

More than a Number: How Reducing the Assessment of Teaching and Learning to a Number Narrows the Curriculum, Marginalizes Creativity and Leads to a Destructive School Climate

There is always an easy solution to every human problem – neat, plausible and wrong

~ H.L. Mencken

(Note to the committee: Please be aware that the text below represents a compendium of excerpts from articles, blogs and presentations that I have written/made/read on the issue of standardized testing over the last four years. I have referenced the pieces through a superscript keyed to the reference list at the end. Furthermore, other citations that appear in the text are also referenced in a separate citations section.)

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Teaching is the most important job on the planet ¹. I come to this conclusion, in part, because of the work of a Renaissance master painter. In addition, after 43 years as an educator (as a teacher, principal, superintendent and professor) I have developed an unswerving belief in the power of good teaching to transform a young person's life.

A metaphor inspired by Michelangelo's approach to creating his masterpiece, The David, is the defining image for me of the meaning of teaching. Michelangelo's work on this sculpture is based on the artistic discipline known as *disegno*, in which sculpture is considered to be the finest form of art because it mimics divine creation. With this concept in mind, Michelangelo worked under the premise that the image of David was already in the block of stone he was working on – in much the same way as the human soul is found within the physical body. For me, this elegant approach captures the meaning – the art - of teaching. The very word education comes from the root word *educare* – to bring forth.

When we stand in front of a class of students or sit beside an individual student or interact in any way with one of our students, we are practicing the art of uncovering the image of the student beneath the raw material. Our job is to chip away at the outer layers and to coax the divine image to emerge. Gently, diligently, we trust that the image awaits us if we only have the patience and the tools to complete the task. In the deft hand of a skillful teacher, we see the results of this labor. A student will blossom in a classroom which has both a safe and a challenging culture. Vygotsky, the great thinker about the teaching/learning process, calls this place the "zone of proximal development." It is the place where a student feels that she can stretch the limits of her potential because the teacher is there as a non-threatening and motivating mentor to bring forth the best that student has to offer. Such is the teacher as artist.

Unfortunately, the artistry of teaching is being drained out of our classrooms as a result of misbegotten policies from both the federal and state governments. This paper will cite various examples and

illustrative research to support what I believe are the damaging effects of a draconian approach that purports to be in the best of interest of our students and our schools.

Over the last 3-4 years I have had the opportunity to visit schools in various parts of the world in my role as a professor. In fact, I am involved in an ongoing project with South African schools regarding the effects of race and poverty in both US and South African education. But, for the present paper, I would like to cite experiences that I had while visiting schools in China and Finland.

China, where testing has lost its luster

I was a member of a delegation of educators who had the privilege of visiting schools in both city and rural communities as well as places of higher education in China. We talked with students, teachers, administrators and ministry officials. The Chinese teachers and officials gave us a fairly consistent message: they are reform-minded about education. Their reform has multiple themes, including making teachers and students “partners” in the learning process; increasing creativity in the classroom; decreasing competition (changing from what they call their “examination culture”); encouraging students to become involved in social action. Do these goals seem to fit into the social themes that Chinese leaders are striving to weave into the society?

A China expert, Adam Segal² of the Council on Foreign Relations, had this to say in an interview I conducted at my university:

Chinese leaders are not happy with being the “factory to the world.” They know that factory production is energy intensive, pollutes the environment, and means dependence on low wage jobs. They want to move China up the value chain, moving from “made in China” to “innovated in China.” To do this, they have implemented a whole range of policies meant to increase innovation capabilities such as increasing the percent of GDP spent on research and development from 1.5% to 2.5%. Education is expected to play a big part, since creativity and collaboration are seen to be critical to technological innovation.

Segal referred me to an interview with Qian Xuesen, the former Caltech rocket engineer deported from the United States in 1955 who became instrumental in China’s missile program. Soon after his death in 2009, People’s Daily published a final conversation with Qian in which he worried about the future of China:

Today, the party and the state emphasize new technological innovation programs and have invested a lot on “innovation projects” and “innovation plans.” These are necessary. But I think it is more important to have talented people with innovative mindsets. The problem is that there is not a single university in China that is based on a model that develops talents for technology invention. They echo the views of others and do not have unique innovations. They received the influence of feudal ideas and have always been like this. I think this is a great problem China faces.

