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Of Books and Barbecues

By Bruce Marlowe

Late last fall, students across Rhode Island took the New England Common Assessment Program, or NECAP (pronounced the way a loan shark would). My 16 year old daughter was among them. Before the exam, she was required to attend a high school pep rally of sorts where students were told, first in grave, measured tones that being NECAP'ed is a solemn responsibility. But, then, after the stick ("You will not graduate without participating"), came the carrot. I suspect that the contradiction of bribing students for good performance in a district whose stated mission is to promote "self-directed, life-long learning" was not lost on the students. Nevertheless, that is precisely what the principal, with the support of the superintendent, unashamedly proposed. Students were actually told that if they do well they can earn prizes, like having points added to their grades or being treated to a barbecue in the school's courtyard. Indeed, the PowerPoint presentation used by the principal during the assembly (which I received electronically after writing a pointed letter) features a slide of a giant barbecue on an elevated stage, surrounded with bunting and other celebratory paraphernalia. And, after this slide, came another, this one featuring a table of the neighboring town's scores on the last round of NECAP testing. Showing this to my daughter and her peers, the principal offered the following encouragement: "You can beat these scores; you're better than this." Who knows what other treasures are in store for students if, as encouraged, they can outscore the local rivals?

How did schooling become reduced to a kind of game show, where the entire enterprise is about performing for rewards and beating the other guy? Is this zero-sum approach supposed to encourage the hope in my daughter that the kids in the neighboring town will learn less than she does (putting aside for a moment the very questionable assumption that these tests actually measure meaningful learning)? In recent articles in *Rethinking Schools* and *Education Week*, Alfie Kohn (2006; 2007) examines this question in depth. For example, in "The Tougher Standards Fad Hits Home" (2006), Kohn cites Janet Swenson at Michigan State University who notes that "...we'll all benefit from the best education we can provide to every child on the face of this planet. Do you care if it's a child in Africa who finds a cure for cancer rather than a child in your country?" And here's Kohn addressing the mindless focus on "victory" rather than on learning:

The only reason for assessment to be standardized is to facilitate ranking—not just of countries, but of states, towns, and schools. If we simply wanted to know how well a student was learning, or how well a teacher was teaching, there are many rich, authentic, classroom-based forms of assessment that could give us a meaningful answer. Only if your primary concern was to know who's beating whom would you need to give exactly the same mass-produced tests under the same conditions (p. 9).

The notion that ranking tells us something about the nature, depth, or value of learning is as insidious as it is false. As Bracey has pointed out (2000), not only does rank order information tell us nothing useful about *what* was accomplished, or about the *quality* of

what was learned, it also “obscures performance” which it is ostensibly designed to illuminate. One only needs to ponder the absurdity of describing a corporation at the bottom of the annual *Fortune* 500 list as “failing.” Or, as Bracey more humorously notes, “When they run the hundred meter dash in the Olympics, someone must rank last. He is still the eighth fastest human being on the planet ... probably not known to the other runners as ‘Pokey.’”

Unfortunately, my daughter’s pep rally is only the most recent example of how state-wide, standardized testing has corrupted learning. In Massachusetts, finding a course called “MCAS English”—where one learns how to fill in exam bubbles—is more common than finding one in the American Short Story, Modern British Fiction or Shakespeare. Here in Rhode Island, some schools may devote a full week, or more, of instructional time for test preparation, and there are now districts where Kindergarten teachers are required to obsessively measure and sort their students so that even finger painting is assessed on a five point scale. Meanwhile, subjects like Social Studies and Art are disappearing from the curriculum because they are not formally tested.

In today’s climate, publicly questioning the value of the standards movement may seem a little like maintaining that the earth is flat. After all, how can anyone question seriously the importance of increasing student achievement? Standards help us to eliminate curriculum redundancy, clarify what we mean by high expectations and assess student learning in relation to clear benchmarks. Unfortunately, the movement rests on several questionable assumptions. Why should all children learn the same things at the same time? Why insist that children master complex material at increasingly younger ages? Why frame assessment as summative while simultaneously making the stakes increasingly higher for districts and their students?

