

Perfect Storm Hits Georgia Schools: Teachers Overwhelmed

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Abstract

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RT3) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have piled up federal mandates into a “perfect storm” for Georgia teachers. This study considers the impact of this storm through the eyes of 23 Georgia teachers. A tidal wave of federal mandates leaves teachers overwhelmed and skeptical about their future.

***Keywords:* : NCLB, RT3, Georgia Teachers, Classroom Change, Federal Mandates**

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Dr. Larry Cuban, education historian, policymaker and professor at Stanford University, associated education reforms with weather cycles in *The Inexorable Cycles of School Reform* (2011). He stated, “Reforms, like weather fronts varying by seasons but similar across years, go through phases that become familiar if observers note historical patterns” (Cuban, 2011). Those with a few decades of public education under their belts have seen “reform” fronts blow through with every election cycle. During this study, a “perfect storm” hit and teachers were sent running for their umbrellas and boots.

This particular cycle is remarkable because it comes on the heels of the collapse of the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). States filed for U.S. Department of Education NCLB waivers because they could not meet the 100% pass rates on Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) by 2015. At the same time, 18 Race to the Top (RT3) states and those with NCLB waivers—almost all states—were required to implement RT3 mandates (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) (Ravich, 2015). These mandates included a common core curriculum, computer-based common core testing and teacher evaluations based on student test scores. Thus, teachers coping with the NCLB “accountability” hurricane now faced an even greater storm of additional professional responsibilities associated with RT3. The “Every Student Succeeds” Act (ESSA) attempted to relieve RT3 pressures, but states are now too deeply invested to change directions (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Furthermore, ESSA maintains NCLB’s unattainable pass rates for students.

Teachers are usually subjected to one or two substantial federal/state mandates every three or four years. Gradual change is typically taken in stride. However, RT3 has multiple high stakes elements with the accompanying red tape. Andrea Gabor, in *Schools Caught in Red Tape Generated by New Education Mandates* (2013), describes how “reform” in Massachusetts may not only be pointless, but detrimental. “Bureaucratic obstacles in public schools could be limiting real progress and preventing the most effective reforms” (Gabor, 2013). As tensions grew, parents across

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the country increasingly refused testing and questioned the effectiveness of test-centered education (Coulson, 2011; Hursh, 2008; Magil, 2015; Stouffer, 2015).

The Story

This “study” started without a research paradigm. In the fall of 2015, the author was awarded a sabbatical to reconnect with alumni and public education after decades as a professor. The plan was to shadow and talk with former students teaching in public schools located within a day’s driving distance. The pool of teachers came from a professional alumni group started in 2003, through a Bellsouth grant, to validate our teacher education charter.

With only a vague idea of the pressures facing teachers in the fall of 2015, the author began visiting schools across north Georgia. Not expecting anything out of the ordinary, field notes were kept for personal reflection and future inclusion in courses taught. As visits progressed, it became clear something unusual and universal was happening. To tell the story of these teachers and their professional climate, the author backward engineered field notes into a research study.

The “Perfect Storm”

A “perfect storm” is when two extreme pressure fronts collide at the least convenient time and place. A hurricane is a storm, but a “perfect storm” is a hurricane destroying New York City during rush hour. To understand the “perfect storm” facing teachers today, one must consider two massive fronts colliding in U.S. public school classrooms.

The weaker front is historic “best” practices in public education—from traditionalism (teacher-centered) through progressivism (child-centered). Most veteran teachers and teacher preparers grew up under this front. Public schools in the last half-century were progressive, student-centered, teacher-directed and focused upon developing industrious “good” citizens. *The Educator’s Encyclopedia* (Smith, Krouse & Atkinson, 1961) lists four purposes of education in American democracy as 1) Self-realization,

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2) Human relationships, 3) Civic responsibility and 4) Economic efficiency. In the last century, teachers (primarily women) taught with relative autonomy in their neighborhoods, and earned a laborer's wage (until teacher unions intervened). Altruism reigned—teachers were like parents, nurturing students to become “good” (rather than “smart”) members of society. This front was once quite strong and had local backing, but its influence has steadily declined under the pressure of the second front.

