

Education Week's blogs > Rick Hess Straight Up

Is There a Doctor in the Education House?

By Guest Blogger on May 18, 2015 8:00 AM

Note: Rick is taking a hiatus while he's off talking about his new book, [The Cage-Busting Teacher](#). Meanwhile, this week's guest posts will be written by Lily Eskelsen García (@Lily_NEA), president of the National Education Association.

I want to thank my friend, Rick Hess, for asking me to guest blog for him this week. He's a brave man. While we disagree on many things, we agree that we should never be afraid of an opposing point of view. It's how we learn if we're right or if our opponent has a point we should think about. I appreciate that in Rick. And I appreciate that he'll let me bust a few cages in his blog.

First, however, I need to vent.

We've suffered under the factory model of school reform for the past dozen years under No Child Left Untested. The pillars are simple enough. **Privatize** (vouchers, franchise charters); **De-professionalize** (fast-track teacher prep, short-term, disposable labor designed to churn in and out with paychecks low and no pension to worry about); **Standardize** (scripted texts, homogenized lessons, pacing guides to require each teacher to be on the same page on the same day); and above all else: **Hit your number**. Motivate staff, students, and systems with carrots and sticks, with the goal wrapped around a quota of kids hitting a cut score. Standardized tests are the measure of basic progress. Standardized tests decide if a child is succeeding. Standardized tests decide if a teacher is effective. Standardized tests decide if a school should be closed down. It is a classic industrial model.

There is no science that says this works with children. There is no evidence that elite private or high-performing public schools are elite or high-performing because they use this model. There's no evidence that parents are demanding it. None of those countries described as our "global competition" that out-perform us on international tests use this model. The corporate school model is not driven by science. It is strictly out of the pages of the New England Journal of We Make This Stuff Up.

But numbers are impressive, and too many people think numbers must mean what someone says they mean. Schools compete against each other by test score rankings that declare which ones are making more "adequate yearly progress" than the others. Teachers compete with each other by test score rankings that declare who is more "effective." Students are expected to perform to specifications each spring so we know which will advance and which will repeat third grade. Teacher are incentivized with prizes or threatened with punishments depending on their students' test scores, just as factory workers are incentivized with bonuses or threatened with losing their jobs depending on who is more efficient at moving the product down the line.

Test & punish models are simple. Everyone knows that heads will roll for failing to improve numbers. Simple. Elegant. What could go wrong? Except for everything.

Of course, if you've got your 401(k) invested in the testing industry, everything's going **quite well**. I am not given to conspiracy theories that all this testing was the brainchild of the Testing Industrial Complex. I believe they are simply opportunists who are taking advantage of the simple-minded policies of misguided politicians and market ideologues. They have a product to sell, and fear is a fabulous motivator. Across the country, school boards and administrators who feared that their systems would be labeled as failing bought just about any sales pitch for bundled test-prep materials to improve test scores; teacher training designed to improve test scores; textbooks to improve test scores; and pre-tests, practice tests, post-tests, tests for the sake of tests... The billions wasted are, well, billions wasted. In terms of the bloated Educational Industrial Complex, we can only say caveat emptor. Buyer beware.

Franchise charters have pitches based on promises of getting the test scores up. Fast track teacher preparation was justified because any adult with content knowledge would suffice—no need for clinical preparation under expert supervision or studies in child development, pedagogy, classroom management, or response to intervention. Scripted textbooks and pacing guides only required a teacher with good reading skills, a good attitude, and a computer to keep score.

Studies show that privatization did not produce the vast improvements that the magical invisible hand of the market place promised either **at home** or abroad. In fact, as part of its analysis of the 2012 PISA results, the **OECD** looked at the impact of competition and **found** that "within school systems, there is no performance difference between schools that compete with other schools for students and those that do not, after taking into account students' socio-economic status." Fast-track teachers were **not the answer**. And the test scores obsession has been disastrous. Test scores have become the definition of student achievement instead of simply one single indicator of a student's progress.

Imagine that a hospital decides that the goal is a healthy patient. One measure of patient's health is a temperature of 98.6. So we take the patient's temperature. Ten times a day. And we chart it. We report it. We rank hospitals according to patient temperature. We pay doctors

according to their patient temperatures.

You get the point. If all you know is the temperature, you're missing a great deal about whether or not the patient is healthy.

That's how I see standardized tests. Even good tests were designed to measure one small aspect of student achievement. Under our national testing obsession, educators are encouraged to focus on what moves the standardized testing needle to the exclusion of other important aspects of a child's education. Educators have struggled to serve two masters. One is hitting the cut score. The other is educating the whole child. We have learned the hard way that it cannot be done.

The factory school model has seriously corrupted critical, creative teaching and deep learning, and I resent it to my bones, so the rant had to come first. Breathe. Namaste.

We know what doesn't work. But we know what research says *does* work. All success indicators go up with good teaching practice, essential resources, and deep connections between home and school. A good doctor practicing good medicine will see the fever go down as the patient's health improves. Maybe it's time to change from the Factory Model of school reform to the Good Doctor Model.

--Lily Eskelsen García

Categories: [Guest Blog](#)