

# Misguided Intentions

Standards, Testing, and Accountability: Misguided Intentions  
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#### Abstract

There are many factors affecting student achievement. It is misguided and a waste of time and effort to pursue the failed policies of more standards, tests, and accountability. The primary problems relative to student achievement are mainly societal. Rather than more failed policies, what our nation needs is a discussion about national values, goals, and priorities.

It seems as if Americans are constantly bombarded by reports of doom related to our educational system. Recently, NBC News has featured their media focus known as *Education Nation*. In addition, a recent documentary, *Waiting for Superman*, has highlighted the disturbing and sad situations in our schools. These and most other commentaries on schools and schooling—as well as laws and funding—are based on the notion that somehow *teachers* are the root cause of the problems facing U.S. schools. The idea seems to be that we need to get rid of a whole bunch of lazy, incompetent teachers.

I have a problem with that notion. I have trained pre-service teachers for nearly twenty years. When I look at my students and work with them as student teachers, they certainly do not strike me as incompetent or lazy. Further, for many years, I have spent a considerable amount of time teaching courses on site in local public elementary schools. I must admit, some teachers I see in action are better than others, but I see no large scale state of underperformance among the teachers I encounter.

The point of this article is that the entire standards/ testing/ accountability movement needs to be scraped. It doesn't need to be tweaked; we've been tweaking for at least thirty-five years. We don't need a different test to use with kids. We have plenty of those right now and already waste considerable instructional time in testing and test preparation. We need to recognize that the entire approach has had

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long enough to prove its usefulness. It has been weighed and measured and found wanting—and wanting to a high degree.

The latest move to “shape up these teachers” is coming from those supporting a system known as value-added assessment. Measure what children come in with and what they leave with. The difference is the value the teacher has added. Ms. Jones added 60 percentile points of value. Mr. Smith added 45 percentile points. That proves that Ms. Jones is about 30 percent better when it comes to teaching than Mr. Jones. She should be rewarded. He should be punished. I have written at length concerning the failings of value-added assessment (Alexander, 2008). It is a misguided initiative that fails to take into account the multivariate nature of schools, environments, and economic factors. We are assured that all of that can be controlled for statistically. However, the mystery of motivation, the reality of having a bad day, and the effects of missing breakfast are not so easily accounted for—no matter what value-added proponents may say.

At best, student achievement is a mixed bag. It involves both home and school factors. Ramirez and Carpenter (2009) have stated variables influencing student achievement. They list five predictor variables that are the most significant for student achievement. Two variables, participation in English language acquisition programs (when appropriate) and number of units of algebra taken in school are clearly school related. The other three, socioeconomic status, time spent on homework, and level of parental involvement deal with home variables. An ETS report (Hammer, 2003) stated that the home environment is as important in influencing what goes on in school as in-school factors. Home factors are key to student achievement. “A study by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company found that nearly all students (97%) who earned mostly A's and B's on their report cards reported that their parents encouraged them to do well in school. Among students who earned mostly C's, nearly half (49%) said they received little parental encouragement” (Out of School Influences). Especially noted are the amount of time spent reading to young children, the amount of TV children are allowed to watch and how often children change schools (Hammer, 2003).

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The impact of media on children cannot be overestimated. Healy (1999) has recounted how TV watching adversely impacts children in schools. This is especially true when it comes to a child's ability to maintain attention—something school requires. In her investigation, she concludes that even such educational programs as *Sesame Street* may have a negative impact on a child's neural connections related to language and attention that are so important to early learners. A more modern critique related to computer usage, reading, and attention has been offered by Nicholas Carr (2010) with similar conclusions. Turkle (2011) addresses the ways that social networking has changed the culture of children and adults. Surely, and discussion of societal change must include the impact of technology.

So, how much of a child's behavior, motivation, and even achievement is related to extra-school factors? Harris (2009) recognizes that approximately 50 percent of our proclivities are genetic in nature. That is not so much of a concern to us, since we cannot readily address that, and the remaining 50 percent is quite adequate to make a huge difference in student learning. When it comes just to school achievement Alspaugh (1991) states that about half of school-to-school variance in achievement relates to out-of-school factors. Of course, personality plays a role here as well—and that is, in large part, nature. Dan Goldhaber (2002), senior research associate at the Urban Institute, points out since the release of the "*Coleman Report*" in 1966, there has been a continuous stream of research indicating the socioeconomic background is the most important factor in student achievement. The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice is emphatic. The center states, "A new report argues that out-of-school factors related to poverty are the major cause of the achievement gap that exists between poor and minority students and the rest of the student population. This is in direct contrast to current federal education policies that are based on the belief that public schools should shoulder the blame for lack of achievement on the part of impoverished students" (2009).