China is getting it. My personal interviews in China with students and teachers and officials and my own readings and other investigations point out a glaring irony. While we in the US are afraid of competition with China, we double down on a testing culture. The Chinese, also competitive-minded, are trying to

distance themselves from an oppressive testing culture. The recent *New York Times* article below gives an update on the mood in China regarding education:

Chinese Educators Look to American Classrooms³

By DAN LEVIN

BEIJING — To prepare for an endless barrage of secondary-school exams, Zhang Ruifan learned to memorize entire science textbooks. So when his family sent him to high school in the United States, he was so far ahead of his fellow freshmen in math and science that he usually knew the correct answer even before the teacher had finished speaking.

“I’d just blurt it out,” he said in an interview while back home here this summer.

But Ruifan, 15, who goes by Derek in the United States, soon discovered that science was more than just facts and formulas meant to be regurgitated on tests.

At school in West Des Moines, Iowa, where he lived with a host family, his science teacher donned protective goggles and used a long-reach lighter to ignite a hydrogen balloon, just so students could get a firsthand look at the element’s explosive properties.

Then there was the day he and his classmates went up to the roof to learn about gravity by dropping basketballs, tennis balls and other objects over the edge. “Back in China I learned about gravity from a PowerPoint slide,” he said. “That’s it.”

The United States State Department does not break down its data on visas by age and school type, but anecdotal evidence here suggests that increasing numbers of middle-class families are looking for a way out of China’s test-taking gantlet.

“I didn’t want my son to become a book-cramming robot,” said Ruifan’s mother, Wang Pin, explaining why she sent him to live and learn halfway across the world. American educators and politicians have been warning for years that rising powers like China and India are poised to overtake the United States in science achievement. On a 2009 standardized test that drew worldwide attention, students in Shanghai finished first in the sciences among peers from more than 70 countries, while the United States came in 23rd (right behind Hungary).

But even many Chinese educators are dismayed by the country’s obsession with stellar test results. Last fall they convened a conference on the topic in Shanghai.

“When American high school students are discussing the latest models of airplanes, satellites and submarines, China’s smartest students are buried in homework and examination papers,” said Ni Minjing a physics teacher who is the director of the Shanghai Education Commission’s basic education

department, according to Shanghai Daily, an English-language newspaper. “Students also have few chances to do scientific experiments and exercise independent thinking.”

That message appears to be getting through to Chinese education officials, who are moving toward the American model of hands-on science learning. This summer, the Ministry of Education launched the latest in a series of campaigns aimed at shifting the focus away from standardized testing.

The ministry said the systemic fixation with testing “severely hampers student development as a whole person, stunts their healthy growth, and limits opportunities to cultivate social responsibilities, creative spirit, and practical abilities in students.”

But as with so many orders from the central government, it remains to be seen whether these guidelines, aimed at provincial education departments, will be adopted or ignored.

Meanwhile, preparation for China’s national university entrance exam continues to dominate the lives of secondary students. Known as the gaokao, or high test, the exam takes nine hours over two days, and some say it makes the SAT look like a pop quiz. Compounding the pressure, gaokao results are the sole factor used to determine university admissions.

This ironclad criterion, combined with the fact that most families have only one child, gives Chinese parents little incentive to encourage extracurricular activities, lest it divert their children from the slog of gaokao memorization. Critics say it also produces poorly socialized adolescents who are ill-prepared to face the challenges of the real world. Students have their own term for describing the way their teachers impart knowledge: “feeding the ducks.”

As a science teacher in the northwestern region of Ningxia, Wei Jinbao has seen firsthand how China’s education system transforms children into hardworking students with an impressive capacity for processing factual information. “Give them a problem and they will find the answer,” he said. “However, they can’t ask a good question.”

Like many Chinese science professionals, Mr. Wei is keenly aware that the country has yet to produce a Nobel Prize winner in the sciences whose research is homegrown. Over the years, he has tried to spark innovative thinking among his students, but he is missing a critical element: lab equipment, which most Chinese schools see as an unnecessary expense.

