

The Misdirection of Modern American Education

by Alan M. Weber

The rash of stories, editorials and letters that have been published in recent weeks and months concerning the “Common Core” curricula and the teacher evaluations, very often written by non-educators, deserve thoughtful and knowledgeable responses. As someone who trains teachers and deeply believes that they should be held to the highest pedagogical and ethical standards, I would like to try to explain why there is such a mounting revolt by educators, parents and students against the standardization of tests and teaching, and to the resultant assessment of and effects on teachers and children.

Standardized tests have been a controversy in the field of education for a very long time. So-called “I.Q. tests,” for example, have been discredited in many corners for their failure to account for environmental factors, diversity of intelligences, inherent faults and biases, and psychological variables in test taking. The perspective that an impersonal and inflexible instrument could better determine what a student does or does not know or is or is not able to do than could that student’s own teacher through his/her own, more familiar, natural, ongoing and creative methods has grown concurrently to the increasing distrust of teachers. As such, it reflects a heightened longing for education to be shaped into a “business model,” akin to the tallying of the output or the measuring of the speed of the production of widgets, rather than understanding it as a more complex, albeit vulnerable system of human dynamics, wherein bottom lines are relative, nothing is subject to guarantee except effort, and “one size does not fit all.”

Between the occurrences of poorly constructed questions, incorrect answers and test misapplications, of culture, gender, language and ability biases, and of the simple facts that some students, like some of us, are better test takers than others, some becoming overtaken with test anxiety and paralysis, how can tests be seen as a total and accurate picture (let alone a moving picture) of either student or teacher? And yet both groups are being held increasingly accountable for the distorted and stigmatizing outcomes, while the publishers of these tests, test-based curriculum books, test preparation guides and test remediation materials are raking in the incomes. The better to fail you with, my dear.

When the Bush-era “No Child Left Behind” first spawned this test mania (2001: A Test Odyssey), there was to have been a wall separating the use of the results to allegedly improve and equalize student learning, which we know did not happen, and their use to assess, tenure, promote or reward teachers. But with the Obama Administration’s “Race to the Top,” rather than moving away from test-based education and assessment, as was his promise while campaigning in front of teachers’ groups, we have entrenched further. They tell us they know that tests are not the best, most reliable instrument for measuring student or teacher performance. They tell us they don’t want teachers teaching to the test. They tell us they want a broader curriculum than just what’s “on the test.” They tell us they want innovation. But out of the other sides of their mouths they also tell us that it’s a race, for desperately needed funds, and if nothing better comes to mind, then more

testing we will go. Children are placed in competition with each other based on the fortunes and inequities of geography. Whether or not they are endowed by their government depends on whether the particular bureaucrats and politicians that determine policies for their schools, usually with little input from those who are to execute them, can sufficiently develop and dictate means to please the referees of this race. And what will please them... actually nothing terribly different from what amateur architects of the educational system have always pushed.

Whenever there has been concern over American students “falling behind” those of other countries, the answer has consistently been “earlier is better,” “make it harder” and “back to basics.” During the post-Sputnik panic, when we were supposedly losing the cold war to the evil Soviets, we answered with the so-called “pushed-down curriculum.” Academic content was moved down a year, sometimes two, so that our students would “catch up.” But what pedagogic study has ever supported the notion that earlier is in fact better? For decades we have been pushing preschoolers and kindergartners like almost no other nation, including, despite contrary presumptions, Japan and China. And what have we gotten for it, other than what psychologists began calling “second grade burn-out?” Never mind that Denmark, which happens to have been the most literate country in the world, is one of the latest in beginning reading and writing instruction. We have piled homework onto children younger and younger, continuing to do so even in the face of a building case that homework yields almost no academic benefits, except in the singular case of middle grade math memorization. And what have we gotten for it, other than increased stress on children, conflict within families and an obesity epidemic? Research on the reasons why educational systems in a number of other countries are meeting with better “results,” however defined, rarely points to earlier or harder work. More often factors like the quality of teacher training and treatment, the priorities and temperament of the culture, innovative and researched techniques, and an early foundation of play and childhood seem to be among the difference makers of significance. Also not to be ignored is the tendency of many other countries to more systematically track or filter out students whose background or biology might predict lower performance scores.

But evidence is an inconvenience, especially unreliable, apparently, when coming from educators. Because his mother woke him up before the crack of dawn to do his drills and now he’s President, Barack Obama became an education expert, pushing for longer school days and years. Michael Bloomberg, by virtue of his aggressive business success, somehow became an education expert, seizing control of “his” Board of Education and forcing through non-forgiving high stakes testing for third graders. Andrew Cuomo, who reaped the rewards and learned the lessons of his father’s rise and fall, somehow became an education expert, dictating to districts that if they don’t meet his standards for teacher assessment in a sufficiently tough and timely manner, he will determine the methodology for them. What academic experts and research are these politicians relying on? How is John King, with no more than three years teaching experience, one in Puerto Rico, one in a private school and one in a charter school, qualified to be the New York State Commissioner of Education, making decisions regarding the fate of New York public school teachers despite having never walked in their shoes? (Well, that is, after all, three

more years of some form of teaching than Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education and architect of “Race to the Top,” ever had.)

