

PROFIT AND LOSS IN THE CLASSROOM

Will the Business Model Bankrupt Education?

Wilma S. Longstreet

MOST OF US take pleasure in simplicity. We seek straightforward answers to even the most complex problems. This penchant for simple solutions is now endangering our education system.

Those leading the movement for education reform have sought to fit public education, despite its complexities, into the simplicity of the business model—a model based on profit and loss as a standard of accountability. We are now meant to organize public education according to a factory model of productivity. The factory model is a wonderfully clear and linear one. Planning exactly how “widgets” should be produced, establishing targets of achievement, and devising efficient processes were mainstays of our twentieth century view of factory operations, and they became a basis of our view of educational reform.

The Advent of High-Stakes Accountability

During the latter half of the twentieth century, the business world moved toward more precise ways of measuring the achievement of objectives and holding business leaders accountable for the quarterly bottom line. The “bottom line” became the measure of rewards for industry heads.

The latter half of the twentieth century also witnessed an exponential growth in the use of standardized tests to evaluate student performance. For most of this period, however, rewards were limited to scholarships, honors, and admittance to the college of one’s choice, and diagnostics rather than consequences dominated most testing activities.

Accountability and high-stakes testing gained new momentum in education after the first Bush administration organized the 1989 Conference of Governors. The governors decided that academic performance could be driven and improved by nationally comparable standardized tests. Schools were to be held accountable for test scores in much the same way that business leaders were to be held accountable for the quarterly bottom line. It was a straightforward proposition that fit easily into many people’s beliefs that

schools should be run more like businesses and industries.

After many years of increased emphasis on testing, the renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in January 2002, which is also known as the “No Child Left Behind Act,” reinforced “high-stakes testing” and “accountability.” Title I of this act is designed to help “disadvantaged” children improve academically. By 2005-06, all states will be expected to test every child each year in mathematics and reading/language arts in grades three through eight or lose federal funds. In 2007-08, elementary, middle, and high school students will take standardized tests in science.

Accountability means that schools are expected to have students make steady progress toward proficiency, or else they will risk corrective actions such as replacement of the staff, lengthening of the school year, employment of a private management group, or a complete state takeover of the “failing” school. Imagine the pressure on children to perform well on these tests. The act also refers only to passing and failing scores, offering little incentive to improve scores beyond simple passing or to raise failing scores to a higher, albeit failing, level.

The “high-stakes” remedies typically include measures such as closing down schools, giving teachers merit raises or threatening teachers with termination depending on their students’ test scores, and encouraging students to move to schools with better average test scores. Proponents say that competition among businesses usually leads to improved products and increased productivity; so why not among schools?

The use of the business model for the evaluation of the quality of education has become deeply embedded in the public’s thinking. Americans hold a general disdain for professional jargon and for what they believe is undue complexity. As a result, the efforts of educators to explain what seems obvious—that schools are

not factories, that children are not “widgets,” and that there are a multiplicity of educational goals demanded by the public that are not measurable by test scores—have fallen on deaf ears.

The nationwide comparison of test scores to indicate which schools are succeeding and which are failing comes at a tremendous cost. It denies the complexity of millions of disparate student personalities and backgrounds, and embraces, instead, the simplicity of a numerical score.

Most of us accept that children have diverse personalities, develop at different rates, and exhibit widely differing talents and abilities. However, particularly as children reach the third or fourth grade, they need to be prepared to perform well in the public arena. They need credentials and skills to get along as adults.

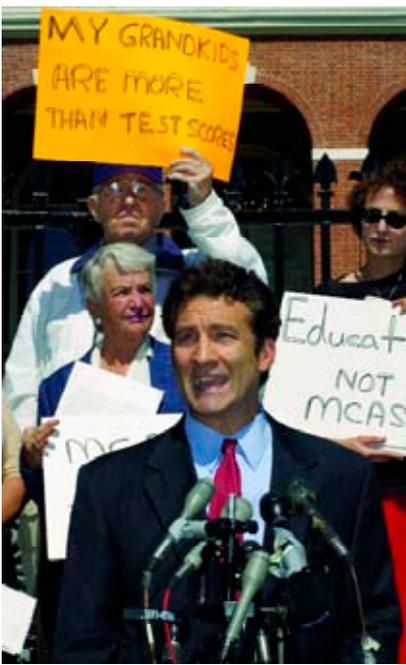
While schools have long accepted the application of the business model, they did not, at first, take it too literally. The teacher and the local school district were primarily responsible for outcomes; if the school or classroom scores didn’t exactly match that of other districts or other teachers, no harm was considered done. This attitude reflected an understanding that students and schools were not as homogeneous as factories.