Asked why, he sighed in exasperation. “The entrance exam doesn’t test experiments,” he said.

With the popular belief that the United States underperforms other nations on international tests, American parents have normalized “pressure” on their children. In fact, in a Pew Research survey, 64% of US parents felt that parents were not putting enough pressure on students and 11 % felt that there was too much pressure. Results from China were 180 degrees apart from US results, 11 % in China saying there was not enough pressure and 68% saying there was too much (Pew Research Center, 2011).

I would submit that the US has moved toward a “systemic fixation with testing” which ultimately will cripple our goals for a creative and innovative student polity.

Finnish Miracle?

I had the opportunity to travel to Finland and observe several public schools and engage in open and frank discussions with students, teachers, principals, department officials and even a cabinet minister. Our team of investigators, which included principals, teachers and a host of higher ed professors from different New York universities, put together a presentation⁴ that we have made in several locations throughout New York State. A sample of the slides we presented appears below:

The Political Context and School Policy

Finnish School System

- Governmental support and cooperation with schools
- The Finnish principal is trusted and respected
- Finnish school system: centralized with a national level curriculum
- responsible for local implementation
- Principals have relatively higher autonomy
- Finnish principals: experts and instructional leaders.

U.S. School System

- Governmental regulation, lack of support and cooperation, competitive system
- The U.S. principal is less trusted and respected
- U.S. school system: decentralized: moving toward centralized curriculum
- Principals regulated by local, state and federal bureaucracies
- less executive autonomy
- U.S. principals: managers faced with increasing governmental domination and intrusion.

Comparative Political Contexts

Education policy in Finland

- Emphasis on social equity
- Cooperation
- National hope*/unity

*hope/unity as stimulus of reform

Education policy in the USA

- Emphasis on individual achievement
- Competition
- National hyper-vigilance fear/division*

*fear/competition as reform stimulus

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Cultural Perspectives of the Profession

USA

- Poorly Regarded by Society and Government
- Ongoing Media Bashing
- Opposing Forces and Hidden Agendas
- Evaluated by "high stakes" tests

Finland

- Highly Valued and, Trusted by Society
- Teaching Profession is Regarded as Noble and Prestigious. Equal to a doctor, lawyer, etc.
- Strong and Respected Union
- No "inspectorate"



Curriculum and Instruction

The focus of schooling in Finland is...

- To enhance a sense of community and equality;
- To raise environmentally conscious citizens who are committed to a sustainable way of life;
- To teach future-oriented thinking.



Finland prepares students to “learn how to learn.”

Collaboration, problem-solving, and creating are more important than knowing a bunch of facts or producing a “correct” answer.

There are no high-stakes tests until graduation from high school.

Teachers can focus on the learning process and not on test-taking skills. There is time for research, projects, and authentic learning.

Emphasis in Finnish schools is on broad knowledge and cross-curricular themes and the inclusion of art and physical exercise in daily lessons.



The US model focuses on literacy and numeracy and the narrowing of the curriculum.

In high school students choose either an academic pathway or a vocational pathway (almost 50% of students). Both pathways are respected and both can lead to programs in higher education (universities and polytechnic institutes).



“Teachers in Finland may exercise their professional knowledge and judgment both widely and freely in their schools. They control curriculum, student assessment, school improvement, and community involvement.” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 7)

The takeaway of our group was that there was no miraculous secret that the Finnish educational system was hiding from the rest of the world. In fact, many of us were surprised to see how similar the teaching styles were between the US and Finland in many of the classrooms we observed. From what our team gathered, the fundamental differences are that educators are one of the most respected groups of professionals in the country and there are *no standardized tests* until the last year of high school.