The stronger front is federally and state-driven education reform—summed in “accountability” and assessment-centered education. NCLB and RT3 have been “Hurricane force” reforms. ESSA dials back RT3, but keeps the storm on our shores. “Education reform” comes when political, corporate and academic “elites” focus on “accountability” as a solution to a political problem (Cuban, 2011). This clash of fronts lay waste to local control of education and upset the teaching profession. In RT3, academic decisions directly affecting classrooms were made in Washington, DC and passed on to state boards and districts for implementation (Mitchell, 2012). Districts, schools, teachers, parents and students have less control of the curriculum than ever before (Hursh, 2008). All the while, achievement scores have leveled or dropped (Coulson, 2011).

Before the Storm—Politicizing Education

In the 1960s, politicians rallied behind desegregation and campaigned for more mathematicians and scientists to compete in the Cold War and Space Race. In 1971, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld school desegregation, which hastened the end of community schools. The Space Race brought standards-based education and increased political interest in education as a means to leverage votes. In the 1980s the Cold War ended and global economics took center stage as industry went offshore and the U.S. economy tanked. Education reform served to deflect political accountability. Education commissions (supposedly nonpartisan) began producing blueprints for change.

In 1967, the Education Commission of the States (ECS)

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addressed perceived shortcomings in public education. ECS seated commissioners from the fifty states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. Commissioners were primarily politicians and academics—what Dr. Larry Cuban (2011) referred to as “elites.” The main effect of the ECS was to shift education oversight from local communities to states and the federal government (Education States Commission, 2014).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), published *A Nation at Risk*. The NCEE coined the term “achievement gap.” *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983) attacked public education for less-than-perfect rankings on international achievement tests. Little emphasis was given to evidence wealthy students were significantly out-performing their counterparts in poverty (American College Testing, 2010; College Boards, 2013).

A Nation at Risk (1983) blamed poor test performance, global economic position, spiraling debt and lost manufacturing jobs on public education. The *Trends in International Math and Science Study* (NCES, 2015) functioned as the yardstick for measuring education across the globe, and the U.S. did not measure up as expected. At the same time, manufacturing in the U.S. hit an all-time low in comparison to other markets (France-Pressé, 2009). Less developed nations advanced globally on the backs of cut-rate resources, fewer restrictions, and massive workforces (Nationsonline, 2010). The national debt increased from \$72 billion to \$442 billion from 1973 to 1983 (Manuel, 2010). *A Nation at Risk* attributed our economic woes to the “achievement gap” (Lutz, 1987). Stedman (1997) proposed the “gap” was mostly contrived, but politically effective.

According to NCEE, the perpetrators placing our “nation at risk” were public educators:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we

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have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (NCEE, 1983, p. 5)

Thus, the political conversation among the “elites” was set. Politicians presented teachers as saboteurs.

In 1988, the Reagan administration initiated the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB, 2010) which introduced the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—the Nation’s Report Card, a random sampling of test scores across the nation. NAEP began measuring the nation’s academic health by test scores. President George H. Bush explored education accountability in the midst of an unsure economy, increasing inner city violence, and deficit spending.

Each successive president responded with increasingly invasive accountability programs: a) Goals 2000 attributed to Bill Clinton; b) No Child Left Behind attributed to George W. Bush; c) Race to the Top, and d) Every Student Succeeds Act, both attributed to Barack Obama. The Alliance for Excellence in Education and the Commission on No Child Left Behind formed to support “accountability” through testing (Alliance, 2010). Unfortunately, political reforms dismissed central tendency and statistical probability—virtually guaranteeing the failure of universal testing. Garrison Keillor (1986) humorously lampooned education reform, claiming children in his hometown were *all* above average.

President Clinton’s *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* became law in 1994 and was amended in 1996. Clinton supported “clear and rigorous standards” for what every child should “know and be able to do” (Goals 2000, 1998). Furthermore, President Clinton called on states to require challenging tests of knowledge and teaching proficiency for new teachers (Clinton, 1998). Such testing became law in the 1998 *Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 1998), a significantly amended version of the *Higher Education Act of 1965*.

Clinton also anticipated a teacher shortage as “boomer”

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children moved through public education (Feistritzer, 1998). Policymakers thought state-approved teacher channels were too narrow and too slow. As a result, pre- and post-certification tests, such as Education Testing Service's *Praxis Series* (ETS, 2015a), were deployed by most states with a primary focus on content (Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment, 2001). Unfortunately, candidates from poverty were significantly less likely to become teachers under the new testing measures (Bennett, McWhorter & Kuykendall, 2006). Professional testing resulted in a lower proportion of minority candidates considering teacher licensure (Gitomer, 2001).