The idea of not allowing a fourth or eighth grader to move on to the next grade simply because he or she had not obtained a high enough score on a single standardized test, or of stigmatizing teachers because their students had low test scores, is relatively new. But today, it has come to be perceived as an effective way to improve academic achievement.

The Risks of Ignoring Complexity

In a recently published essay, Georgia Hendricks states that little of what we are doing now in the name of reform is really educational but rather, “It is [all] corporate management.”¹ However, complaints such as these are dismissed as the predictable blindness of overly liberal, “soft”

This article is part of a series looking toward the future and examining trends that will affect social studies education. The series originated with papers that were presented at a past NCSS Annual Conference at a panel chaired by Anna Ochoa-Becker, Professor Emeritus of Education at Indiana University.



Attorney Tom Frongillo addresses reporters regarding a class action lawsuit challenging the legality of the MCAS exams during a news conference on the Statehouse steps in Boston, Thursday, September 19, 2002.

educators who do not appreciate the value of “tough love.” In other words, to improve education, schools must fix the test scores as businesses would fix the bottom line. But as we learn more and more about corporate failings, it is increasingly clear that even in business, fixing the bottom line is hardly a simple affair.

Numerous professional articles have examined the inadequacies of our current approach to educational reform. For example, a recent Rand Review article notes, “In the industrial sector, production is easily quantified and output can be translated into a single measure: profits. In education, there are multiple desired outcomes, and only a subset of them can be measured by tests.”²

The American Educational Research Association, while still supporting high-stakes testing, recommends ongoing evaluation of both the intended and unintended consequences of high-stakes testing.³ The organization voices the need to monitor both the positive and negative effects of these testing programs.

A number of analyses have demonstrated the shortcomings of high-stakes testing strategies. Linda Nathan, headmaster of the Boston Arts Academy, describes the efforts taken to improve student scores on the high-stakes Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. The academy’s performing arts students were all students from the public schools with the many problems of inner-city youngsters.

We hired an extra math teacher rather

than an administrative manager or a music teacher. Our music department badly needs another full-time teacher, but we cannot justify hiring one while our students’ math scores (and skills) are still so far behind those of their suburban peers. (Sadly, our students’ music skills are also falling behind, but the state tells us that there is no contest between math and music: math must win.)⁴

According to Nathan, the very fabric of her school, the arts curriculum, is being undermined by the government’s mania for standardized testing. This is a small sampling of the problems created by the increasing penchant for high-stakes testing.

In another article on the impact of testing on the sciences, Jorgenson and Vanosdall argue that current high-stakes testing policies threaten the spirit of creative inquiry. They argue that progress in science pedagogy is being undermined:

Ironically, even as inquiry methods and science resource centers stand poised to reinvigorate K-12 science education in America, the national movement emphasizing reading, writing, and mathematics instruction, as measured by high-stakes standardized tests, threatens to suppress the effort to make truly revolutionary progress in science education.⁵

The authors express their concern that the high-stakes standardized testing movement threatens to stop the development of inquiry-based methods in science education.

Quite frequently, those supporting standardized testing express regret about the “side-effects,” but they also ask, “How else can we keep the schools accountable?” Business accountability, however, reduces educational performance to a singular bottom line—the test score. The truth is that there appears to be no escape from complexity. If we are to prepare children to live productive lives in a democratic environment, then we must recognize and deal with complexity. What children are being tested on today bears no resemblance to the kinds of problems we know they will have to deal with as adults.

The dilemma for social studies is that what gets tested is what gets taught. Social studies has not fared well in the current reform movement. Because of its secondary position in testing, social studies has been relegated to a secondary

position in the curriculum. A number of states have tests in history, while fewer test civics, geography, or economics. While this suggests to some social studies educators that we should demand more testing in social studies, the focus of most tests has little to do with the most important problems social studies teachers need to prepare their students to face as citizens. Most tests focus on the ability to recall facts and information rather than on the skills of analysis and creative thinking that are needed to deal with complex issues.