Normalizing and narrowing⁵

What should be the “norm” in schools is tantalizing fare for education reformers interested in improving the rigorousness of curriculum and instruction. One such norm is the dominance of academic outcomes, supported through the 20th century’s growing sophistication regarding measurement techniques. The focus on numeracy and literacy and standardized testing, the preeminent domains of schooling, is not only characteristic of US schools but has become the sine qua non of international comparisons (Ladwig, 2010). By normalizing the supremacy of language and mathematics, the discourse allows for little regard for other domains, i.e., the arts, second language development, health and recreation. This normalization is fed by the public perception that academic outcomes are measurable and non-academic outcomes defy measurement. “In this now dominant paradigm, concepts like ‘self-actualization,’ ‘service,’ ‘citizenship,’ and ‘democracy’ are slighted, along with the arts, the humanities, social studies education, and foreign languages” (Byrnes, 2010). These vague and difficult to measure constructs are readily and eagerly trumped by test score results in math and literacy which feed into the spectacle mentality – much like sports- where ranking and competition, i.e., winning and losing, fit easily into our culture (Nichols and Berliner, 2008). This shift is evident in the amount of time allocated to these subjects. A report issued by the Center for Education Policy found that five years after NCLB became law, 62 percent of a representative sample of school districts across the country increased the amount of time (a 47 percent increase in language arts and a 37 percent increase in math) spent on elementary language arts and math. These same districts decreased time allowed for science, social studies, science, art and music, physical education and recess. In addition, greater proportions of schools identified by NCLB factors as in need of improvement increased time for ELA and/or math than schools not designated in need of improvement. Finally, there was greater emphasis in curricula on state tested content and skills in ELA and math since NCLB inception in schools surveyed (McMurrer, 2007).

While the statistics above are associated with NCLB, similar shifts are occurring with RTTT mandates in states throughout the nation. As long as the pre-eminence of math and ELA scores are determinant of the public’s perception of school success, it follows that schools will emphasize improvement of test scores. In fact, educators (including both teachers and administrators) in New York State whom I talk with regularly, believe that RTTT has only made the emphasis on test scores greater and concomitantly deemphasized the arts and other non-tested subjects.

Teacher Evaluation: What we need/What we don't need⁶

- We need a purpose-driven system which builds capacity, not a numbers-driven system which engenders fear

While a numbers-driven accountability system with severe penalties imposed on those who do not “make” their numbers may have wide intuitive appeal to the public, for those who have been in schools and studied evaluation systems, this approach will not service our need to improve our schools systemically. High stakes consequences will yield more compliance and less commitment. For the long term, a system that seeks a deep-rooted capacity for change and growth will need the commitment from those who lead it. The purpose of a meaningful and effective evaluation system is primarily to build capacity and not to reward and punish.

- We need evaluation methods that emphasize the complexities and uncertainties of the teaching/learning process, not formulas that emphasize student test scores

Evaluating teachers and principals by student test scores is arguably the most easy-to-understand calculus of all. What could be simpler than teach the child, give the child a test, judge the teacher/principal by the scores? The literature and research is replete with debunking this mythology. Evidence has been put forth by leading authorities that using standardized test scores to measure teacher effectiveness does not yield valid and reliable data. We need a fuller understanding of the nuances and complexities of the teaching/learning experience, including the effects of poverty, interactive effects in the classroom, effects of previous teaching, other home life issues, cultural idiosyncracies, etc.) While these variables present thorny and uncomfortable challenges, they nevertheless must be considered in any long term solutions to evaluating our schools.

Oversimplifying the Complex^{7,8}

There is no simple answer to the educational success question. Any moderately intelligent person who is paying even half a mind to the subject, can subscribe to the notion that even if there is an answer to how to measure educational success, it will be complex and multi-faceted.

So how did we leave our common sense behind when we think about our schools? How have students and teachers and schools been reduced to a number? Why is the reflex always to how we score on standardized tests? How has success been so thoughtlessly narrowed?

The public comes to understand their world through the filters of individual psychology and social cues. These filters are working overtime when it comes to the public's perceptions of schooling. Those who have studied how we make sense of the world know that there are mechanisms between thought and perception which are fragile and subject to manipulation.

In his masterful work, *The Mismeasure of Man*, (1981) Stephen Jay Gould takes on everything from craniometry to IQ tests, making the case that humans have a long and infamous history of mismeasuring one another. Two of the main culprits, according to Gould, are reification and rank. They are worth a closer look.