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB, 2001) greatly increased federal incursions into education. Under NCLB schools must publish Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports to demonstrate academic progress. Schools fail AYP if scores fall below state proficiency goals (Peterson, 2005). The mandated AYP for 2015 was that 100% of U.S. students must be on grade level (Peterson, 2005). It should be noted here that not one state or U.S. territory met the 2015 NCLB requirements.

Under NCLB the curriculum narrowed to expedite accountability and standardization. Under Goals 2000, teachers were spending almost 80% of their teaching time on reading, writing and math (Perie, Baker & Bobbitt, 1997). The remaining 20% went to science and social studies. Today's curriculum includes these subjects, but also includes significant time for benchmark, practice and formative testing. A recent survey found 44% of 5,000 teachers spend over 20% of their time on test prep and test administration (PageOne, 2015). Science and social studies remain marginalized—art, music and physical education have all but vanished.

President Obama contributed Race to the Top (RT3). A key feature of the Obama administration's reform is a federalized common core curriculum (Weidle, 2010). Whereas NCLB federalized "accountability" testing, RT3 federalized the curriculum, its computer-based testing and use of results for evaluating teachers. According to Weidle (2010), core standards focus all students on college and include rigorous content and application of knowledge.

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The new core curriculum narrows previously diverse curricula even further (Crocco and Costigan, 2007; King and Zucker, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Low-stakes subjects are the sciences and social studies. Low-stakes subjects are tested, but these subjects are not leveraged for accountability. No-stakes subjects, such as the arts (music, theater, visual, etc.), and physical fitness (recess, fitness, nutrition, sports, etc.) are typically untested and play no role in accountability.

RT3 pushes states forward on pay-for-performance (Rose, 2010). Key evaluation points include pre- and post-testing, student growth models, and teacher evaluations by administrators and students. States receiving RT3 funds or NCLB waivers are required to implement a similar evaluation system. In an RT3 world, teachers will receive pay and promotion based on student growth models. Perhaps the relationship between education reform and politics can be summed up simply as follows: Politicians dream of everyone, everywhere, and in every circumstance, passing every achievement test.

Fronts Collide in Georgia

In Georgia (recipient of \$400M in RT3 funds) teachers faced a world of *newness*—*new* common core curriculum (Common Core Georgia Performance Standards, CCGPS), *new* teaching standards (Teacher Assessment Performance Standards, (TAPS), *new* state-wide teacher evaluation system (Teacher Keys Effectiveness System, TKES), *new* electronic “dashboard,” *new* value-added growth model (Student Growth Percentiles, SGPs), *new* teacher growth model (Teacher Effectiveness Measure, TEM), *new* synchronized curriculum maps and pacing plans for class/team/grade/subject-level, *new* achievement test system (Milestones), *new* in situate special needs coordination (with teachers or para-pros), a *new* certification model—plus the “normal” 25-150 *new* students. These new mandates ensured the continued flow of funds to cash-strapped Georgia schools (PageOne, 2015; Ravich, 2015).

Teachers were in their fourth (or fifth) set of curriculum standards in a little over a decade. The state’s Quality Core Curriculum

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came in two iterations (Georgia Department of Education, 1999 & 2002), 2004, Georgia Performance Standards (GPS, GADOE, 2004) and 2013, Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS, GADOE, 2013). In February 2015, “common core” was dropped from the name and CCGPS was renamed Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE; GADOE, February, 2015). Ironically, the standards are very similar in content, but are rewritten, recoded and redesigned for testing and reporting purposes—it is quite frustrating for teachers to learn yet *another* set of categories, indicators and jargon.

Teachers also faced their third or fourth version of professional teacher assessments. The last decade has seen the Georgia Teacher Observation Instrument (GTOI) or the Georgia Teacher Evaluation Program (GTEP, GADOE, 2005), CLASS Keys (GADOE, 2008), Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS, GADOE, 2012) and Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES, GADOE, 2013).

Student assessment changed. *Milestone* common core tests began in 2015—the third achievement test program in recent years. The *Milestone* is one among many tests required in Georgia public schools. According to PageOne (2015), of 5,100+ Georgia teachers surveyed, almost 25% administer six or more district or stated required tests.

