

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### **When Education Is But a Test Score**

**By Michael V. McGill**

I've come to think that a school superintendent's main mission today is to protect teachers and kids from the ideological madness around us. If I can keep education reform from "helping" them, I'll have achieved something.

In June, I'll complete my 41st year as a school or district head. For the last 16, I've been the superintendent in Scarsdale, N.Y., just north of New York City.

Scarsdale's schools have always marched a bit to their own drummer. Some would say that's a result of elitism: Median income here is somewhere in the nation's top 100, depending on which source you use. Over 80 percent of residents hold a bachelor's degree. Students are among the country's top performers.

But reality is more complicated than the stereotype. People are people, and Scarsdale residents display an encouraging range of views on almost every subject you can imagine. One thing they do agree on is the importance of education. The school district was a model of progressive practice in the early 1900s, and it's always cut somewhat against the grain.

Still, with Scarsdale's track record—virtually every student graduates in four years; 96 percent attend four-year colleges; over 60 percent are admitted to those *Barron's* calls "most selective"—why am I concerned? And why should anyone care about what might seem to be my one-off view of the world, anyway?

Because colleagues in other districts tell me that there, as here, too many teachers are worrying about their new state-imposed, essentially meaningless, evaluation scores. Everywhere, there's more talk about prepping for tests. (One Scarsdale teacher just spent \$200 of her own money on test-prep materials. And that's where the school board says, "Give

children a deep, rich education, and let the numbers take care of themselves.") This distorted emphasis is diverting time and energy from the good work we're all supposed to be doing.

For almost a quarter of a century now, Scarsdale educators and parents have tried to help state officials understand that high-stakes testing and related reforms make it harder to provide a quality education. Three successive education commissioners have replied variously that the policies are good for us; that they may not help us, but they're good for others; and that our concerns are small-minded and selfish. We're just a "boutique operation," one of them said.

That's not what my colleagues seem to think. "It's hard to argue with your results," they say, "so you can be vocal. If we speak up, our state education departments and the newspapers will say we're just making excuses, and they'll crucify us."

Meanwhile, the reforms grind relentlessly onward.

How did we get here? It's been nearly 31 years since "A Nation at Risk" ushered in the modern school reform movement. Apocalyptic language notwithstanding, the report was a relatively moderate call for change along largely traditional lines: higher standards, better curricula, more time in school, and stronger teaching.

Business leaders and government officials have chosen to pursue a more radical agenda instead. Inaccurately characterizing public education as a mass failure, they've embarked on a sweeping crusade to transform the system by applying business-management methods to schools. The three pillars of what's been called "corporate reform"—accountability, the use of "metrics," and competition—have produced charter schools, high-stakes testing, teacher rankings, and an obsession with numbers.

The corporate model of schooling relies on questionable but ineluctable circular logic. It assumes de facto that education is a test score. It then depends on a tightly coupled system of control and audit to drive scores higher. Higher scores must mean education is improving.

While that's the theory, the model all too often produces absurd results—state tests longer than the bar exam, for instance—and unsettling human stories, such as special-needs children being forced to take tests they'll never pass.

The bigger picture includes curricula whittled down to whatever the tests test; less art and music; "scripted" teaching and unfair teacher ratings. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have risen, but not as much as they did before the new reforms were implemented. The achievement gap between poor and affluent persists.

Recently, there's been pushback. In Texas last spring, more than 800 school boards **signed a petition** to cut back on testing that was taking 45 of the 180 days in the school year. In **Connecticut, New Mexico, New York state, Washington state**, and elsewhere, growing



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numbers of parents have had their children opt out of state exams. New York City's new mayor and **schools chancellor plan** to reduce the emphasis on high-stakes standardized tests.

Where do we go from here?

In a more hopeful future, there's a place for standardized tests, but they're used judiciously, and they're not high-stakes.

There's also widespread understanding that a real education has goals that standardized tests measure poorly, if at all: learning to ask penetrating questions or to solve problems with no evident answers, for example. A real education leaves room for teachers to teach what they love and for students to initiate their learning—an important skill in the 2000s. A real education is about personal liberation.

**"In a more hopeful future, there's a place for standardized tests, but they're used judiciously, and they're not high-stakes."**

To offer all children that kind of experience, we have to begin by rewriting the narrative. There is no one education system in the United States, no single "education problem," and no one solution to the different challenges that confront our schools. As long as state and federal policies assume that one approach is right for everyone, they'll undermine real quality everywhere. Policymakers must forge authentic relationships with practitioners, many of whom feel marginalized and deeply demoralized. A significant step would be for state and federal officials to engage with local educators in an honest assessment of what in the reform movement is and isn't working. A genuine dialogue would respect the realities both parties face. Without the willing engagement of those who do the work, no complex human endeavor is likely to succeed.

With state and federal support, local districts must invest in educators' professional capacity. Most teachers and principals are doing as well as they know how to do; competition or "naming and shaming" won't help them improve. They do need more opportunity to learn what's known about best practices, more chances to explore what's not known, and the time to do both. Ample funding for coursework, clinical training, coaching, and teacher research is essential.

As a people, we must recognize that schools and teachers are critically important, but they can only do so much. They have to act as if they make all the difference in children's lives, holding up high expectations and exhausting every strategy for reaching every child. But it's no coincidence that achievement gaps are smallest in countries with big social-safety nets. We won't overcome ours until government addresses the effects of poverty and discrimination.

Finally, we'd be wise to heed **Michael E. McIntyre of the University of Cambridge**: "[A]n advanced society ... will also find ways of encouraging unmeasurables such as curiosity, enthusiasm, and creativity that are crucial to a world-beating performance in an uncertain future. An advanced society will have rediscovered and acknowledged the fact that the most highly developed skills and learning come from the ignition of interest, not the imposition of auditing."

Those are the elements of the education all America's children deserve.

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