

National Education Testing: A Debate

On April 26, 2001, the Cato Institute held a Policy Forum, “National Standards and Testing: Will the Bush Education Plan Work?” The three speakers agreed that something is rotten in America’s classrooms but offered different assessments of and solutions to the problem. Excerpts from the remarks of author Sheldon Richman; Eugene W. Hickok, President Bush’s nominee for under secretary of education; and author Alfie Kohn follow.

Sheldon Richman: We’ve come a long way since the early 1980s when the Reagan message was “government is not the solution, government is the problem.” The Bush message is that government is not the problem, government is the solution. Instead of calling for the abolition of the Department of Education, as the Reagan administration did, the Bush administration wants to increase the budget of the Department of Education and expand its powers. To quote Barney Frank, “Reagan is gone, the New Deal affirmed.”

For about 150 years we’ve had teachers and schools “accountable” to local and state governments. Bush wants the lower-level governments to be accountable to the federal government. That doesn’t sound promising if the goal is improved education. It is time to rethink the entire institutional setting, not look for new government solutions. We have already had a grand 150-year experiment in which government, not parents, has made decisions about education.

During those 150 years, education has been deprived of something that has worked miracles in almost every other area of our lives, namely, entrepreneurship. I don’t mean simply that things would be better if businesspeople made money while providing education. The competitive marketplace is not just a place where people provide goods and services in the anticipation of profit, although that’s an important part of it.

As F. A. Hayek was fond of pointing out, competition is a discovery procedure. It’s a way we learn things we wouldn’t know otherwise from people we would never suspect would be able to teach us those things.

An open, competitive system allows entrepreneurs to think up ideas, look for gaps in the provision of services, and come

up with innovations. In the case of education, entrepreneurs would be able to offer those innovations directly to parents, with no bureaucratic filter. If the bureaucracy is a filter, we don’t get the effects we should expect from a competitive system. The competitive system creates; it yields knowledge that we otherwise wouldn’t have. The only way to get at new ideas is through a freely competitive system in which price signals operate without encumbrance by the state. In the case of education, parents would be free to buy the services they thought were best for their children. Hence the term “parent power.”

We’ve had the opposite. As former American Federation of Teachers leader Albert



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Shanker said: “It’s time to admit that the public education system operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody’s role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It’s no surprise that our school system doesn’t improve. It more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy.” We have been operating schools like a centrally planned economy and we’re getting the predictable results.

In a free economy, standards evolve naturally. The computer industry is a very good example of that, with all of its networks and complicated systems. There has been an evolution of standards. The marketplace is beautiful at giving us competing, evol-

ing, but at the same time, relatively stable standards that let people conduct their affairs. It’s a little odd to think that only government can give us standards in education.

We create institutions, which in turn evolve standards to achieve objectives. We would have no interest in an educational arrangement that didn’t teach anything useful. I compare education with language: The idea that there could be a language without standards or rules is ridiculous. It would violate the very purpose for which the language was desired in the first place, and any such language would have disappeared through some process similar to natural selection. The same thing with education: Parents have some objective in getting their kids educated. Most parents, I’m sure, have a whole list of objectives, and they’re going to be drawn to schools that tend to achieve those things, and out of that we’re going to get what you might call standards or at least some sort of intelligible basis on which to choose schools.

The idea that only government can bring us standards is really a throwback to primitive times. Centrally planned economies can’t deliver the goods. The Bush plan will eventually be seen as just another phony promise in the long string of government proclamations. Every few years officials come out and say, “Yes, the schools are a mess, and I have an idea how to fix them,” and then, of course, a few years later somebody else says the same thing. The next microgeneration of political operatives will be saying the same things with some little twist on how they now have finally hit on the solution.

Government education cannot help but impinge on freedom of the family, on personal liberties that we cherish. A noncontroversial curriculum is as chimerical as a value-free education. It’s impossible. There will always be controversy; there will always be sensibilities offended, which is exactly why government should not be in the business of imposing even de facto standards and curriculum.

We separate church and state to avoid just such violations of liberty. We should separate school and state for the very same reasons. We can do that by letting the free market fueled by parent power provide our education.