Inductees faced their third certification test series over the course of a decade—*Praxis I* and *II* (Educational Testing Service, ETS, 2015a), Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (ETS, 2015b), version one (ETS, 2015b), and GACE version two by Pearson, Inc. (GACE, 2015).

Teaching conditions changed. In 2014, Georgia’s legislature cut \$4.8 billion from its 180 school districts. The loss of funding resulted in 61 districts furloughing teachers (as much as a 5.5% salary cut), 127 increasing class sizes, 49 eliminating art and music programs and 102 increasing property taxes (Suggs, 2014). Many districts were forced to RIF (reduction in force) teachers—one district RIFed 119 faculty members (Jones, 2013).

Methodology

Participants

All participants in this limited field observation completed a nationally accredited (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, NCATE) teacher preparation program between 2003 and 2013. Participants came from a pool of 294 teachers. Of those, 143 volunteered to participate. Forty-two volunteered for shadowing (observation) and interviews. Of those, 23 were selected based upon principal/district authorization, schedule compatibility and the travel limitations of the author. All participants were females teaching in primary (K-3), elementary (3-5) or middle (6-8) schools. All had at least two years of public school experience in their fields. All had additional endorsements (ESOL, reading, math, gifted, etc.) and about 25% had advanced degrees. Among these, four were Teachers of the Year in their respective schools.

Participants worked on grade-level teams with 3-5 colleagues, typically, three teams per grade. Teams taught 60-150 students each day. Departmentalization was the norm at team level—one teacher for reading, one for math, one for language arts, etc. On smaller teams, teachers covered two subjects. Lesson planning was by subject or grade-level—rarely by individual class. The RT3 goal is to have all teachers on all teams teaching the same thing at the same time. Autonomous lesson planning for one’s homeroom has gone the way of the chalkboard. The author visited only one “traditional” self-contained classroom (rural) in which one teacher taught all subjects.

Context

All observations and interviews were in K-8 classrooms in Georgia. The participants represented 18 separate schools and 11 districts in northwest and north-central Georgia. The area covered approximately 700 square miles from the Alabama and Tennessee state lines (west and north) to U.S. Highways 20 and 85 (south and east). The schools visited were both rural and urban. Five of the schools were in the Atlanta suburbs. The average school had 800-1000 students and the average class had 20-25 students. More than

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half of the schools were Title I (free/reduced lunches) and most classes were diverse blends of African American, Caucasian and Hispanic.

Procedures

While on sabbatical leave, the author visited former students to observe, talk and catch up. The author's original objective was to examine changes and reconnect with public school life after some years away. Each visit involved shadowing (observation) and a post-observation conversation or interview. The author kept notes on each visit with the intention of bringing an informed perspective to college-level, preservice teachers.

The author's field notes suggested a qualitative research paradigm (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). The author's field notes were easily adapted to Grounded Theory (1994, Strauss & Corbin), in which one observes and interviews participants, noting and collecting related statements and artifacts. Grounded Theory (GT) works well when quantitative, ordinal values are lacking (Nkwi, Nyamongo & Ryan, 2001).

Teacher comments were noted and compared for commonalities. Constant comparative analysis of field notes revealed all participating teachers shared similar concerns in a year of change. Field notes were the sole source of data. The author reviewed the 23 interviews and used a simple coding process to tally common issues and grouped them accordingly. Teachers' remarks were also marked as positive (*p*) or negative (*n*). The *p/n* codes were to be summarized by topic in table form. Positive responses were hopeful and affirming; negative responses expressed distress or complaint.

From a pool of 250 teachers who were within a day's driving distance, the author set appointments to observe and interview the 23 volunteers. The author was on friendly, collegial terms with all the participants. Field notes were written post-interview. Names of participants, students, colleagues, staff, principals, schools and districts are in digital files, and are to be destroyed upon the completion of the study.

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Each teacher was shadowed and then asked how their school year was progressing. “Assessment” was an expected theme, so the author planned to ask about validity and reliability if the subject arose. Two operational definitions were re-introduced from their college days: “Validity,” meaning an assessment measures what it proposes to measure and “reliability,” meaning the measurement is accurate and consistent across populations and over time (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2011).

