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## Measuring the Immeasurable: The Schools We Want and the Problem of Assessment

By [Marc Tucker](#) on March 31, 2016 6:30 AM

I was in Hong Kong last week visiting some schools, drawn there by Hong Kong's consistently high performance on international comparisons of student performance. My aim in this blog is to briefly describe those schools and then share some reflections on the implications of what I saw for curriculum, assessment and accountability in the United States.

The first of these schools was the Diocesan Boys' School. It is a century old, founded in the waning days of the British Empire in the image of the great English "public" schools, whose mission was to prepare the future leaders of the Empire. Groton, in New England, was cut from the same cloth, as are other American independent schools.

DBS--that's how they refer to their school--is an elite school with a stunning record of academic accomplishment. It is besieged by recruiters from England's best independent schools, such as Eton and Harrow, who make students offers they cannot refuse during what we would call sophomore year to leave DBS to attend school in England for their last two years prior to entering university. This is because the reputations of these top-drawer English schools depend on the number of graduates they can get into Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Stanford and other top universities, and the graduates of these schools who were recruited from DBS get into these top universities at a greater rate than the students who grew up in England.

But academic accomplishment is hardly the end of the story. Music is not a required course in the curriculum. But the top DBS choir tours the world, singing at the Kennedy Center and similar venues elsewhere, winning prizes everywhere. They do just as well in robotics. This sort of achievement requires an enormous amount of work, just as the academics do. The choir gets several weeks off at the holidays, but the choir members are at the school for all but three of those days, practicing. Whether it is physics, history, robotics or choir, the expectations for the students are very high and they work very hard to meet them.

Though most students are commuters, DBS has the social structure of the old English public boarding schools anyway. There are prefects, sub-prefects, school prefects and many other roles in which students can both lead and serve. DBS is not a school. It is a community in which learning is taking place in many different contexts. Hong Kong has defined the required curriculum not in terms of subjects to be studied but rather experiences they want students to have.

If there was a sense of careerism in the room while we were talking with the students, we missed it. We talked with a group of about a dozen students for an hour. They were very impressive. They spoke in complete sentences--no "ums" or "y'knows"--were widely read, very knowledgeable and deeply thoughtful. They loved their school as much as the faculty was devoted to them. Like the faculty, they saw the classwork as only part of a much larger mosaic. They made no distinction between the core academic curriculum and what we would call the extracurricular activities or the sports program or the extensive activities related to community service and extended visits to other countries and cultures when they described their school. They understood that what one learned as a prefect was just as important as what was learned in physics class. For students and faculty, building character was just as important, if not more so, than cognitive development. The sense of achievement these students conveyed, whether the mountain to tackle was Bach or advanced mathematics, was palpable. They knew they were achieving at very high levels and took great pride in that, but not the sort of overweening pride that goeth before the fall. The motto of the school is "To Lead and to Serve." When I asked the school's very impressive headmaster what they meant by leadership, he began by talking about modesty. I have a hard time believing that that would have been the first thing I would have heard about leadership from a dean of one of our top business schools.

The second school we visited was Yung Yao College, a high school serving low-income students in an old industrial zone of the New Territories. Just as at DBS, the leadership of the school was deeply impressive and the faculty totally devoted to the students. Whereas DBS had always been about developing Hong Kong's future leaders, Yung Yao had been about developing its future workers. But hanging on the wall were multiple international prize awards from Intel and other science and engineering competitions, awarded to students who might never have had a chance before this leadership team took over the school. Everywhere we looked, we saw evidence of very high achievement in mathematics, science and engineering, all in the form of what might be called applied learning. There was "stuff" everywhere, as if we had walked into a high tech lab. Most such schools have the simplest form of 3-D printer. This school had a whole room full of such printers, some of them considerably more sophisticated than any I had seen in a school before. In an adjoining room was a seven-foot high computer in a rack, to process the information needed to drive the printers. In yet another room stood examples of the complex objects the students had designed and made using the printers.

This school, which had formerly led students to lives and careers on the margins, had been successful at creating a whole range of attractive opportunities for them. Devoted teachers had set high targets for the students and helped them believe in themselves and their capacity to

reach those targets. Part of the secret had been to mobilize people and institutions outside the school that were willing to provide tangible and intangible supports that must have made the students feel that it was not just the faculty who thought they had a future.

The last school I want to describe briefly is St. Paul's Co-educational College, another very well-led school devoted, like DBS, to the development of Hong Kong's future leaders. I have space here only to describe one aspect of their program. Every month, the students leave the school for a week to go somewhere else, usually some other country or some other part of China. They may be helping people in a poor country build a school, or meeting with the leaders and voters in another country to understand their political system or visiting the museums, theaters and art galleries in another country to get a good grasp of their culture. In this way, they combine service learning with international comparative studies of culture, history and political systems.

From my perspective, these three schools together embrace the kind of curriculum that all students ought to have, a curriculum made up of experiences devoted as much to the development of character as the development of competence, built around high standards that have been fully internalized by the school community itself, providing opportunities for leadership and service, devoted to deep understanding of the big ideas and key conceptual frameworks on which human understanding is built as well as the ability to mine that knowledge and understanding to build and make the world we all need, and fostering deep empathy for people who are different and the desire to reap the rewards of service.



And now, finally, I can get to the question that is my point: How would you measure the things that define what makes this composite vision of a school successful? Is it the students' sense of empathy with others, their capacity to lead, their desire to be of service, the Intel prizes they have won, the number of appearances in Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center, their deep mastery of physics and history, their consummate English, their eagerness to set high standards for themselves, the prizes they have won in science and engineering competitions, their sense of obligation to a community that is devoted to them, their grasp of other cultures around the world, their understanding of the variety of governance systems in the world and their strengths and weaknesses?

Please note that tests of reading, mathematics and science that are readily available in the United States measure only a tiny range of the things just mentioned. Some of these things we saw are disarmingly measurable, like the number of prizes won. But is that what we really mean? Is it the number, or the significance of these prizes or something else? Some are not readily measured and some are not measurable at all. The faculty of these schools would tell you that their school is about the balance, the totality of the vision and of its execution in their school, how it all fits together into one harmonious whole. That is their school.

Should we be holding schools accountable for their work? Absolutely! There are schools that do a very poor job year after year after year. Those schools disproportionately serve poor and minority students. We need to do the best we can to come up with a few indicators of performance that will enable us to identify the schools that appear to be failing their students and then send in expert teams to see what is going on and what needs to be done, and, if necessary, pair them up with top-performing schools and proven school leaders to improve their performance.

But it is madness to drive our whole accountability system with such gross and partial measures of performance. To do so is to narrow the horizons of all schools in order to identify a few that really need our attention. Perhaps some humility is in order. Perhaps we should acknowledge the limitations of our measures and limit the aggressiveness of our accountability systems accordingly. To do that would require us to trust our teachers a bit more. That should induce us to treat our teachers like the professionals I saw in Hona Kona. That way lies

sanity.

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