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Eugene W. Hickok: In Pennsylvania our debate about standards started with “We do have government schools, so we have the problem of how to improve those schools.” One thing the governor did was to appoint a commission of citizens from business and industry, some educators, and some school board members. Not the leaders of the alphabet soup organizations of public education—NEA, AFT. The goal was to have people who are the clients of education tell us what they think they need and what America’s students or Pennsylvania’s students seemed not to be getting, and then to translate that into a set of academic standards (what I would call expectations—not a curriculum but a statement of expectations).

I didn’t realize how controversial that was. I was a college professor; for me the academic standards movement was sort of common sense. I equate academic standards with a syllabus for a college course. I would never start a semester without giving my students a syllabus. A syllabus is a statement of expectations: what students can expect to get from me in the course, the topics that will be covered, the sequence in which they will be covered, the work load, what I expect of students, how I’m going to grade them, how I’m going to evaluate them. In many ways a syllabus is a contract; when students walk into a class they have a good sense of what’s going to happen during the semester. And a syllabus is a way for the professor to hold students accountable. That’s what tests and grading are all about—a way for the professor to hold the student accountable and, if truth be known, a way for the student to hold the professor accountable. That’s what the standards movement is all about, and yet it was very controversial because it is not the way public education has operated for a very long time.

We heard just yesterday from civil rights groups that said we should stop this whole testing conversation until Congress does a study of the stress levels placed on our children by testing. I was stressed as a child undergoing testing, but do you know what’s more stressful than testing? Being ignorant, not having knowledge. That’s more stressful than testing.

In Pennsylvania, rather than have a test that was going to determine whether a student could go on to the next grade or a test that would determine whether a student could graduate from high school, we decided to periodically assess students and then create incentives for them if they excelled



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on the tests. We put together a whole new package of laws called “Empowerment” that helped turn our schools around. Just a couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to visit high schools all over Pennsylvania that were having pep rallies on a Friday in the autumn. Nothing new about that; in fact, it was kind of fun. But the pep rallies were to celebrate academic success.

We also decided that you cannot make smart decisions as a parent, as an educator, as a taxpayer if you don’t have adequate knowledge. And so you can go to the Web page of the state of Pennsylvania and with a click of your mouse get an in-depth profile, not a report card, of every school in Pennsylvania. The profile describes curriculum offerings, library holdings, technology, student-teacher ratios, SAT scores, state assessment scores, graduation rates, drop-out rates. We got close to 5 million hits on our Web page the last month I was there. It was a way for parents and others to look at schools and start making comparisons.

Governor Ridge and I are strong supporters of school choice, of vouchers, of charter schools, of tax credits for families who want to send their kids to nonpublic

schools. We are all about attempting to deal with a system in which we have an educational emergency. But we also have to be involved in the practical politics of change. Frankly, in an ideal world we would be much more serious about changing the whole nature of our understanding of education. In an ideal world I think we would get away from the monopoly model.

You also have to pay attention to the teaching profession. Math teachers, certainly secondary school math teachers, should be taking the same courses that math majors take in math departments. I’m not saying pedagogy doesn’t matter, but I am saying that content matters and it matters a lot in a standards-based environment.

Finally, we need to find ways to deal with the fixation, the obsession, we have in this country with money as the solution to our educational problems. I’m not saying money doesn’t matter. The budget under Governor Ridge did grow tremendously, and if you look at President Bush’s proposed budget, the largest increase is for the Department of Education. The issue now is accountability. There’s no single answer. It’s all part of the package, but we need to be thinking seriously about asking fundamental questions about results and performance and then have the guts to deal with the answers we get to those questions.

Alfie Kohn: We are facing an educational emergency in this country. Ironically, the emergency has been in large part created in the name of raising standards—not as a result of the kinds of conditions that are used to justify those standards. Let me offer some facts, which I believe are indisputable, and then I will offer some opinions, which are disputable.

Fact number one: U.S. students are tested to an extent that is unprecedented in our history and unparalleled anywhere else in the world. As the former head of the House Education Committee, a Republican, commented recently, “If more testing were the answer to the problems in our schools, testing would have solved them a long time ago.”