Reification is ". . . our tendency to convert abstract concepts into entities . . . We recognize the importance of mentality in our lives and wish to characterize it, in part so that we can make the divisions and distinctions among people that our cultural and political systems dictate. We therefore give the word 'intelligence' to this wondrously complex and multifaceted set of human capabilities. This shorthand symbol is then reified and intelligence achieves its dubious status as a unitary thing."

And rank is . . . ". . . our propensity for ordering complex variation as a gradual ascending scale . . . ranking requires a criterion for assigning all individuals to their proper status in the single series. And what better criterion than an objective number? Thus, the common style embodying both fallacies of thought has been quantification, or the measurement of intelligence as a single number for each person"

Gould's premise seems tailor made for the obsessions we see today in our schools with the scores on tests as a proxy for intelligence and sizing up our children, teachers, and schools - even our country -- in the test rankings sweepstakes.

And then there's heuristics.

A heuristic is a mental short cut, a way of simplifying complex phenomenon that we all use to get through our day. We don't have to deconstruct each part of the whole of a complex issue to believe we "understand" it. A word or a slogan or a dismissive remark about the space program or global warming is enough to satisfy. Tversky and Kahneman (1974) may have been the first researchers to systematically examine this construct. Their definition of the availability heuristic is particularly appropriate to this discussion.

The availability heuristic is: ". . . an oversimplified rule of thumb which occurs when people estimate the probability of an outcome based on how easy that outcome is to imagine. As such, vividly described, emotionally-charged possibilities will be perceived as being more likely than those that are harder to picture or are difficult to understand, resulting in a corresponding cognitive bias"

The public has little patience for developmentally appropriate education that takes longer, or deep learning that may not be readily translatable to a score, or individual approaches that can't be benchmarked to other learners, or the unpredictable days, weeks, months and years in the life of some classrooms. Better to have a test score that can be graphed for consumption in the local paper. Now that can be easily imagined. And even discussed with neighbors.

Breathing room for mistakes⁸

As the school year came to a close in my county, a front page story in our regional newspaper blasted a local school district for routinely boosting the scores of secondary students on state tests by one or two points to make the passing cut off point. Surely, this boost made the difference between graduating and not graduating in many cases. With all the wrath the writers and editors could muster, in headline sizes worthy of news of a terrorist attack, the district, one of the poorest in the county, already saddled with a beleaguered reputation, was dealt another blow.

A few days after reading this story, I was contemplating its meaning as I crawled through my morning commute. I had to try to put the crime in perspective. I pondered the motive and the result. I looked for the culprit. I searched for the victim.

I came up with a metaphor.

As I looked down onto the roadway of the bridge I was driving over, I noticed the expansion joints embedded in the pavement. I was curious. I did some research. According to a Wiki definition:

An expansion joint or movement joint is an assembly designed to safely absorb the heat-induced expansion and contraction of construction materials, to absorb vibration, to hold parts together, or to allow movement due to ground settlement or earthquakes. They are commonly found between sections of buildings, bridges, sidewalks, railway tracks, piping systems, ships, and other structures. Building faces, concrete slabs, and pipelines expand and contract due to warming and cooling from seasonal variation, or due to other heat sources. Before expansion joint gaps were built into these structures, they would crack under the stress induced.

I thought about the definition in light of the headline news I had read earlier. If we can understand the physical forces at work in our infrastructure development, why can't we understand the emotional forces at work in our children's development? Where are the expansion joints that allow for tolerances around stress points for our kids? (And, as an aside, I thought of the Yerkes-Dodson curve, an iconic symbol of the relationship between arousal and performances. After a certain point, attention (arousal) turns to anxiety which reduces the learner's ability to understand and be competent. Are we taking this relationship into account with our high stakes initiatives? I think not.)

Yerkes-Dodson Curve



Setting a cut point, a bar, a marker of any kind, should be done with the understanding that the point is largely arbitrary and that making high stakes decisions based on a strict adherence to the marker will lead many students (and teachers) to crack under the stress. Nevertheless, as in the headline story, when a student who scores one or two points below the cutoff is allowed the space, "the expansion joint," to succeed anyway, the school district that provides the space is vilified for it. And you can be sure there will be a major investigation into this nefarious deed, citing educators who have cheated their students by lowering the standards. And this vilification is going on around the country, as educators, forced to the breaking point, seeing their students' success and their own careers obscenely narrowed and reduced to test score results, make attempts to redress the over-use of numbers as destiny.

