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If You Hate Standards, Learn To Love The Bell Curve

By Douglas B. Reeves

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The politically correct blood sport among educational commentators these days is the jeremiad against the evils of academic standards and testing. High expectations and, even worse, testing to ensure that those expectations have been met is, in the accepted creed of the faculty lounge and parent-teacher- organization meeting, the devil's own instrument. As everyone knows, one must "teach to the test" and thus engage in low-level "drill and kill" in order for students to succeed on these mindless examinations.

What everyone knows is, of course, wrong. Winston Churchill said of democracy that it is "the worst of all political systems—except for all the others." So it is with standards. Despite the obvious flaws of an educational system based upon academic standards, it is far superior to the available alternatives.

Few analysts have considered the fundamental question: If standards and testing disappeared tomorrow, what would be the alternative? To hear the critics of standards and tests, the answer would be educational paradise. Such an assumption rests

upon the faith that, absent standards and testing, every classroom would offer expectations that were clear, rigorous, and objective. Success in one grade would be related to success in the next grade, because communication and coordination among teachers and different grade levels would be flawless. Without external standards and expectations, the testing conducted by teachers would be inherently fair because it would be based upon the achievement of an objective result rather than comparison of one student to the other.

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Paradise, alas, eludes us. The alternative to standards and testing is not educational nirvana, but a return to the bell curve and its twin, mystery grading. Without objective standards, the basis of comparison for students is not the relationship of student work to an objective standard, but the comparison of one student to the other. A few students will succeed, a few will be tossed onto the academic scrap heap, and the vast majority will be "normal" and thus fit the distribution that characterized the eugenics movement and the educational establishment for decades. The abandonment of standards leads us to the era in which teachers identified bluebirds, robins, and blackbirds, the choices of color hardly an accident. The abandonment of testing embraces the world in which we have not perfection, but grading as the mysterious determination of the teacher. What parent has not endured the following conversation? "What did you do in

school today?" *Nothin'*. "Why did you get that grade?" *I dunno*. From the mouths of babes shall come the truth. Only clear standards and consistent assessments offer a coherent response to these entirely reasonable questions.

The fundamental flaw in the reasoning of the critics of standards and testing is this: However much they decry the evils of standards and tests, the alternative is worse. The alternative to standards is the bell curve, in which teachers have for decades compared student performance not to an objective standard, but to that of other students. This has provided the worst of both worlds: Proficient students have been labeled as failures because they failed to achieve scores higher than their more proficient colleagues'; nonproficient students have been complacent because they were able to beat their less proficient peers. If standards and state tests were eliminated tomorrow, every school in the nation would be left with the absurdity of students who cannot read, write, or compute at levels appropriate for their grades feeling full of false self-esteem because they scored "above average" when compared with their even less adequate peers. Worse yet, students making great progress and at last performing at a proficient level would be regarded as inadequate because their proficiency was a percentile below another child's.

The argument against academic standards and rigorous tests rests upon a syllogism that is honored more in the passion with which it is expressed than the evidence supporting it. The syllogism asserts first that academic standards are narrow in scope and inherently focused on "mere facts" rather than deep thinking and analysis. Second, the only way that one can succeed on standards-based tests is to engage in mindless test preparation and the inherently evil "drill and kill" exercises of the medieval classroom. Third, the good teacher who insists upon

rigorous analysis, reasoning, thinking, and writing would produce students doomed to failure on standardized tests.

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Reduced to its essence, this syllogism asserts that bad teaching yields good test scores, and that good teaching yields bad test scores. Not only does the evidence fail to support this common assertion, the data on the subject lead to precisely the opposite conclusion. Research from the Center for Performance Assessment, multiple other sources, and that rarely considered factor, common sense, reveals that teachers who focus on analysis, reasoning, thinking, and particularly writing not only have challenging classrooms and literate students, but also produce pupils with higher scores on state and district tests. Neither of the prevailing political extremes, however, seems interested in the evidence. Some protestors oppose standards and testing, firm in the conviction that the bell curve is true and that without social intervention, poor and minority children cannot succeed. Such an inherently racist premise does scant justice to the good intentions of those who advocate this position. Such a view also ignores the mountain of evidence that demographics are not destiny.

The far right opposes standards and testing, convinced that somehow the political aphrodisiac of "local control" will shrink if every student is required to read, write, and compute. The appeal for local control creates a curious alliance between the far right and militant test protestors, both of whom apparently believe that their rights are threatened if the public learns about the reading levels of schoolchildren. When confronted with the fact that an astonishing number of 8th grade students are unprepared for the literacy and mathematical demands of high school courses, some advocates find it easier to screech an oration on the benefits of local control or the perils of tests than to teach students to read, write, and compute. Neither side appears interested in, much less convinced by, evidence that rigor, analysis, writing, editing, and hard work by students and teachers yield better results than either mindless test prep or endless whining about testing.

Some state academic standards are indeed narrow in scope, while others focus on broad issues of analysis and understanding. But the proposition that this is an irreconcilable paradox is laughable to the workaday teacher, who understands that the concepts of mathematical problem-solving will elude students who cannot add, subtract, multiply, and divide.

Teachers toiling in the vineyard with real students also regard as preposterous the notion that students can apply high-order thinking skills to history, geography, and economics without understanding that the Civil War preceded Vietnam, that the Balkans are not the Baltics, and that there is rarely a singular cause for an historical or economic effect. Regardless of the language of state standards and the contents of state tests, good teachers routinely provide a combination of factual knowledge and analytical understanding.

State tests have similarly inevitable failings. Tests fail to reflect the full scope and complexity of the curriculum of schools. In fact, no test can or should examine every element of every curriculum in every school.

The demands of the legislators and those whom they represent, the parents of today's schoolchildren, are much more modest than a comprehensive evaluation of education.

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We simply want to know if our kids can read, write, and compute, and we are not willing to concede that such a request constitutes child abuse, despite the histrionic claims of the anti-standards movement.

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Standards should be clearer and more rigorous. Tests should be more comprehensive and clearly related to standards. I should be tall and handsome. The remedy for two of these three deficiencies is perseverance, hard work, and collaborative effort by people of goodwill. None of these deficiencies will be remedied by the abandonment of standards or the elimination of the measuring stick.

The clarion call for boycotting tests and abandoning standards

recalls the desire of the obese chain-smoker to hide the scales and discard the blood-pressure cuff. When we don't like the results, blame the instruments.

Most parents and many thoughtful but silent educators know that hiding the results will not improve the health of the patient. We can handle the truth, but we have a diminishing tolerance for those who prefer fact-free self-congratulation to turning off the television and video games, opening the backpack, and finishing our collective homework.

Douglas B. Reeves is the president of the Center for Performance Assessment, based in Denver, and the author of 10 books, including, most recently, Crusade in the Classroom: How George W. Bush's Education Reforms Will Affect Your Children, Our Schools (Simon & Schuster, 2001).

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Vol. 20, Issue 39, Pages 38-39, 52