Fact number two: Standardized tests are primarily measures of the size of the houses near a school. Up to 90 percent of the vari-

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ance in test scores between schools, towns, or states can be explained solely on the basis of socioeconomic status without even knowing what’s going on in the classrooms.

Fact number three: Research has demonstrated repeatedly that there is a positive correlation between how well a kid scores on standardized tests and how shallow his or her thinking tends to be. Research has repeatedly classified kids on the basis of whether they tend to be deep or shallow thinkers, and, for elementary, middle, and high school students, a positive correlation has been found between shallow thinking and how well kids do on standardized tests. So an individual student’s high test scores are not usually a good sign.

Fact number four: Every major organization in the field of educational measurement has concluded that it is unethical to make high-stakes decisions, such as whether a kid should be flunked and forced to repeat a grade or denied a diploma at the end of high school, on the basis of a single test or set of tests.

Fact number five: There is no good evidence that a test-based approach to school reform, let alone high-stakes testing, is effective. We do know that students from states that use high-stakes testing tend to do less well on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than do students from states that do not use high-stakes tests. We have research on individual classrooms that finds that when teachers are told, “You are going to be held accountable for your performance in here and for raising test scores,” those teachers’ students tend not to do as well on the same tests as students taught by teachers given the same curriculum to teach but given the instruction, “See if you can facilitate your students’ understanding of this material.”

Last fact, which I think is very hard to dispute: The time to raise test scores in schools has to come from somewhere. Now, all over the country, that time is being taken from recess for little kids, music and the arts, and class meetings that build social and moral skills.

If we allow high-stakes testing to continue, we are going to face what I would describe as an “educational ethnic cleansing in America,” and it will all be done in the name of

accountability. One of the practical effects of this approach is that we are not only pushing kids out of school and not only undermining the most effective curriculum in the



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name of raising test scores; we are also forcing out teachers. I don’t believe the problem here is just government. In fact, I believe that the governmental policies that I’ve been describing are most pernicious because they follow a private-sector model, a series of metaphors and methods that have to do with incentives and sanctions, that have to do with an approach to teaching that is ultimately not about helping kids explore but is about preparing kids to be workers and raise the profits of corporations.

Ultimately, I believe education is a public good. We do not make things better by setting people against each other in a vicious and toxic race to defeat each other. Nor do we improve education by treating parents as mere consumers so that learning becomes something like an SUV or a snack that is for sale in the marketplace. But I believe many of us can agree that what is going on now in terms of national and state top-down, heavy-handed policies is leading a growing number of folks to say this is a disaster for children.

We are facing an educational emergency, and the proposed “accountability” solutions are stirring up a counterreaction in this country right now. That counterreaction has two features that are utterly absent from the accountability movement: democracy and common sense. ■

Cato Calendar

Assessing the Term Limits Experiment: California and Beyond
At the American Political Science Association
San Francisco • Hilton San Francisco & Towers
August 31, 2001

Policy Perspectives 2001
Austin • Four Seasons Hotel
October 16, 2001

Policy Perspectives 2001
Dallas • Four Seasons Las Colinas
October 17, 2001

Money and Markets in the Americas: 19th Annual Monetary Conference
Cosponsored with The Economist, UBS Warburg, and TV Azteca
Mexico City • Four Seasons Hotel
October 24, 2001
Speakers include Francisco Gil-Díaz, Robert Mundell, Judy Shelton, Robert McTeer Jr., Allan Meltzer, and Guillermo Ortiz.

Cato University
Montreal • Omni Mont-Royal
October 25–28, 2001

Policy Perspectives 2001
Chicago • Ritz-Carlton
November 1, 2001

China’s Pension System: Crisis and Challenge
Cosponsored with China Center for Economic Research
Beijing • The Great Wall Sheraton Hotel • November 8, 2001
Speakers include Sun Jianyong, Justin Yifu Lin, John Greenwood, Jose Piñera, Mao Yushi, and Liu Mingkang.

Policy Perspectives 2001
New York • Waldorf-Astoria
November 16, 2001

14th Annual Benefactor Summit
Phoenix • Royal Palms Hotel
February 20–24, 2002

25th Anniversary Gala
Washington • Hilton • May 9, 2002