

Standards-Based Accountability's High Stakes

By Ronald A. Woll

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the mantra of the school reform movement was “all children can learn.” This sentiment was in perfect harmony with our nation’s long-standing commitment to universal education—the promise that every child would have the opportunity to be educated to the level of his or her ability.

By any measure, our education system has failed to keep that promise. Although the evidence is abundant and well known, and so need not be detailed here, consider three indisputable facts that capture the essence of the system’s failure.

First: The **National Assessment of Educational Progress**, or NAEP, has reported for decades that an average of three out of 10 seniors score “proficient” or above in reading, writing, math, and science, and their scores generally decline as they move from the 4th grade to the 12th grade.

Second: Of every 100 students who start the 9th grade, about 30 drop out, and, according to recent studies, another 35 or so graduate without being adequately prepared either for college or the modern workplace. That means that about 65 percent of the nation’s young people are not being adequately educated.

Third: The brunt of the failure falls on poor and minority children, who are on the wrong side of an unyielding achievement gap. It is no coincidence that the gap is between white and most minority students. More than half of all African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students reach the 9th grade without being able to score proficient on reading and math tests.

These students are more likely to fail the high-stakes tests and to drop out. They are least likely to attend college, and, if they do, they are most likely to leave without a degree.

To assume that these students fail because of “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” as President George W. Bush suggested in making the case for the No Child Left Behind Act, is preposterous.

[Back to Story](#)



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Their failure is due to the hard bigotry that generations of these kids have suffered. And high common standards won't rectify that. Indeed, they divert attention away from the real problem by creating the illusion that things will improve if students and teachers are held to even higher standards.

If that were even close to being true, how do we explain that nearly 30 years of unprecedented effort and enormous expenditures has not improved student performance, reduced the dropout rate, or closed the achievement gap?

I am convinced we have made little or no progress in improving education because we misdiagnosed the problem at the outset and, consequently, our efforts to improve student performance have been seriously off course.

That misdiagnosis arrived in April 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the report of a federal commission that stunned the nation. Its major assumption was that our schools were essentially sound and that student performance had declined because we lowered our standards. To improve, we would need to raise academic standards and establish more-rigorous requirements for high school graduation and college admission. That recommendation placed the highest priority on standards and testing.

After a flurry of publicity, most federal commission reports vanish with little or no lasting effect. Not this one. The reform movement's course was set. And standards-based accountability has been the dominant strategy of the school reform movement ever since.

But the strategy produced few gains. And now the response of the states is to adopt common-core curricular standards that are to be aligned with common tests being created with \$362 million in federal grants.

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Why is it necessary to increase the use of testing when we know from years of previous testing what the results will be? Why make standards more rigorous when experience has consistently shown that student performance does not improve much? The new common standards appear to be better than most state standards, but experience suggests that they will increase only standardization, not student learning.

More standardization is not what our schools need. As the Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen puts it in his book *Disrupting Class*, applying his ideas about "disruptive innovation" to education: "If the nation is serious about leaving no child behind, it cannot be done by standardized methods. Today's system was designed at a time when standardization was seen as a virtue. It is an intricately interdependent system. Only an administrator suffering from virulent masochism would attempt to teach each student in the way his or her brain is wired to learn within this monolithic batch system. Schools need a new system."

Personalized education would be the engine of that new system. This change in approach would be rational and would shape virtually every aspect of schooling:

- Schools would be of human scale because students and teachers need to know each other well if education is to be personalized.

- Preschool education would be universal. The primary years would focus intensely on literacy and numeracy, using the arts and other subject matter as the context for learning reading and math.
- Beginning in middle school, multiple educational pathways would lead to college and other postsecondary programs to prepare young people for work in a complex and changing world. A student could choose a pathway reflecting his or her interests and aspirations. Each student would play a significant role in designing the curriculum, which would be anchored in the real world, not in the abstractions of most classrooms.
- There would be no “traditional” core curriculum with typical academic courses and rigid schedules in middle and high school.
- Traditional classroom instruction would be minimal. Teachers would become advisers who guide students in educating themselves. They would tutor students and help them manage their time and energy.
- Technology would largely replace textbooks and worksheets. It would be used innovatively to individualize education and extend the student’s reach.
- Student learning would be assessed on the basis of portfolios, exhibitions, special projects and experiments, and recitals and performances—real accomplishments, not abstract test scores.
- Standardized tests would be used at transitional levels of schooling only to monitor student achievement and school performance for accountability purposes commensurate with public funding.

Some will see this approach as lowering standards even further and substituting “touchy-feely” for rigor and content. I would take that charge more seriously if the rigorous content-and-standards approach were solving the problem today, but it is not.

Yes, standards are an integral part of education; without them, schools are unacceptable. Assessments are also essential to make sure students are learning to read for comprehension, write clearly, and understand basic math. These skills are key to fulfilling the fundamental purposes of schooling: learning to reason and solve problems; and developing habits of mind and behavior to be good citizens, productive workers, and decent human beings.

Used properly, assessment is a tool that helps teachers see where students need help. It can be personalized to reflect the particular needs, talents, and aspirations of students and accommodate how they learn and at what rate. A new system would have high expectations for students as well as for school administrators, teachers, policymakers, and parents. Those expectations would take into account the enormous diversity of our children and the circumstances that shape their lives; they would also reflect the values of the family and society and not simply the archaic academic demands of college admission offices. Students would evaluate their own work to heighten their sense of responsibility for their own education and their awareness of what is expected of them and why.

In fairness, *A Nation at Risk* addressed the importance of attracting the best and the brightest teachers—who, nearly everybody agrees, are at the heart of successful education—including preparing them well, offering them a career track, and improving their compensation. I believe we would have made real gains by now if we had been as aggressive in promoting these goals for our

educators as we've been for promoting standards and tests.

But that course correction would be costly. It would require universities and colleges to finally redesign teacher education, and, most of all, would require transforming schools into professional workplaces.

Going forward, it would be unwise and unnecessary to bet everything on standards-based accountability. The stakes in such a gamble are so enormous that we are morally obliged to consider, simultaneously, the second course I've described and embark on a parallel strategy of creating a new, innovative system.

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