Standardized testing as we know it ignores the full range of what has made American education one of the most successful “products” in the history of our country: the American proclivity—individually or institutionally—to adapt to changing times. Traditionally, American education has been successful (even in the business sense) because it has relied on Socratic thinking, deductive logic, and creativity. Social studies is one of the best disciplines to make this point.

The focus on testing has diverted attention from the real problem of education: the weakness of the national discussion concerning what the curriculum and schooling need to do for children. The present program of study that students must follow is becoming progressively less relevant to the challenges that youngsters will encounter upon graduation.

If we are to educate students effectively for citizenship, we need to prepare them to deal with important global challenges, such as combating terrorism, establishing order and cohesion in international relations, adapting to the globalization of the economy, and responding to world problems such as poverty, hunger, and disease. Much of what lies ahead in the next twenty-five years seemed like topics for science fiction in the past twenty-five years. This is true not only of the possible future shape of terrorism, but also of other fundamental questions. The genetic revolution is only just beginning. It is more than likely that the cloning of human life will challenge the very core not only of our religions but also of how we develop and participate in the institution of family. What exactly is the future of the “family”? The potential of integrating computers with animal and human life is only a glimmer but is likely to pose major challenges to the next generation. And, of course, the public arena needs to have a level of “good” citizenship, but what does that mean in terms of democracy? And how do we interpret the role of the mini-autocracies of national and multinational corporations competing in what is typically called a free enterprise system? These subjects are rarely discussed in

schools and are certainly not a part of our current testing movement. Can we afford to ignore them?

As a nation, our analysis of the mission and curriculum of our schools has been woefully lacking. There have been extensive discussions about the “best” content for English or chemistry, but very little thought given to why we would want our children to continue studying the same subjects that our grandparents and great grandparents studied. Nor have we discussed the repercussions of ignoring the creativity of youngsters for the sake of having them fit into a set of poorly established public requirements. Doesn’t our American genius lie in our flexibility and problem-solving capabilities? Should we not encourage the development of creative responses to problems?

Let us be clear. At the heart of our educational irrelevance is our love for simplicity. Not only our school curriculum but also our high-stakes tests are increasingly detached from the challenges confronting our children. We need to develop new content areas that prepare young people to deal with the unexpected results of technology and help them be involved significantly in the major decisions of their times. We need to change our educational climate so that there is room for complexity. A school course based on comparative studies of research across the disciplines could never be developed in the current climate. A proposal to actively involve youngsters in local governance and integrate studies of democratic processes with actual experience would probably be smiled at as the product of some soft-minded school person. A course dealing with controversial issues, their challenges to our values, and the making of decisions in circumstances where it is hard to determine the right path to follow would probably incur the wrath of numerous groups that want one or another topic off limits, or that seek to have their own answers taught as certitude.

In the context of today’s reform movement, knowing the right answers to standardized test questions that have clear parameters has become the hallmark of school success. It is also the hallmark of our schools’ growing irrelevance to twenty-first century problems. There are many things we need to do to help our public schools survive. Perhaps foremost is to acknowledge the complexity of our problems, and not be satisfied with the comforting, simple answers of times gone by. G

Notes

1. Georgia Hendricks, “Real Teachers Don’t Test,” *Educational Horizons* 80, no. 2 (Winter 2002).
2. B. M. Stecher and L. S. Hamilton, “Putting Theory to the Test: Systems of ‘Educational Accountability’ Should Be Held Accountable,” *Rand Review* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2002).
3. American Educational Research Association, “AERA Position Statement Concerning High-Stakes Testing in PreK-12 Education” (2002). [aera.net \(www.aera.net/about/policy/stakes.htm\)](http://www.aera.net/about/policy/stakes.htm)
4. Linda Nathan, “The Human Face of High-Stakes Testing Story,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 83, no. 8 (April 2002): 599.
5. O. Jorgenson and R. Vanosdall, “The Death of Science?” *Phi Delta Kappan* 83, no. 8 (April 2002): 602.

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