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Full-Speed Behind

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Business and industry began to take an interest in the education of our young people with the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983. The proposed reasons for concern were that America’s children were falling behind their international peers, thus these prospective employers would not have suitable workers for their industries. These interested entrepreneurs, upon further inspection, saw a degree of profitability in operating schools outside of the public domain. Leaders in business met in round table discussions across the country to discuss the business of education. They attached certain terminology previously reserved for politics and industry, such as “accountability” and “standardization” to educational goals, objectives, and outcomes.

The primary purpose of any business has always been to make a profit. These business leaders attached this type of thinking to pedagogy thereby transforming the importance in education from the process of learning to the product of learning. Standardized tests have come to be of greater and greater importance. Now, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation, these tests have achieved the status of being called “high stakes” tests because they can determine the success or failure of children, schools, administrators, and districts. We believe that the testing craze has created a form of discrimination reminiscent of the days that should be gone but not forgotten.

The new Federal Education Law presents a huge step—into the past. So far into the past, that we are now reaching pre-Brown v. Board of Education levels. With the re-entry of neighborhood schools after the Reagan era and the Milliken decision of 1974, we find the schools that are “failing” tend to fall in urban areas. Children in these schools are stuck. “Bay Area school districts told tens of thousands of parents recently that their children have a legal right to transfer immediately from their low-achieving school to a better one...Surprisingly, very few accepted” (Asimov 2). Either their parents lack the means to move them to schools farther away, or their parents really do not want the children to be so far away from home during the day. The December 28, 2003 issue of the *Washington Post* reports that families who want to move their children from failing schools are met with refusal from neighboring schools in districts that are not failing (Dobbs 1). We are again finding some schools filled with black children, and other schools filled with white children. Nowadays these two categories are not even “separate but equal”- a rationale that we all know was never really true anyway.

It continues to be forward into the past in the area of rating children and schools. The average yearly progress (AYP) and system of standardized tests used to evaluate children and schools are reminders of the old tracking system. Children used to be tested and tracked. If they performed well on intelligence tests, they were placed in a program

that led to higher education. If they were developing in a different way, they were placed into a program for skilled or unskilled labor. Albert Einstein made it into science by sheer luck. Today, he would have been held back in the third grade ad infinitum because he could not pass the third grade exit test. The tests have helped shape statewide and national curricula—historically developed on the local level—as educators focus more on facts, skills and processes likely to show up on tests. Opponents of the standardization push sweeping the nation’s school said they worry that the move toward increased assessment testing ignores the growing diversity among American students (Botelho 4).

In Mississippi, children are given the third grade exit test to “prime” them for the fourth grade test, which is the one reported to the Feds. If the child does not perform well on the third grade test, he is given the opportunity to fail it again in the fourth grade. This way the “under-performing” children do not take the fourth grade test; and consequently, are not reported to the Federal Testing Gestapo who labels schools as failing. The poor child, however, is labeled a failure at age eight. How do you think he/she feels?

More than 100,000 third graders in Atlanta, Georgia will soon sit down to take a test that will decide whether they will get promoted or not. More than 1 in 10 will probably fail. After three years of talk and tutoring, a controversial state law kicks in that requires third graders to pass the state’s reading exam or risk being held back to repeat the year. Most metro Atlanta students in grades 1-8 will take the Criterion Referenced Competency tests...in a variety of subjects, including math and English. But, there is extra pressure on third graders. How individual third grade students do on the reading exam—a series of multiple choice questions based on a short reading passage—will determine if they go on to the fourth grade (Toffi & Ghezzi 1-4).

“Sometimes we are labeling kids, sometimes we are labeling entire school communities,” says Mark Townsend, president of the Colorado PTA, “based on standardized test scores. That’s not necessarily a fair indication of what the school is up to. The stress from assessment tests frustrates students and teachers, who call the penalties unfair and feel valuable class time is lost taking exams and ‘teaching to the test’” (Botelho 2).

The problem with the Testing Gestapo is that there are really no better options for children who are not performing to these “standards” created by those in the testocratic bureaucracy. There is not any room in the “performing” schools, and there is not any money to help the “under performing” schools. These children are left with no life skills, no abilities in problem solving, and test-taking skills that really do not matter.

Another problem with the No Child Left Behind Act is that it punishes schools and teachers when children do not do well on the tests. The Spencer Foundation found that sanctions for poorly performing schools had severely potentially harmful consequences. These include teachers who felt less engaged in teaching, and who were less likely to use what they learned in professional development in their instruction. On the other hand, in states that had rewards for better performing schools, teachers were

more likely to report that their professional development was consistent and coherent with the goals of the school (Grabmeier 1-3).

Mississippi had been successful in reducing the Achievement Gap between whites and blacks before the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted. In 2000, Mississippi had the eighth smallest black-white achievement gap on the 2000 NAEP grade 8 math assessment (Education Trust 1). One state has freed its children from unnecessary bubbling. Nebraska, not unlike many other states, already had methods in place to close the achievement gap and improve reading skills for its students. Nebraska's 517 school districts design their own assessment systems: a portfolio of teachers' classroom assessments, district tests that measure how well children are meeting locally developed learning standards, a state writing test and at least one nationally standardized test, included as a reality check. By today's standards, the system is unusual because it rests on a revolutionary concept that teachers know better than tests whether students are learning, and that they can be trusted to make that happen (Dell'Angela 1-3).

The tragic irony of the times is that we know how to create schools that will prepare responsible, competent citizens. There are exemplary schools all over the country that are doing this right now (Marshak 1-3). For instance, only 159 of Nebraska's 517 school districts are on the federal radar; while others are so small they do not trigger the law's threshold of 30 students testing in any one group. Suburban schools in Vermont, Utah, and other states have said no to the Gestapo. These schools have high standards and rigorous accountability, and they respect and value the diversity of their students. What makes the schools work, responded Nebraska Education Commissioner Douglas Christensen, is that it speaks to the heart of teachers (Dell'Angela 1-3).

Dave Marshak cites two important studies commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor to connect what students are learning with the needs of employers (1-3). They acknowledged basic skills like reading, writing, and mathematics were central for student success in school and adult life. Both studies, however, noted additional categories of competence and knowledge as being equal in significance to traditional academics—speaking and listening skills, problem-solving skills, creative-thinking skills, knowing how-to-learn skills, collaboration and organizational effectiveness skills, and personal management skills. These skills are not measured by standardized tests.

Let us look at the problem from outside the box. What about the tests themselves? Are they structured in a way to assess meaningfully what and how children are learning? These students of life agree with Greg Palast who believes that the tests are a form of educational eugenics (1-5). The privileged class of students in private schools and in the suburbs of Vermont, Ohio, and other states are learning how to think while not being bogged down with batteries of meaningless multiple choice bubbling exercises, while urban public school children are primed with memorizing senseless facts to create accountability for their teachers, principals and school districts. So, we have No Child Left Behind to provide new worker drones that will clean toilets at the country clubs, punch the cash registers color-coded for illiterates, and pamper the upper-class on the higher floors of the new economic order.

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