

Charters and heavy testing hurt our schools

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Across the country, parents have been in revolt against high-stakes standardized testing, with kids tested over and over again while creativity is cut out of classroom curricula. Parents — particularly in targeted urban schools from Chicago to Boston — are also marching against the forced closing of neighborhood schools, displacing kids and shutting down needed neighborhood centers.

Now there is more and more evidence that the parents have it right — and the deep-pocket “reformers” are simply wrong.

First, the Obama Administration — which has pushed high-stakes testing as central to its education agenda — announced that kids were being tested too often, with too much school time devoted to preparing for and taking required tests. In what a [**writer**](http://rainbowpush.org/page/m/64e371a9/11e94a79/72aac11a/31ede90a/1167922255/VEsH/) for the New Yorker described as a major “mea culpa,” the administration now recommends that standardized testing be limited to 2 percent of class time. Maybe music, art and creativity will have a chance once more.

Second, a [**report**](http://rainbowpush.org/page/m/64e371a9/11e94a79/72aac11a/31ede90b/1167922255/VEsE/) by the Center for Media and Democracy on charter schools — the centerpiece of the so-called reformers’ agenda — reports that some $3.7 billion in federal money has been larded onto charter schools in the past two decades with virtually no accountability. The result is often a simple rip-off: schools that never open or open for a few months and shut down. Some highly touted cyber charters — schools featuring online courses — are, as Education Week [**reported**](http://rainbowpush.org/page/m/64e371a9/11e94a79/72aac11a/31ede90c/1167922255/VEsF/), essentially useless, like not going to school at all. Others, like the highly touted New York Success Academy Schools, apparently boost their test scores by identifying low-performing students who have “got to go” and finding ways to get rid of them.

And now the National Assessment of Education Progress, the gold standard for measuring progress, reports that American kids have lost ground in math, and either were stagnant (4th graders) or worse (8th graders) in reading.

Charters are spreading like kudzu; wall-to-wall standardized testing is nearly universal — and the parents are right: It isn’t working.

The reality, as National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen Garcia has pointed out, is that the nations that have outperformed the U.S. in recent years don’t do the things that the deep-pockets reformers have been touting. They don’t terrorize teachers; they train, respect and pay them. They don’t set up private charters and drain money from public education; they devote more resources to the poorest students, not less. They don’t do repeated high-stakes standardized testing; they evaluate teachers and students carefully, mentor them and improve them.

The school “reformers” are hurting, not helping. Closing neighborhood schools too often divorces parents from their students’ schools. Demeaning teachers is leading to higher turnover, when experience is central to becoming a good teacher. Repeated standardized testing takes the joy out of learning, making kids less likely to find their strength.

As Jeff Bryant of the Education Opportunity Network writes, parents are driving an “education spring,” revolting against an elite reform agenda that is driving away good teachers, undermining public schools, and draining funds and fun from our public schools. Parents are right to keep the pressure on.