

WASTING MINDS

WHY OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM IS FAILING

AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

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All Standards for All Students

ASSUMPTION: *The key to improving student performance and closing the achievement gap is to establish rigorous content standards and a core curriculum for all schools—preferably on a national basis.*

The get-tough strategy of school improvement rests on the premise that high standards, rigorous curricula, high-stakes tests, and threats to withhold funding from poorly performing schools will lead to better schools and higher student achievement as measured by test scores. Those committed to this reform strategy believe the bar must be raised, and students and teachers must meet more rigorous requirements or be penalized.

Although standards-based accountability has been the national school reform strategy for nearly two decades, it gained momentum from the passage of No Child Left Behind. Opposition to NCLB has steadily grown since its inception, even among early supporters, but the drive for higher common standards and more rigorous courses and tests continues unabated. Prominent business leaders, politicians, and education policymakers have made national standards, curriculum, and testing a high priority.

These admonitions have a kind of Orwellian ring. More than two decades ago, proponents of standards-based accountability promoted it as the solution to mediocre education and poor schools. Based on the results of the strategy, one must wonder how they can argue so forcibly that it is still the right reform but only needs to be ratcheted up to be successful. Even based on their own (flawed) measure of test scores, the dismal record speaks for itself.

The scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress remain dismally low, and almost 30 percent of the nation's public schools have been designated as low-performing under No Child Left Behind. An article published in *Education Week* reported that

almost 30,000 schools in the United States failed to make adequate yearly progress under NCLB in the 2007–08 school year. For states with comparable data for the 2006–07 school year, the number of such schools increased by 28 percent.

Half those schools missed their achievement goals for two or more years, putting almost one in five of the nation's public schools in some stage of a federally mandated process designed to improve student achievement. The number facing sanctions represents a 13 percent increase for states with comparable data over the 2006–07 school year.

Of those falling short of their academic-achievement goals, 3,559 schools—4 percent of all schools rated based on their progress—faced the law's more serious interventions in the 2009–10 school year. That's double the number that were in that category one year ago. (Hoff, 2008, para. 1–3)

Standards-based accountability has been widely embraced because there is a certain logic to it: decide what every student should know and be able to do; formulate a “rigorous” curriculum to ensure that students get the designated knowledge and skills; use standardized tests to assess them yearly to make sure they are succeeding; punish them and the schools if they fail to meet the standards.

In business, a similar approach is called the “virtuous circle,” or feedback loop, and it is used in producing things like autos and computers. Set high-quality standards, develop procedures to see that the standards are met; check them for quality at several stages of production; feed results back into the system so it can be improved.

That made sense to me in the early years. I became a member of the Pew Forum on Standards-Based Reform, a group of the nation's finest minds in education, including Mike Smith and Jennifer O'Day, whose scholarly papers prompted standards-based reform. The forum met for a couple of days four times a year to visit schools and study and discuss reform efforts. Although I found every

One Student at a Time

ASSUMPTION: *To help motivate children and maximize their abilities, we must educate them one at a time and tailor their education to their interests and needs.*

The engine of a new-schools strategy is personalized education. It shapes virtually every aspect of schooling. For example, schools must be relatively small because students and teachers must know each other well if education is to be personalized. Such a model has no traditional core curriculum with typical academic courses and rigid schedules because standardization is the antithesis of personalization. Students play a significant role in designing their own curriculum, which usually emphasizes real-world learning. Traditional instruction and textbooks are minimized, and teachers become advisors who guide students in educating themselves, tutor them, and help them manage their time and energy. Because bubble-in standardized tests to evaluate students are incompatible with personalized education, student learning is assessed on the basis of actual work as demonstrated in portfolios, exhibitions, special projects, and experiments, recitals, and performances—real accomplishments rather than abstract test scores.

That's it in a nutshell. Personalization embodies the assumptions (premises) on which a new-schools strategy should be based. Today's students come from different socioeconomic situations and cultural backgrounds, learn in different ways and at different speeds, and have different talents, problems, and aspirations. To accommodate this enormous student diversity, the strategy should

encourage the creation of new schools that are different from conventional schools and from each other, and they should offer a variety of educational opportunities.

Personalized education is taking root in other countries. Great Britain's Department for Children, Schools, and Families, for example, has adopted *The Children's Plan*, which is based on the premise of personalized education. Its director writes:

In the best schools in the country, excellent classroom practice has already established a pedagogy and culture of personalized teaching and learning. Our new approach in schools—which looks at progression across stages—means we will focus on every pupil, in every year group, not just those at the end of key stages and in the middle of the ability range. (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2007, p. 63)

The concept has even begun to appear in the United States in recent years. Rhode Island is the first state to commit to personalization by mandating that every child have an individualized learning plan beginning in the 6th grade (McWalters, 2005). Other states and districts are moving toward some version of personalization.

The movement got a boost when *Breaking Ranks*, one of the best reports to be published during the current school improvement effort, recommended personalization. The 1996 report by the National Association of Secondary School Principals urged that large high schools break into units of no more than 600 students, with each teacher responsible for no more than 90 students. The report called for schools to provide individual learning plans and “personal adult advocates” for every student. Teachers should adapt their instruction to accommodate individual learning styles, the report said.

Beginning in 2000, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation began to fund small, innovative schools across the country. Proof of concept for personalized education was soon well established, and the philosophy began to spread. Many of the Gates-supported small schools have replicated themselves across the country. Big Picture Learning, which designed and established The Met in Providence, has a network of more than 70 Big Picture schools in the United States and abroad based on its model. Similarly, EdVisions, creator