

Outing ACT: Test-and-Punish Doesn't Educate, but It's Profitable for Testing Companies

Friday, 07 September 2012 00:00

By [Susan Ohanian](#) and [Marion Brady](#), *Truthout* / *News Analysis*

Future historians, trying to explain why America, at the turn of the 21st century, chose a path to education reform that made catastrophe all but inevitable, will have a difficult time unraveling the tangled weave of ideology, ignorance, hubris, secrecy, naiveté, greed and unexamined assumptions that contributed to that catastrophe.

Why, they'll wonder, would the citizens of a country that had become the richest and most powerful in the world, a country that had accumulated patents, Pulitzers, Nobels, and other national and international awards out of all proportion to the size of its population - why would it hand over its system of education to corporations, politicians and a wealthy guy who went to private schools?

That wealthy guy, of course, is Bill Gates. To sell a particular theory, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has funneled millions of dollars to a broad range of parent, professional and political groups, including the Parent Teacher Association, the ASCD (formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), the National Writers Project, the American Federation of Teachers, The National Council of La Raza, many universities, the Aspen Institute, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and, very importantly, to the manufacturers of standardized tests.

The Gates theory? America's schools were "soft"; they needed to be "hard" - rigorous.

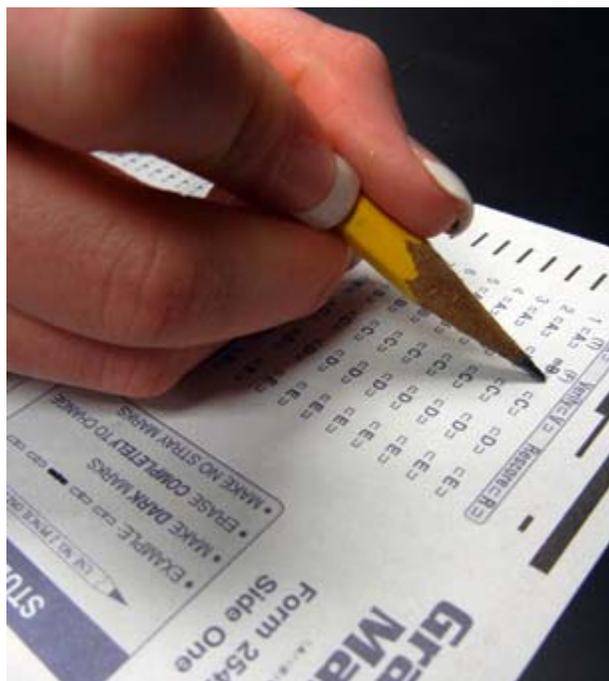
The "soft" part of the theory wasn't based on research, didn't emerge from public dialogue, wasn't a conclusion reached by knowledgeable observers, and certainly wasn't a view held by those actually doing the work - classroom teachers.

The "hard," or rigor, part of the theory has now been in place long enough to demonstrate that it doesn't work. A report from the [National Academy of Sciences](#) says what even longtime fans of the test-and-punish school of reform now admit: it's been a fiasco. Specifically, the National Academy of Sciences finds, "The tests that are typically used to increase performance in education fall short in providing a complete measure of desired educational outcomes."

Never mind all that. The sales pitch for the need for tough love has been phenomenally successful. The idea that greater rigor will breathe new life into American education has become the conventional wisdom, promoted by liberals and conservatives, the leaders of both political parties, the US Department of Education, the US Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the Center for American Progress, Democrats for Education Reform, the Gates, Broad and Walton Family foundations, and by the producers of educational materials. They quote each other and the media echo chamber amplifies it.

Not surprisingly, ACT Inc., formerly known as American College Testing, is a major player in the rigor push. Over \$8 million in grants from the Gates Foundation ensures that the rigor message gets to where it counts most - the tests to which teachers must teach if they want to keep their jobs. The company's report, "[Raising the Bar: A Baseline for College and Career Readiness in Our Nation's High School Core Courses](#)," released in July 2012, was funded by the Gates Foundation. And wouldn't you know, [ACT helped write the very standards by which it made its own assessment](#) in the "Raising the Bar" report.

Scare tactics drive the rigor message. [ACT's August 20, 2012, media advisory](#) accompanying the release of this year's test scores provides a window into an assault on public education few people really understand.



(Photo: [Shannan Muskopf / Flickr](#))

"60 Percent of 2012 High School Graduates At Risk of Not Succeeding in College and Career" reads the headline. It was picked up verbatim by media across the country in reporting that showed no hint of shame at its continuing failure to check facts.

The message: "America is in big trouble. Be afraid. Scores must be raised. How? Well, ACT, Inc. sells test prep materials; ACT sells curriculum programs starting in elementary school, getting kids ready for a test that is given in 11th grade. Buy the materials to prepare for the test ACT sells. Worried parents can sign up for a monthly ACT newsletter telling them that "research shows that a large majority of 8th graders" simply aren't ready for college.

The role of ACT and other manufacturers of standardized tests is hard for the public to grasp. Test manufacturers are an organized political powerhouse with an army of lobbyists. They're making billions from policies put in place in Washington and state capitols, but they see those billions as chump change to the money to be made when the common core standards have narrowed and standardized the curriculum to simplify the writing of test items, when every kid is tested in every subject not once, but continuously, when a do-or-die End of Course (EOC) test with an arbitrarily set cut score will force a predetermined percentage of students to start over from scratch, this time in a situation that (for those who can afford it) makes ACT's curriculum programs, ACT's test prep materials and ACT's newsletter necessities rather than luxuries.

This is news to most people. Generally speaking, ACT, Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Educational Testing Service and other suppliers of educational materials are seen as more or less benign, neutral observers, standing on the sidelines of education and keeping score, providing something akin to a public service, doing what classroom teachers used to do routinely as part of the job (at no extra charge) but who, sadly (say the new reformers) can no longer be trusted.

The testing fox is in the education henhouse and it is having a wonderful time. Take the mandated high-stakes tests, fall below an arbitrary cut score set by a secret formula and the consequences are life-changing. And not just for the kid. Standardized test scores raise and lower real-estate values, close treasured neighborhood schools, end the careers of experienced teachers, put enormous dents in school budgets, even call into question the value of the institution of public education.

Here's an alternative to the rigor theory: American education is in crisis because institutional inertia, bureaucracy and policymaking in the hands of education amateurs in state legislatures and Washington who are beholden to corporate interests have locked in a 19th-century curriculum and all the baggage that goes with it. That relic of a bygone era isn't up to the challenge, and pursuing it with rigor is making a bad situation worse.

In less than a generation, corporate America's wrong diagnosis of what ails American education, sold by the "Standards and Accountability" bumper sticker slogan, has hooked America's system of public education - and now, it is reeling it in. When the corporate education industry is finished with our educational system, they'll sell it back, but don't expect it to turn out kids who collect patents and Pulitzers.

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