



Changing the Schools Can Change the World...

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How the Corporate Culture of 'Standardized Testing' Warps Our View of School Reform

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As we launch ourselves into the second decade of the 21st century, America's school reform debate continues to center on "test scores" and blaming teachers for the perceived failings of schools. We must be imagining that Herculean efforts to "close the gap" will really fix the vast inequities that were institutionalized in schools during an earlier era, when public attitudes were much more parochial and much less democratic. How much life has changed over the past 50 years and yet how little school has changed to keep up with the times.

In the new global environment of the 21st century, in the rapid expansion of interconnected economies, in the quantum leaps of mental efficiency kids are making every day as they multitask with advanced technologies, **the foundation for a new world culture is being laid.** The school structure that served the 1950s, and is still in place, becomes more irrelevant every day. For at least the past 25 years, American schools have been beaten into the ground by a relentless "back to basics" movement that has now reached the full extent of its absurdity: We appear perfectly happy to judge our kids, our schools, our teachers, and our country by antiquated "standardized tests" that are hopelessly out of step with the reality of today's kids and, in fact, with today's attitudes about excellence.

Enthusiastic consumers that we are, Americans have bought the bubble of unreality that tells us schools will work better when they are run like businesses, concentrating on a statistical "bottom line" as if that told the whole truth about us. News flash: **Schools are NOT businesses; they are organizations of people who deal in growth and human development.** In that regard, we can safely say that schools are **much more like families** than any other structure with which we are familiar: People engaged in relationships to support personal progress--in the best sense of "family."

Corporations rightly operate on numbers, marketing statistics, sales, efficiency, a healthy bottom line. But **the wholesale transfer of the corporate culture to schools has warped our view of what school is all about.** Children are not products and they are not customers; they are neither objects to be done to nor buyers to be pleased. Neither analogy relates the true purpose of schooling, which is to enhance the intellectual and cultural development of individual children. At least that is what we say in all of our school mission statements. We pay lip service to that desire; yet **we remain locked in school structures and business-like practices that, at best, limit our perspective on school reform and, at worst, actively prevent substantive change.**

Key among those limiting business-like practices is the use of “standardized testing” to measure student and school success, **exactly as though kids were manufactured items to be quality-controlled--or thrown off the assembly line.** A colleague who helps organizations design healthy systems sent me this recent remark by Jay W. Forrester, Professor Emeritus of Management, Sloan School, MIT:

“Many people have expressed disappointment with performance of the present K-12 schools. A publication from the National Academy of Engineering observed ‘... another \$650 billion has been spent on US public schools while the performance of its students on standardized science tests of those about to graduate declined further.’ But who is answering the question of why results have declined further? I believe that we have here a syndrome that we often identify in corporations through system dynamics modeling--the steps that people are taking in the belief they will solve a problem are actually the causes of that problem, and the more they do in an attempt to remedy a situation the worse they make it.”

As long as the only box we operate within is circumscribed by false assumptions about how learning occurs and why we have public education, as long as we continue, as Forrester points out, doing more of the same thing and getting consistently worse results, we will remain unable to get out of our self-designed hole. **Schools are locked in the cycle of a dysfunctional system, just like a dysfunctional family, or in Forrester’s comment, a dysfunctional corporation.** The real need is to look at schools as SYSTEMS and to go back to the root of our public education structure, the underlying philosophy that holds our schools in place.

Is there a match between the current system of public education and our desire to empower the intrinsic gifts of each child? Obviously not. We are still engaged in mass production, standardizing our children for roles that no longer exist (factory workers, low-wage earners, rule followers) and dividing students based on their value as test-takers (the college prep track vs. the vocational track), the haves vs. the have-nots. While it is difficult to imagine that this might have been a desirable way of structuring schools during the 20th century, at least it was an efficient one, clearly delineating those that would succeed or fail in the highly structured society of the era.

In the 21st century, when the Worldwide Web has taught us that **collaboration, creativity, and synergy are the new engines of change**, we can no longer afford to be limited in our approach to schooling by the narrow band of standard measures that our testing system dictates. The human brain is designed to process multiple bits of information into thoughts that have meaning, to create connections, to bridge gaps, to understand and evaluate in complex ways that no multiple-choice test will ever reveal. **Isn't it time to repurpose our schools to serve kids' brains?**

Here is only one example that shows the clear difference between real learning, using the proclivities of the human brain, and the disconnected rote responses demanded by our testing apparatus:

A recent article in a metropolitan daily spotlighted a journalism teacher whose kids were staying at school until 10 p.m. to finish getting out the paper and, as the teacher said, becoming “empowered to think for themselves.” By putting out the paper, they were writing (about something that interested them), editing, conceptualizing the presentation on the page and, in the process, assimilating principles of the print code, sentence structure, argument, support, and even ethical use of information. This is a widely different type of learning from the “standardized test” question that asks, for example, “Which of the answers below shows the correct use of commas in this sentence?” or “Which of these sentences contains a grammatical error?”