Goldhaber goes on to state that much research indicates that of variables influencing student achievement which schools can control, the most important variable is teacher quality. That's well and good, and every child deserves an

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excellent teacher. No one can argue that, all things being equal, a great teacher has far more impact than a poor one. Yet, Goldhaber and colleagues have discovered that around 9 percent of variation in student achievement is due to teacher characteristics. About 60 percent of variation is explainable by individual student characteristics, family characteristics, and such variables. All school input combined (teacher quality, class variables, etc.) account for approximately 21 percent of student outcomes. In the matter of schools and student achievement, teacher variables account for a small (but important) piece of the pie. Yet, it seems as if the government and educational establishment is ready to “sell the farm” to get rid of (what are perceived as) ineffective teachers.

Judy Harris (2007, 2009) has written at length concerning the influences that lead to the formation of personality in children and adults. The conventional wisdom surely places the lion’s share of the burden for children’s outcomes squarely on the parent(s). Yet, Harris convincingly demonstrates that a great deal of the outcomes of children’s lives come from the peer group and society. This has been labeled the Group Socialization Theory. It is not without its detractors. Still, Harris hammers away at the evidence and the research, of which it could often be said that the evidence cannot be ignored. It defies the conventional wisdom and annoys those who have long held to the prominence of parental nurture in determining outcomes for children. When it comes to school, in like manner, it is clear that out-of-school variables such as the percentage of children living with only one parent, the percentage of eighth graders absent from school at least three times a month, the percentage of children age 5 or younger whose caregivers fail to read to them daily and the percentage of eighth graders who watch five or more hours of television daily, are at high risk of school failure (Factoring in the Achievement Gap).

Just as Harris has demonstrated, environmental factors much larger than the home have great influence on child development. In like manner, when it comes to school, I propose that the problems in our schools are not predominantly due to lazy, ineffective teachers. Yes, such teachers do exist, but in the aggregate, their numbers are small. What I suggest is certainly not “politically correct.” Nor is it

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likely to win many friends in the world of educational theory and philosophy and government. Still, the reality remains. Much of what happens in terms of children's achievement cannot be pinned on what happens in schools. Further, the idea of "cleaning up Dodge" is misguided and foolish. What is needed is a great discussion of where societal and cultural values have taken a wrong turn. In short, the accountability/testing/standards approach is irredeemable. It is broken beyond the point of being fixed. It needs to be scraped and new, more unpleasant, realities must be faced. What is proposed here is that educational problems are largely societal in nature. Societies can assess themselves and they can change. There *is* historical precedence. Just take for example the current competitor nations that supposedly outperform American kids at every turn (another story). Those societies reoriented priorities, which resulted in changes which are far reaching.

Diane Ravitch was long a favorite of the conservatives. She served in the Education Department of the George H. W. Bush administration. At the time, I wrote a short piece mentioning her work for the World Prosperity website (no longer posted). Ravitch was a real hero of the conservatives. She was later a staunch supporter of *No Child Left Behind*. Recently, she has undergone a bit of a conversion as she has reviewed the data of reform. She points out that charter schools are often more hype than reality. Even when they do succeed (usually they do not), much success can be contributed to the dogged determination of students and parents. When forced to compete in lotteries for admission to charter schools, only a few make it into the best schools. Yet, when those same determined students attend other schools, it seems that they excel as well. The issue seems to be a home/community culture that views education in certain ways and the determination not to give up (Ravitch, 2010). In Koretz's book, *Measuring Up* (2009), we face squarely the issue of the reporting of educational achievement by schools and states. As Koertz makes clear, the whole process is so fraught with confusion, difference, inequality, and randomness that it, in many ways, is useless. How can everything be staked on something so fallible and (perhaps) even biased?

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So, I repeat, the entire enterprise is flawed. No one can fault standards as the basis of a curriculum guide. Beyond that, standards, and testing and accountability form a devastating trinity. It frankly and speedily needs to be dismantled and replaced with some painful dialogue concerning the state of our society. One state Chief School Officer frankly admitted that only 37 percent of the state's students will reach proficiency by the magic date of 2014 (Alexander, 2008). Anderson (2011) offers an even more ominous assessment: "Education Secretary Arne Duncan announced ... that 82 percent of public schools are in jeopardy of missing annual targets in reading and math, up from 37 percent last year." After all, it simply cannot be decreed that all students will be on grade level by a certain date (2014). It doesn't work that way. It leaves teachers anxious and demoralized. It does the same for kids. What we need is not more tests and standards and accountability but, rather, a great turning.

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