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K-12 Assessments Are More Art Than Science

By Invited Contributor Listed Below on April 1, 2014 8:14 AM | [No comments](#)

Today's guest contributor is **Michael V. McGill**, Superintendent, Scarsdale Public Schools, New York.

Ed Gordon describes the "liberal" and "conservative" forces that have shaped federal and/or state education policies. It may be useful to clarify the fact that these forces don't align neatly with the outlook of either major political party.

For generations, most people saw education as an interest that transcended partisanship; in recent years, that vision has become a dark caricature of itself. The misguided high-stakes testing movement would not have its current reach were it not for the support of a broad political coalition of Republicans and Democrats that reaches back at least to the Clinton administration.

Left wing collusion in a policy of shaming and blaming teachers and schools has been at least as responsible for the damage done by high-stakes testing as right wing interest in privatizing education and cutting costs. This unlikely alliance largely reflects the influence of a powerful business community that continues to perpetuate two highly questionable premises: that education's main purpose is to serve the nation's economic machinery and that business methods are the schools' salvation. Fueled by self-interest (some of the most ardent proponents of what's been called "corporate-style education" stand to profit mightily from it) and supported by largely uncritical media, the strategy grinds implacably onward.

Policy makers don't see alternatives for many reasons.

- The dominant reform narrative is simple and easy to understand; alternative perspectives are complex, nuanced and difficult to grasp.
- There's a general lack of understanding of the issues and mistrust at every level: federal to state, state to local.
- Research has little impact on policy because there's little two-way communication or collaboration among the different parts of a fragmented "system" of governments, policy makers, researchers, politicians, and practitioners.
- Public funding for enlightened school reform has diminished at every level; private money has filled the resulting vacuum. Much of it comes from foundations that support the corporate agenda.
- Funding and staff reductions have weakened professional organizations and other groups that traditionally influenced education policy. Businesses and foundations have significant resources and have grown even more powerful.

Also, as Gordon aptly notes, those with a responsibility to speak out have been largely silent. He specifically mentions those who've been involved with "measurement science," but in a better world, school superintendents, principals, teachers also would have risen up. We've been reluctant to take a stand, however. Fear of criticism, fear of authority, fear for our reputations or for our employment have all played a part. University professors, by and large, have been quiet as well. They didn't have a dog in this fight, it seemed; now the same ineluctable spectre of metrics and "analytics" that's haunted elementary and secondary education these last years is dogging them.

The past doesn't have to be prologue. Public backing for current policies is remarkably shallow; however, those who promote them are politically strong. Under the circumstances, grassroots political action may be the only way to create significant change. In states including Texas, New York, Washington and Connecticut, coalitions of educators and parents are protesting or working with those who have the power to redirect policy and to channel energies more productively. These promising developments call out for still more public support.

We need less, not more, mandated testing, and we should be extremely cautious about externally-imposed, embedded assessments that create their own curriculums, *de facto*. In the process of trying to lift the average quality of teaching and learning by standardizing them, we run the serious risk of crushing the individuality, the initiative and the pursuit of student and teacher interests that make an education memorable.

It's not enough to be against current policies. It's important to offer positive alternatives.

The challenge of building a program of assessment for teaching and learning is to blend accountability to external standards with local curriculum and measures that can reflect emerging events and knowledge, as well as student and teacher interests. Practitioners must be able to integrate assessment into their instruction seamlessly or with minimal intrusion

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The particulars of this work are often situational, so I won't address them in detail here. I will mention two practical problems. First, it takes time to develop and implement curriculum and assessment. And principals and teachers don't have a lot of free time today, especially given the extensive claims of mandated summative tests. Second, surprisingly few practitioners have significant experience creating or using high-quality, embedded formative assessments.

To realize the promise, therefore, we need to develop better standardized tests and local assessments that are what's being taught. We especially need good measures of capacities we currently assess poorly or not at all: the ability to formulate insightful questions; the capacity to innovate and create; the ability and desire to make a positive difference and a deep interest in learning, among others. We need to invest significantly in professional development and give practitioners time to create these tools and use them effectively.

If the federal and state governments want to make a meaningful contribution, that's where they could focus resources.

In sum: good assessment is a valuable instrument, and it should be a more integrated and integral part of what teachers do each day. However, all assessments are imperfect, and the art itself is limited. With those thoughts in mind, we'd do well to recall that the "science" of measurement adds value to education only when it's applied in a spirit of humility and guided by sound human judgment.

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