Statewide testing has created an atmosphere in schools that is intimidating and mundane. Intimidating because it has been presented as a *fait accompli*—teacher opinion is discouraged and often prohibited—and mundane, because teachers who once considered themselves excellent, now feel compelled to comply with rigid mandates from above, whether or not they make pedagogical sense (Marlowe & Page, 2000). There is an avalanche of literature investigating the ways in which statewide testing affects teacher behavior (see *Collateral Damage*, 2007 for the latest synthesis). It’s not a pretty picture. Research indicates that statewide testing initiatives lead teachers to emphasize only subjects that are tested, and within those subjects, only those skills needed to perform well on standardized tests. But a narrow focus on achievement also has profound, unintended effects on student behavior.

A substantial body of research indicates that as students pay increasing attention to *how well* they are doing, they become decreasingly concerned with *what* they are doing. It also demonstrates that providing external rewards for performance actually results in poorer performance and weaker motivation for learning. For example, as early as 1962 Glucksberg discovered that compared to subjects who were simply given task directions, those also offered monetary rewards were less creative in their approach and took significantly longer to complete novel problem solving tasks. And, in a wide variety of

experimental settings, Deci and Ryan (1985; 2000), have very convincingly demonstrated that the introduction of incentives causes a sharp decline in intrinsic motivation. (For a deep discussion of these points, as well as a comprehensive survey of the research, see Deci and Ryan's website on Self-Determination Theory at <http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/index.html>.) Finally, in a series of now famous experiments, Dweck (1986; 1999) discovered that students whose attention was directed towards how well they were doing very quickly developed maladaptive, self-protection oriented styles of motivation. Compared to students who were told "You must have worked really hard" those who were praised for being smart quickly became anxious in the face of new problems, demonstrated challenge-avoidance behaviors, and low task persistence. Perhaps most dramatically, Dweck found that more than 40% of the students who were praised for their intelligence also lied about their performance to an anonymous peer group they would never meet.

The findings are clear. Yet, many continue to insist that standardized testing is the best measure of student learning. This is patently false. To illustrate, consider the following thought experiment:

Mrs. Jackson is widely regarded by school administrators, her colleagues, and two generations of students and their families as the finest teacher in the district. A woman of enormous energy, enthusiasm and self-efficacy, Mrs. Jackson is a tireless advocate for students, a dedicated, lifelong student herself, and someone who is consistently described as being able to reach even the most challenging children. She is engaging and fun, but tough too. Many of her former students recall how she never gave up on them, never quit until she was sure they understood, or could write a coherent paragraph or read with fluency...Nevertheless, after receiving the results of the state-wide assessment, Mrs. Jackson says to herself, "Gee, I thought Johnny was a good reader because he paraphrases and analyzes what he reads so eloquently, reads for pleasure, and gets excited by books. But, since he did poorly on the statewide exam, I guess I was entirely wrong."

The absurdity of this scenario is striking. But believing that standardized testing is a useful way to learn about or to support students requires more than such a simple suspension of belief; it demands a willful ignorance of our experience as educators and of an enormous amount of data as well. By relentlessly emphasizing achievement, we undermine student interest in learning beyond what is required for the test, the grade, or the barbecue on the quad. As John Holt (1967) noted forty years ago, "The anxiety children feel at constantly being tested, their fear of failure, punishment, and disgrace, severely reduces their ability both to perceive and to remember, and drives them away from the material being studied..."

Research (see Wiggins 1989 for a good discussion) has clearly established that authentic assessments provide the richest, most accurate gauge of student learning. To make judgments about students, teachers, or school districts on the basis of one-shot, summative evaluations administered to children who are typically anxious, bored, hostile

– or “all of the above” – is foolhardy. Instead of innovative teaching, we are left, increasingly, with curricula driven by the tyranny of statewide tests.

But, the barbecue promises to be very tasty.

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