The best educators, the engineers of child development, know the importance of safely absorbing the expansion and contraction of a child's life, allowing space for personal issues, growth pressures, family problems, peer distractions. They know how to absorb vibrations and hold parts together during the tectonic shifts of childhood. They know that setting a bar has to be tempered with the wisdom of knowing when to lower it -- and when to raise it as well.

I can hear the chorus now rising to challenge the premise. If we don't set the bar firmly we will be confusing our students about accountability and meeting goals. And... what's next? If 65 is passing and we say OK to 63 and 64, can 61 and 62 be far behind? Maybe. Maybe not.

The point is the numbers paradigm for educational success is misplaced. Setting an unforgiving line in the sand does not give the flexibility to the teacher who understands the whole story of the child. As youngsters learn and grow, caring adults know they need encouragement more than anything else. Those who know what children need work around the numbers and focus on the support. Two examples come to mind.

Recently, I heard a TED Talk in which a teacher explained her philosophy of grading her students. A student got 2 right out of 20 and she put a +2 on the paper. The teacher explained that a -18 would demoralize the student; a +2 meant he was on his way. And, can you imagine parents setting tough standards when their child begins to walk? A toddler cutoff point? Sorry, sweetheart, you took two steps too few. You fail walking.

Any time you assign a number you better be careful about tolerances -- or the material will crack. Stress cracks in our bridges and our children are deadly.

Silencing the classrooms⁸

Just over 50 years ago, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* (1962) a damning indictment of the chemical industry's passion for DDT spraying to destroy insects. Here is the opening paragraph to a chapter entitled, "And No Birds Sang."

"Over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song. This sudden silencing of the song birds, this obliteration of the color and beauty and interest they lend to our world have come about swiftly, insidiously, and unnoticed by those whose communities are as yet unaffected."

Carson's plaintive cry seems eerily familiar to what many of us have been saying about the changes we see in our schools. The classrooms in our nation have grown "strangely silent" where once they were filled with questions, laughter, spontaneity and, yes, noise. This change has come about "swiftly, insidiously and unnoticed" by communities who have been fed lies about a new accountability that promises to improve our schools.

We learned from Carson's well-researched work that when a toxic substance is introduced into a natural environment there is a kill that occurs. Educators have learned from their own well-worn experience that toxic threats producing kills are not limited to birds or fish in the natural environment, but are also found in toxic elements in schools that kill children's spirits.

When standardized tests -- promoted by big business interests -- take the place of teacher judgment, when teachers' evaluations are reduced to numbers, when scripted learning is the norm, when fear and intimidation are more prevalent than love and compassion, when obedience trumps the freedom to question, a poisonous atmosphere is created in our schools. We notice the silence in the joyless and lifeless places that our classrooms are becoming in the wake of a fugue of destructive educational policies designed to satisfy the mandates of Race to the Top.

Fifty years from now, when educational historians look back on this period, they may be honoring those who, Carson-like, exposed RTTT as the educational equivalent of DDT in its attempt to silence a generation by its widespread use of agents that stifle creativity and marginalize imagination. Maybe in their review they will be baffled by the policy makers of this era, posing a litany of questions to the erstwhile education czars: What were you thinking when you decided that a one size fits all, a punishing, severe and unforgiving approach to the care and development of children would work well? Were you hoping for obedience to reign over all other responses, for a triumph over the messiness of growing up, for silence in the school? Did you ever meet a child?

Even the Secretary of Education doesn't get it⁸

On April 30, 2013, Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education, gave what was billed as a Special Invited Address, at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association (AERA) in San Francisco. This conference, attended by thousands of higher ed scholars in education departments, is for many, the high water mark of academe. Focused research and investigation from all over the world is shared and critically examined.

What we heard was breathtaking in its lack of awareness about the effects of Race to the Top (RTTT). Far from being chastened by what is going on in schools around the country, the Secretary doubled-down on his test-driven offensive. A look at some of the things he said is eye opening.