Students working on the newspaper are learning for themselves, much as they figure out how to use computer programs or how to operate complex video games or social networks. They are applying what they learn in a meaningful way; they are motivated to learn because they are intrinsically interested in the outcome of their work (the quality of their newspaper and what their friends will think of it). They take charge of their learning because they want to know the answers (How can I make this lead better, what headline works best?). **This is a completely different--and much more substantive--realm of learning from that required on tests which ask kids to recall memorized data and to recognize correct answers, the lowest levels of cognitive function.**

Imagine how incredibly different the teaching must be to make kids successful on “standardized tests”: “Let’s drill today on recognizing the best answers for identifying incorrect punctuation, and then let’s work on writing compound and complex sentences, and then we’ll practice recalling the main ideas from ten or twelve short reading selections, and, of course, figuring out which of the five answers the test makers think is correct”

Is it any wonder that kids are leaving school in droves or doing worse on bubble-in tests as the information grows further and further removed from their lives? Is it any wonder that teachers have been screaming for years that high-stakes testing is destroying their classrooms and endangering the entire public education process? Is it any wonder that parents and teachers sit down together and shake their heads in amazement at the societal/political forces that are beyond their control?

At one point a year or so ago, *Education Next* ran an article by its senior editor, Chester E. Finn, Jr., a renowned educator, scholar, and school reform expert who heads the Thomas Fordham Institute. In a long discourse on the history of the school reform movement, the usually conservative Dr. Finn characterized current attempts at reform as “the old system’s desperate struggle to retain its prerogatives.” He went on to say that “the old system is itself obsolete, and 40 years of sad experience show that further tugging and prodding from the banks of the Potomac is not going to modernize it.” Most importantly, he went even further to say that **“any overhaul of American education must also be informed by an overarching vision of the kind of system it is after That vision, more than the details of individual reform proposals, may be what is most sorely needed now.”**

Beyond corporate walls, beyond the rigid testing of narrow parameters, beyond the rhetoric of cosmetic changes that masquerade as “school reform,” lies the real work that needs to be done: **The discussion of and coming to a new agreement about what we want our schools to BE.** To do that, we need to be willing to release our white-knuckle hold on test scores and on the idea that schools need to be shaped around a corporate culture run by the numbers. Schooling is not a numbers game; it is most truly a people game. In fact, the biggest complaint of today’s parents is that school does not recognize the value of their children. That pretty well matches the biggest complaint of good teachers, that their class loads and isolation do not allow them to work with the talents of each child.

Clearly, getting parents and teachers together to imagine a new vision for schools appears in the best interests of the nation, the public education system, and most certainly the children. What do we want our schools to become? Let us visualize that first and then figure out how to change our system, our laws, and our practices to create it. Many of us have spent many hours in meetings across America, working on vision statements, contributing to pools of ideals that govern our directions. We know a lot about this process. Is it possible to harness the power of this visioning process to reinvent schools?

That certainly seems a more profitable way of spending our online time than arguing about the details, doesn't it? For example, can we retrain Congress to understand how learning really works? Can we break loose the hold of the business community on schools if we promise them that a new public system can far outperform the corporate culture by setting free both kids and teachers (and allowing parents to sigh in relief as well)? Can we get the public to accept the necessity for expanding creative and critical thinking through projects, internships, entrepreneurship in schools? Can we persuade the powers-that-be to use federal financial clout to instigate and reward a new focus for public education? Can we get everyone to shift their focus from the needs of the economy to the needs of the kids?

The major premise, of course, is that **centering school on the development of the children** (rather than on political considerations, economic considerations, adult power issues, or testing company statistics) will create **a vibrant, supportive system that eventually produces much more value for the nation through enhanced human progress**. Here are some ideas on how that would look:

- Switching from “standardized testing” to **a comprehensive assessment system that allows students to demonstrate their understanding in purposeful ways** (think rubrics, presentations, projects and help for teachers in creating them).
- Bringing parents and teachers together at each school to determine **more collaborative and effective uses of time and space**.
- Expanding governance systems to **include parents, teachers, administrators, and students in policy-making decisions**.

These are only tip-of-the-iceberg beginning steps to a full re-visioning of the purpose of public education in the 21st century, moving away from 20th century corporate models and reductive “back-to-basics” testing and into collaborative processes that enhance learning for all the people involved. We can create public schools that work for every child and we can invest federal and state money in building a new supportive, responsive public education system for all of our kids. **The only question is whether we will speak up about our dreams for human progress and demand that our ideals take root first in our schools.**

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Patricia Kokinos is a veteran teacher and school administrator with 25 years of experience in creating school change. She is the author of the award-winning novel [Angel Park, a mystery about the death of a school official that reveals how far we have to go to make some changes that count](#). Visit her website at www.ChangeTheSchools.com and join her campaign on www.Facebook.com/ChangeTheSchools.