Shadowing lasted one or two hours and post-observation conversations were informal. InTASC/TAPS standards (required in Georgia’s TKES system) served as reference points. The beginning of post-observation conversations involved various prompts upon diversity, classroom management, teaching methods, student feedback opportunities and expressions of care and commitment to students—similar to student teacher supervision experiences during college. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Prior discussions with local teachers suggested topics for discussion. Local teachers invariably steered conversations toward TKES (explanation following), common core, growth modeling (student assessment), teaching teams and lack of professional fulfillment. Under NCLB and RT3, team teaching became the norm in Georgia. Teamwork takes a great deal of time—local teachers were attending as many as three after-school meetings each week

Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) had just gone into force after a year of piloting—a direct consequence of RT3 and acceptance of “stimulus funding.” TKES evaluates teachers according to 10 teaching standards similar to InTASC. Summative assessments include teaching evaluations, test scores and student surveys. TKES allegedly yields data for pay and certification decisions. A significant part of TKES includes non-standardized benchmarking of individual students, then comparing those benchmarks to achievement test scores.

Student growth modeling (SGM) began as an ambiguous, beginning-of-school, non-standardized benchmark pre-test linked to spring achievement testing. Ironically, teachers discovered post-test comparisons would not be available until some months *after*

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school started the *next* school year. The SGMs in TKES required individualized pre- and post-testing instructional plans for *every* student. SGMs (as conceived by the GADOE) would yield growth intervals and student percentiles to indicate whether teachers were exemplary, proficient or deficient teachers.

Prior to visiting teachers, local teachers were concerned about

- Pre-planning,
- RT3 mandates (TKES, SGMs and observations),
- teaching teams,
- diversity and central tendency, and
- a personal and school morale.

Interviews

Post-observation interviews began with a review of classroom demographics and the question, “How has this year started out for you?” The author assumed teachers would begin discussing pre-planning, time constraints and beginning-of-the-year experiences. The author next asked, “Do you have enough time to get everything done?”

“Tell me about your team.” Teamwork and shared responsibilities are critical issues in today’s schools. None taught in traditional, self-contained classrooms—mostly because of large schools, testing and new curricula. The author was aware most teachers served on at least three school teams.

“What about TKES?” directed the interview toward RT3 mandated assessments. “Do you think TKES will be a valid and reliable way of evaluating your teaching skills?” This question was included to see if teachers believe TKES has integrity and value. “Have you had a TKES observation yet?” was to elicit teachers’ perceptions of high-stakes observations by administrators.

The author expected SGM comments because local teachers invariably brought up Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) and SGMs in informal discussions. To ensure comments on these the author asked, “Will SLOs and SGMs be valid and reliable in evaluating you and your students?” This question was included to see if teachers believe the system has integrity as a measurement tool.

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“Do your students’ scores represent a normal curve (with regard to central tendency)?” was asked to ascertain how teachers perceived their student population and situation. All teachers interviewed studied central tendency and normal distributions under the guidance of the author as undergraduates. The author was prepared to review the highlights of central tendency if necessary. Central tendency is the “elephant in the room” when it comes to accountability.

Finally, “Are you fulfilled as a teacher?” “Why?” This question was included to ascertain the morale of the teacher. “Do you think everybody feels like you do?” sought to calculate the morale of school colleagues. “Are you fulfilled as a professional?”

After interviews, notes were transcribed into field notes and were coded as mentioned above. The author’s field notes often included paraphrased quotes related to specific questions. In addition to the coded responses the author noted similarities with comments made by early interviewees.

Findings

The following data were from the coded responses of the participants (see Table One). Actual responses follow to give the reader a sense of teachers’ concerns.

Topics	<i>p</i> Positive	<i>n</i> Negative
Pre-planning	.43 (10)	.57 (13)
Teams	.91 (21)	.09 (2)
TKES	.09 (2)	.91 (21)
SLO/SGM	.0	1.00 (23)
Curve (SDM)	.13 (3)	.87 (20)
Fulfillment	.13 (3)	.87 (20)

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Questions and Responses

How has the year started out for you? All teachers interviewed felt overwhelmed. Their primary complaints: not enough time to prepare; too many meetings. Pre-planning began in late July; the author conducted interviews in October and November. Apparently, pre-planning across the state was used for TKES implementation and instruction. In past years, teachers had fewer meetings and spent the remainder of their time in preparing their classrooms. This year was different. When school started, teachers felt they were already behind and under-prepared to deliver their new curricula in a TKES-driven environment.

