

When Will the Testing Bubble Burst?

By **Anthony Cody** on **April 28, 2011 2:42 AM** | [1 Comment](#) | [1 Recommendation](#)

In the mid-1920s our economy boomed. The stock market, then relatively new, soared to amazing heights, as the middle class invested their money and saw their wealth grow. But there was a problem. The stock market prices had inflated beyond the intrinsic worth of the companies they were based upon. This came to be known as a stock market bubble, because when the inflation of value stopped, the bubble burst and the economy collapsed. 26

The nation experienced another bubble recently with the rising value of real estate, which blew up in our faces a few years ago, and is still costing many of our communities dearly.

Take a look at the dynamics of these bubbles. In each case we had something with some intrinsic value, which people began obsessing over. The future value was projected to be far greater than the current value, and investors started pouring money into the market, bidding up the prices. The phenomena started to feed itself - as the price rose, people saw others making their fortunes, and more money flowed in.

In the case of the housing market, government policies fed the boom. Lax regulations allowed financiers to create "innovative" loans requiring no documentation of earnings or collateral. Loans were packaged and sold so the risk was passed on to investors. And those who stood to profit worked to inflate the bubble as much as they could, spinning projections of wealth, saying that growth is inevitable, and denying the dangers even as they grew. Real estate speculators, investment bankers and loan agents all saw their fortunes grow as money poured into the market. And very few saw what was coming, and even fewer raised any alarm.

But at some point reality began to set in. The bubble expanded to its limits, tottered, and when the money available to feed its irrational expansion dried up, the collapse was inevitable. And prices returned to earth, to some proximity to the intrinsic value of the stock or property. Our economy is still reeling, and millions have lost their homes and jobs.

We are now in the last upward push of the testing bubble.

Just like real estate, test scores have some intrinsic worth. They can be used to see how students at a given school are performing in some important areas of basic skills. We have had tests available for this purpose for decades, and they allow us to see patterns at the whole school or district level, and to judge the effectiveness of different curricula or instructional programs. But the value of these tests is being vastly inflated as a result of the phony imperative that we are in an "education crisis," and the only cure for this is "accountability" for test scores.

Corporate education reformers are so happy to have introduced "market forces" into the education arena, they have overlooked the fact that they are creating the most destructive dynamic of the marketplace -- the unsustainable bubble -- which is inevitably followed by a calamitous crash. And as with all of these bubbles, the longer it takes to burst, the greater the damage it will inflict.

Here are the things tests are supposed to accomplish for us:

Exit exams ensure high school diplomas "mean something." However [research](#) has revealed they do little good.

Make us competitive in the global economy. Except, as Yong Zhao has [described](#), our biggest competitors are trying desperately to escape the trap rote learning and testing have landed them in, and are trying to change so as to foster the creativity our schools produced in the past

Furthermore, as Stephen Krashen reminds us

The core issue remains US performance on international tests and the studies relevant to the discussion are those showing the huge impact of poverty on these tests. When we consider children who do not live in poverty and who attend well-funded schools, US test scores are at the top of the world. Our "low"(actually mediocre) scores are because we have so many children living in poverty, more than all other industrialized countries.

Close the achievement gap, by allowing us to reward teachers with good scores, and punish or fire those with low scores, driving out the "bad teachers" responsible for the low scores and attracting ambitious effective teachers to replace them.

The trouble is, performance pay has not, thus far, even worked to raise test scores. Furthermore, raising test scores often results in WORSE education, rather than better, as Alfie Kohn [recently explained](#). High stakes tests have driven schools attended by poor children towards a "pedagogy of poverty,"

One thing that always happens when there is a bubble is that there are people who are benefiting from the froth, who work as hard as they can to keep it inflating. In the housing bubble, the banking industry was making a fortune, and since they were selling off the loans as quick as they got them, they were not worried about the crash. And they convinced themselves it could only go up.

There is a phrase in Latin -- *cui bono* - which means "who benefits?" Whose interests are served by the inflation of the testing bubble?

Billionaire philanthropists and political leaders want poverty off the table as an issue needing attention. So instead of recognizing the crisis created by one in four children living in poverty, they have relocated our schools as the cause of the crisis, and accountability for test scores as the cure.

Politicians who wish to destroy teacher unions have also seized on this as a means of attacking them. Teacher unions must be resisting the removal of due process protections and seniority because they are trying to protect the "bad teachers" responsible for low test scores. Get rid of the unions, and then we can get rid of these lousy teachers and the scores will rise. At least that is the justification. And once the unions are weakened, pensions, benefits and salaries can be cut. Then there will be more money for tax cuts for the big corporations that provide the campaign dollars for the next election.

Projects that are able to focus narrowly on improvement of test scores for children in poverty are also winners. Once we define success as test score gains, then schools and teacher preparation or intern programs that master test preparation can appear successful.

Test publishers are big winners. Though the use of low quality multiple choice tests discredited No Child Left Behind, the test makers have come up with a way to keep the bubble full, by promising vastly improved tests. These new tests will, of course, cost billions of dollars more, but their value will be inflated even more, because now they will supposedly measure critical thinking and creativity.

And **today's news** announcing the partnership between Gates and Pearson reveals that any line separating philanthropists from profit-making test and curriculum publishers has been wiped out.

Scores of consulting firms that specialize in "school turnarounds," test preparation, student data analysis and other "reforms" that revolve around test scores are making their money off this trend.

One does not have to be venal to contribute to this problem. As Upton Sinclair once said, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!" And some people have convinced themselves that improving test scores is a meaningful goal - even a moral imperative.

But moralistic proclamations notwithstanding, high stakes tests thus far have yielded few if any of the benefits we have been promised. They have not significantly budged the achievement gap - and in many ways have widened it. They have not made us more competitive, or prepared students better for college - as the rising number of students who need remediation indicates. They do not allow us to accurately identify the best or worst teachers, and when used for this purpose are likely to lower the quality of instruction rather than raise it, by forcing teachers to focus on test preparation.

Parents have begun to join teachers in calling out this charade. The testing bubble relies on most of us believing that the scores offer real value, and can deliver even more if we just invest more money and importance in them. This **town hall meeting** in Florida gave Congressman Ted Deutch and Department of Education official Michael Yudin a taste of the skepticism that signals the beginning of the end for this bubble. When more superintendents join **Texan John Kuhn** in speaking out, more holes will appear in the bubble.

The sooner this bubble bursts, the sooner we can get to the **REAL work** involved in improving our communities and schools. We can roll up our sleeves and deal with some of the social issues that affect students' abilities to learn. We can allow teachers to reflect and collaborate with a focus on authentic student work that is creative, rich and open-ended, instead of focusing on test score data.

Several parents who have been organizing around this are leading the next Save Our Schools webinar discussion on Saturday, May 7th. You can **read more about the event here.**

What do you think? Are our leaders inflating the value of tests? How can we burst this bubble?

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