"We need you, the researchers, to answer the question, 'Which approach works better - this one or that one' and then we need to move forward by your answer."

This is a disingenuous invitation at best. The research community has been telling the administration for years that high stakes testing is an invalid, unreliable and unstable measure of both student and teacher performance. We have not seen any effect on policy from our clarion call for dumping this metric as central to change in our schools.

"Researchers are also familiar with Campbell's Law, which is often cited in debates over standardized testing and accountability. It holds that '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.'"

This reference is staggering in its lack of awareness. Many of us use Campbell's Law in our research and writings -- for the very purpose of demonstrating how policies such as NCLB and RTTT have corrupted the dynamics inside schools. The pressures to perform on tests that can make or break a school year for a student or destroy a teacher's career are enormous in the current policy context. We use Campbell as leverage in our attempts to stop the testing madness. We were dumbfounded that the Secretary used Campbell in a speech that defended high stakes testing regimes. And the absurdities continued.

"State assessments in mathematics and English often fail to capture the full spectrum of what students know and can do. Students, parents, and educators know there is much more to a sound education than picking the right answer on a multiple choice question . . . And today's assessments certainly don't

measure qualities of great teaching that we know make a difference - things like classroom management, teamwork, collaboration, and individualized instruction. They don't measure the invaluable ability to inspire a love of learning."

If we hadn't been in the room to see and hear these remarks ourselves, we would not have believed that they came from the Secretary. Does he not know that psychometricians working for the federal and state education agencies have insisted that more objective test questions - i.e., multiple choice questions - be used on exams because they are supposedly more "reliable" indicators? Is he unaware that the RTTT system rewards/punishes the individual teacher and discourages time and energy devoted to collaboration and teamwork? Does he not realize that the high stakes testing juggernaut has sucked the oxygen out of the classroom leaving little time for "the love of learning?" And if that weren't bizarre enough, he bemoans the culture of schools today, a culture that is driven by RTTT mandates.

"Some schools have an almost obsessive culture around testing, and that hurts their most vulnerable learners and narrows the curriculum. It's heartbreaking to hear a child identify himself as 'below basic' or 'I'm a one out of four.' "

This observation sounds more like the Secretary is talking to a clergyman in the confessional booth than to a group of educational researchers who have been studying the destruction of children's self-concept as learners by the very policy that his office developed and promotes.

In an obvious reference to the major cheating scandals that have erupted in various parts of the country, the Secretary had this to say:

"There is no excuse for school administrators and teachers tampering with student tests to boost test scores. It is morally indefensible - and it is most damaging to the very students who most desperately need the help of their teachers and school leaders. But I reject the idea that the system makes people cheat. In all but a tiny minority of cases, teachers want their children to genuinely learn and grow - not achieve phony gains to make themselves or their schools look good."

With this pronouncement we see the utter disregard for the intelligence of the audience that day. Just moments before, the Secretary cited a law of social dynamics that warns of the dangers of certain types of social indicators being used for decision-making. He then indicts those who have been corrupted by the very law his administration created. This is beyond any reasonable person's ability to swallow. It is a new level of twisted logic - and a dangerous one as well. If the focus is on the "cheaters" then the focus is off the policy. It is a most insidious political gambit that the Secretary is taking in hopes that the noise around high stakes testing will diminish in the din created by the cheating scandals.

Students know best

In closing I would like to share some graduate student perspectives with the committee. I had the opportunity last week to ask my students – these are current teachers aspiring to be school administrators – what they thought of the new reforms in New York. Without prompting from me, here were some of their answers: They do not take into account children with special needs; graduation

rates are still wildly disparate; are we really getting to know our student populations this way?; what about the arts?; test anxiety is a major issue; we want well-rounded students; students and teachers feel paralyzed right now.

So, having done due diligence for many years, I am unalterably opposed to the current testing regimes and punitive measures that New York State – with the imprimatur of the federal government – has undertaken as reforms. I hope those in power will act quickly to reverse some of the damage before there is no oxygen left in our schools at all to do what really matters for kids.

References to excerpted articles, blogs, presentations, etc.

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