“I used to spend the week before school getting my room ready and planning. This year we had workshops and team meetings almost every day of pre-planning.” “A crazy year! There’s always something more to do or a meeting to attend.” “I used to plan more—now I spend a lot of time worrying about all the stuff I have to get done—I’m constantly just trying to keep up.” “I’ve never had a year like this.” “It’s all standards—I have fewer and fewer choices when it comes to what I do in the classroom.” “Most days I’m working from team plans—I rarely have time to do specific planning for classes.” “Tons of meetings for TKES.” “I feel sorry for the new teachers.” “I don’t feel like I get done as much as I used to.”

“I’m overwhelmed!” “Okay, I guess, I’m here until 6:00 every night.” “The year has started well enough, but it’s been challenging.” “There’s a lot of new stuff—it’s hard.” “I love my kids! It looks like a good year.” “I’m just trying to keep up.” “TKES, SLOs, GSMs and meetings are taking lots of time.” “Pre-planning was mostly TKES workshops and school meetings—I don’t feel like I got my room as ready as I usually do.” “Shifted to a new grade this year—big mistake—there’s too much new stuff to learn.”

Tell me about your team. All participants worked on grade level/subject teams. Even so, many were surprised about being asked about their teams. In most cases the author was introduced to team members—typically, four or five teachers teaching areas covered on achievement tests. The only subjects taught daily were

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math, reading, language arts, science and social studies. The first three were considered the “riskiest” and most difficult to teach. Teachers serve on at least three teams: grade-level, subject and school. None of the teachers had team development training.

“With 400 students and 16 teachers, you have to work as teams. It’s impossible to coordinate a standardized curriculum otherwise.” “If we worked individually we would never stay together on the standards.” “It’s best to divide and conquer—I’m only responsible for social studies on my team. I haven’t taught the entire curriculum since I graduated.” “I suppose if all the lessons were scripted we could back off the teams, but who wants that?” “I like being on a team, but we waste a lot of time figuring out what’s wanted.” “In a smaller school, you might have self-contained classes and team-working would change—you’d all be doing the same thing—on our teams we’re all doing a different subject.” “I’ve always been on a team. I don’t know anyone who isn’t.”

What about TKES? TKES is big. The teacher assessment system involves a new common core curriculum, professional standards, observations, assessments, student growth models, student surveys, one-to-one technology for students and reporting progress through a “dashboard” into a state-wide database. Teachers see pay-for-performance as the underlying theme. Thus, TKES is perceived as a high-stakes assessment system aimed at teachers. The final assessment is to be an aggregation of teacher observations, assessments, student growth and student survey results.

“I doubt its validity, but I don’t think it matters.” “TAPS [standards] are valid, but the evaluations will be unreliable.” “The observations make me nervous—I’ll be surprised if I’m at my best.” “How can student surveys be fair? Some teachers are stricter than others.” “TKES doesn’t see what I’m doing day-to-day—observation times are rarely the best sample of my work.” “No, I blew my observation—was having a bad day—I got a couple of 2s on my evaluation.” “I got all 3s and 4s!” “It’s a game we have to play and I’ll play the game as best as I can—you have to ‘game’ the system.” “It is what it is.”

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Will SLOs and SGMs be valid and reliable in evaluating you and your students? “I don’t like the SGMs—we don’t control a lot of variables in students’ lives.” “If you’re talking about using student scores to evaluate us—not likely.” “The SLOs are a joke—the only test we give and hope everyone fails.” “It’s too early to tell.” “I’m not sure it’s necessary. I have a pretty good idea where my students are without all the modeling stuff.” “Maybe, if all the other things were equal, but they never are.” “SGMs are trying to do what teachers do naturally—I don’t need them, but we have to do it.” “I don’t know enough about it yet.” “The modeling doesn’t tell me much I don’t already know—this is all for TKES.”

Do your students’ scores represent a normal curve? All teachers were incredulous about accountability goals. NCLB, RT3 and ESSA mandate 99-100% pass rates for the entire student population. Yet, given a normal population and a valid and reliable assessment, 15-20% will fall a standard deviation below the mean. Teachers, especially in Title I classrooms, know their students, classes, school and state are subject to central tendency. Politicians do not know this. Teachers also know “rigorous” assessments mean lower scores and only a “dumbed down” assessment gets everyone over the bar. If every student *does* pass, skepticism should reign.

“RT3 doesn’t believe in curves—they still insist all my students are above average!” “Yes, we’re a normal curve and the same old problems exist—ability, family background and poverty.” “How can teachers teaching different subjects to students from different socio-economic settings be evaluated fairly?” “Of course, but no one sees that but us.” “We’re Title I and I’ll be lucky if a third of my class passes.”

