

Does the No Child Left Behind Act Improve Schools and Increase Educational Opportunity?

Harold Berlak

The avowed purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act is to raise standards of academic achievement. Lewis Gerstner, former IBM CEO and a chief advocate of the No Child Left Behind Act, justifies testing mandates as follows:

"We must establish clear goals and measure progress to them, articulate exactly what we expect from schools, teachers, principals, students and parents, _ provide rewards and incentives _ If the goals are not met enact stiff penalties --changing leadership, and even dismissing staff members in schools that aren't performing. All of this _requires testing and assessment of both students and staff. "

The logic of NCLB testing requirements appears straightforward. Schooling is labor intensive and costly. Public expenditures for education, federal, state, and local, account for a large proportion of all domestic spending. Testing is needed to inject discipline and accountability to a system rife with bloated bureaucracy and incompetent or indifferent teachers and administrators. Furthermore, the argument runs, standardized testing advances equality of educational opportunity because the same high standards are set for all children regardless of parents' wealth, race, or ethnicity.

The dean of free market economists, Milton Friedman, adds another justification for standardizing curriculum aligned to standardized testing.

"_. [T]he only way to make a major improvement in our educational system is through privatization to the point at which a substantial fraction of all educational service is rendered to individuals by private enterprises. Nothing else will destroy or even greatly weaken the power of the educational establishment -a necessary pre-condition for radical improvement in our educational system. _[In addition,] the privatization of schooling would produce a new, highly active and profitable industry."

Privatization, or more precisely corporatization, of education requires significant returns on capital investment. Standardized measurement linked to standardized curriculum is viewed as essential for measuring productivity, affixing monetary value, and calculating annual gains and losses.

The technology of standardized testing is familiar. Tests are composed of 'items', each of which presents lines of text, mathematical problem, table, diagram, drawing, chart, photo, spoken text, etc. The test-taker's task is to choose the best answer from an array of four or five alternatives, and darken the corresponding bubble on an answer sheet or computer display. This technology trumps any and all other indices of educational success and failure

Deeper understanding, subtlety of thought, creativity, critical thinking, perseverance, leadership and sensibility about self and the world cannot be measured by multiple-choice technology. When NCLB and state sanctions are tied to

standardized testing, the effects on curriculum, teaching, and learning are predictable and well documented. The curriculum shrinks and learning narrows, particularly in schools designated as failing or in danger of being designated as failing. Subjects and areas of study and forms of learning -music, drama, the arts, social and moral development, physical education, oral language- that do not count when calculating a school's ranking are ignored or marginalized.

Many acknowledge the limitations of academic achievement tests and grant the obvious -that a score on an academic achievement test and true academic achievement and growth are not one and the same. Yet in public discourse and in the press, even among some who are highly critical of NCLB, a school's relative standing on academic achievement tests is taken as a reasonable, if not wholly adequate, indicator of school quality and teacher effectiveness. This careless use of language that confounds test scores with actual achievement, school quality, and teacher effectiveness is a major source of confusion in debates over educational policy and diverts the public's and lawmakers' attention away from addressing the social and educational problems we face as individuals, families, states, and nation.

The mindless and ubiquitous use of standardized tests as the sole measure of educational progress is as unjust as it is absurd. It has had the effect of labeling close to one third of the nation's 91,400 schools as failing in 2002-3 based on the failure to make AYP (Annual Yearly Progress) targets set by NCLB regulations. It is estimated that if current rules hold, as many as 90% of schools in most states will be classified as failing in ten years. Irrevocable decisions are being made that shape the direction of the lives of many millions of individuals based on the score on a single standardized, multiple-choice test. Yet none of the tests used to calculate AYP are grounded in observed and documented academic ability or achievement.

Reliance on standardized tests affects all students and communities, but as numerous researchers have carefully documented, there is a particularly adverse impact on students and communities of color. Teachers and administrators in low scoring schools which disproportionately serve communities of color are under such extraordinary pressure to meet NCLB's Annual Yearly Progress goals that those most likely to be first in line for a narrow and culturally truncated curriculum, and shrinking educational opportunities are the children of the poor, immigrants, and people of color. Because there is no evidence to support the claim that standardized tests are a valid and credible measure of academic achievement, these tests are a particularly invidious form of structural racism lending the cloak of science to policies and practices that have denied, and are continuing to deny, persons of color equal access to educational and job opportunities.

NCLB as well as state policies that mandate standardized testing technology tied to prescribed curriculum undermines democratic values and cultural diversity. Democracy can only be sustained by an informed, engaged public that possesses the inclination and critical skills to question political authority and public policy. The equating of quality schools with test scores has the effect of marginalizing civic and anti-racist education, discussions of controversial topics and fundamental political and moral questions that are at the heart of living in a culturally diverse democratic society. Furthermore, at the core of democracy is the commitment that ordinary people should be able to exercise their right to participate fully in making decisions that affect their lives and the

life of their communities. This includes control over the public schools that educate their children. No Child Left Behind and state standardized testing mandates shift political control of schools from local communities, local governing boards, parents and teachers to state and federal government bureaucrats, test experts, and private contractors, who are distant from classrooms and everyday school life.

The future of assessment.

Standardized testing now taken as a given in American education is an arcane form of information technology, a relic of the early years of the twentieth century. It was developed at the time when the mechanical hole punch and manual sorting with pins was state of the art information processing technology. While the statistics used for tallying and reporting results have become highly sophisticated, the multiple-choice technology of standardized testing has not changed since its invention. Among the more formidable obstructions to change in assessment policy is a belief, widely shared in this society, that whatever the deficiencies of standardized testing, there are no other practical ways to document educational progress, sort students, and evaluate teachers.

However, contrary to this widely held belief, there is no shortage of systematic evaluation methods for documenting and assessing teaching and school learning and for gauging the quality of academic and other forms of school learning. The digital microprocessor and desktop computer technology developed over in last fifteen years has transformed our technological capacity to collect and document students' writing, math, art, and a wide range of educational achievements without reducing them to a set of multiple-choice test scores. Though technology cannot replace human judgment, digital information technologies have enormous and as yet untapped potential for the development of information systems that foster democratic decision-making, and responsive, systematic, and locally conducted assessments. The current educational assessment policy, federal and state, must be reversed if we are to have a system of public education that serves our children, parents, and our communities, and strengthens rather than undermines our democratic institutions.

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