When subsequent newspaper editorials began calling us out once more, first for “falling behind” the Japanese, and then the Chinese, there has been more pushing down and more plain old pushing. Yes, once in grade school those countries do drive their students hard academically. And perhaps if we keep on the course we’re going, although we may never quite catch up to them in science and technology, we can surely close the gap significantly in suicide rates. We are increasingly producing over-stressed, disinterested, uncreative, homogenized students who hate school and the very concept of “learning” and have lost their senses of self and wonder. Those of us who may be conspiracy theorists might even wonder if there isn’t a certain ulterior motive for the politicians and businesses who seek to control education and society in spitting out manipulable students who were never taught to think, only to pass tests. Children are more than combatants in a battle for technological supremacy and education is more than preparation for a job. Even regardless of what other countries are doing or the perceived virtues of our religion of competition, we owe it to our children to educate them as whole, respected, naturally inquisitive, socially in need, uniquely diverse, vulnerable and precious human beings.

All of this finally brings us to the subjects of current debates and headlines, “Common Core” and the teacher evaluations. As to “Common Core,” certainly many teachers need parameters, direction and resources. What they do not need is a kind of educational cookbook. High standards, as stated before, are critically important, but when we talk about standards we should be focusing mostly on professional standards, not prescriptive ones. The problem is that teaching is no longer seen as a profession, in part because teachers, unlike doctors or lawyers or psychiatric social workers, are wrongfully paid through property taxes. They are seen then as “public servants,” and typically disparaged ones at that. Anyone can teach, right? Well, anyone can follow directions anyway. We don’t tell doctors or lawyers or therapists the singular set of objectives and strategies they must apply in every case. We hold them to oaths, not formulas. We rely on their professional discretion based on their training. Sadly, teacher training is one of our greatest areas of weakness and much of the cause of the problems that are being misaddressed. But the kind of training we need is one that would inspire, enlighten and empower teachers to be those kinds of decision makers, adapting goals and methods based on individual developmental levels, needs, cultural backgrounds, learning styles and interests, not just to follow a script. Brain research informs us that if learning is not connected to children’s experiences, thus relevant and meaningful, is not self-motivated and self-constructed, is not pleasurable and non-stressful, the synapses with which to make further cognitive connections will not sufficiently form.

There are undoubtedly good things about Common Core, notably its intended emphasis on thinking. But academic subjects and standards need to be age appropriate, well constructed and flexible. The pre-kindergarten standards are basically fine; in fact, I teach my students that the rich, appropriate activities well trained preschool teachers regularly do meet most of the standards already. Unfortunately, while sequential learning, one concept or skill built on a previous one, is important, Common Core doesn’t

build them developmentally, it builds them exponentially. As it moves up grade level to grade level, the gap between what is and is not appropriate, and too often even what is possible and not possible to be learning grows. And teachers can no longer rely on their own good and valuable activities to meet the standards, they have to artificially conform to top-down lessons that they don't believe in and sometimes don't even understand. Do we really want every classroom of children, regardless of who they are, where they live, what they've experienced, how far they've developed, what they care about and who they want to be, to be focused on the same things in the same way at the same time? How can the axiom that children learn "at their own pace" be denied? What happened to the breakthrough of "differentiated instruction" based on our new understandings of the human brain through Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences? And do we really want the government, or business interests (as with school vouchers, charter schools or Common Core derived profits), controlling public education? Let the government protect the rights and safety of students, and leave curriculum, mentoring and, where necessary, policing of teachers to legitimate, accessible and imaginative master educators.

So this should in no way be construed as a denial of the need for teacher assessment, for oversight and the filtering out of the indisputably too many teachers out there who do not deserve the title of "teacher." The question is how and by whom are they to be assessed? Currently in New York almost half of teachers' "grades" are based on their students' test performances and the improvement shown or not shown. Should we assess doctors on how many of their patients got better rather than died, or do we also consider what illness they came in with and how they responded to treatment? Should we assess lawyers on how many of their clients got off rather than being convicted, or do we also consider their degree of guilt and the impact of the judge, jury and prosecution? The messages to teachers are clear, and they are chilling. Go to a school district where students are better prepared and paid for, rather than a poorer one where you can make that real difference that you first dreamed of before the system woke you up. Try to have your students perform below par at first because you don't want to be designated in the newspapers as deficient because scores didn't go up. And, most of all, avoid like the plague students who have disabilities or disadvantages, because they will more likely bring "your" scores down. Heaven help you if economic or demographic factors not within your control cause you to end up with more students in your class next year, let alone more students with problems, because politicians nor the public will. By all means teach to the test, since the public reputations of your students, yourself and your district depend on it... and cheat if necessary, since it's really all about numbers, not real educational and human achievement. How do those like Obama and Cuomo, who were anti-poverty crusaders before they became politicians, not understand that test scores are more greatly influenced by factors like nutrition, health, environment, facilities, parental education, self-esteem, prejudice and money than by the actions of one teacher, as important and obligatory those educational and ethical actions assuredly are?

Mechanisms for teacher assessment must not be mechanical. Of necessity they must be creative and complex, synergistic and human. Master mentorship, peer collaboration, student evaluations and enhanced training must be part of that. Support and

empowerment have to replace scapegoating and shackling. Rather than competitively doling out merit pay to teachers based unavoidably on arbitrary or unfair bases, we should put money where it counts: smaller class sizes, better teacher training, multidisciplinary innovations, and, ultimately, a total reform of the public school system to assert what modern teaching should be: the ability to take each child from the point at which s/he comes to us and bring that child along as far as, together, we can. Sure, that might be hard for the bureaucrats and bean counters to measure, but what of any value in interpersonal dynamics is easy or measurable? We are rapidly reaching the bottom of a slippery slope, so far down we can't even see the landscape anymore. Like Sisyphus, we have to roll the boulder all the way back up the hill, but unlike him, we can reach the top if we cooperate and deliberate, not race.