast, children and adolescents become genuinely motivated to learn how to learn by working at their studies through collaboration, consultation, and cooperation with their peers under the guidance of the teacher in a democratic classroom and school environment.

As for the teacher, Einstein (1936/1995) expressed and answered the problem directly, succinctly, and prophetically in these words:

The teacher should be given extensive liberty in the selection of the material to be taught and the methods of teaching employed by him. For it is true . . . that pleasure in the shaping of work is killed by force and by exterior pressure (p. 35).

As for the student, the external pressure of high-stakes tests may result in higher test scores, but pleasure in the shaping of learning may be diminished or lost for a lifetime. ■

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