Are you fulfilled as a teacher? In October and November of 2015, teachers interviewed were not happy or encouraged by the direction their profession was headed. “Overwhelmed” was their most-used descriptor. Many voiced a disconnect between what they chose to do (serve students) and what they feel like they are doing (running an assembly line). The teachers interviewed expressed an absence of professional autonomy and dislike for

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excessive, high-stakes assessments. Teachers balanced their love of children against their distaste for TKES.

Are you fulfilled? “Yes and no—I love my students, but I hate all the other stuff—and it just grows and grows!” “I’ve always wanted to be a teacher, but it’s not what I thought [it would be].” “No. I feel like I work in a prison.” “I have moments, but most of the time I’m working on documenting.” “It’s all about the curriculum and I want it to be about children and their interests.” “Mostly yes—especially when I remember why I became a teacher in the first place—I love my kiddos.” “I don’t think I can do this for 18 more years.” “Yes, this is what I’m good at.”

Discussion

The teachers interviewed were unanimous in declaring RT3 changes “overwhelming” or “challenging.” Most attributed it to the GSGM portion of TKES, CCGPS (new standards) and new Milestone testing. Milestone tests are a statewide-server-based McGraw-Hill test similar to the widely-used *Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers* (PARCC). As mentioned earlier, the GSGM pre-test (SLO) component is unreliable.

The good news was that in spite of being “overwhelmed,” classrooms were generally well-managed and learning was consistently monitored. Observations and conversations with team members helped build a context for teacher responses. Most had a positive attitude, but were not happy with their non-teaching workload. More than half said they were spending significantly more time planning and meeting after school than in past years and most suspected no one reviewed their web-based lesson plans. Slightly less than half begrudged the time taken from pre-planning for TKES meetings. Five teachers half-jokingly said they were not sure they were going to make it through the year. One teacher stated she was so frustrated she was contemplating resignation before the end of the school year.

Teams are the rule in Georgia, yet none of the accountability or evaluation measures address teamwork or team (in)effectiveness.

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Further research is in order, especially as student tests scores become high-stakes measures for teachers. The teachers in the study were not anti-team, though they wished they had more autonomy as a professional. All wished for relevant, engaging lessons tailored to meet the individual needs of their students in the context of their strengths and interests. Most of the teachers picture a “good” team as one that supports, encourages and coordinates best practices. Almost all the teachers enjoyed working on teams with their colleagues, but disliked most of their meetings being taken up by implementation and keeping up with state mandates.

Teachers have as many as three team regular meetings each week—school, grade level and subjects. Most of the teams in this study were focused upon unilaterally mapping and pacing the new common core and preparing for TKES. All 23 teachers agreed team-teaching was necessary under the current conditions. Many suggested school size and the common core curriculum make teamwork a given. As long as uniformity and accountability dictate actions, teams will remain necessary. Interestingly, almost all the teachers said they taught their best lessons after testing was done.

Generally speaking, teachers did not think TKES would be valid or reliable. Their primary concerns with growth modeling (SGMs). They were concerned about uncontrolled variables, such as balanced classes (normal populations), socioeconomic circumstances and need-based faculty placements or teaching assignments. Most assume SGM is a pay-for-performance initiative—which they dislike. The TKES component with the least criticisms was leadership observations. Most appreciated evaluations on TAPS standards for professional growth, but were not happy with its 50% weight in overall evaluations. Among those who shared their TAPS observation scores, most received 3s (proficient/consistent), two mentioned receiving 2s (needs improvement/inconsistent) and five mentioned receiving 4s (exemplary/continual). No one reported receiving 1s (deficient/unobserved). Most distrust upcoming student surveys, but few were familiar with the questions on the survey. The notion of “gaming the system” came up often and was best described as doing “what one had to do to get by.” Most teachers were content

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with “proficient” regardless of what they thought of their own skills. Some went so far as to say “proficient” was a safe place to be with regard to TKES.

Teachers were unanimous in dismissal of SGMs as a valid, reliable or sufficient measure of student growth or professional ability. The teachers were clearly connecting growth models with value-added assessments and pay-for-performance. None were fans of high-stakes achievement testing—especially the new Milestone tests. Common arguments against testing were often mentioned. More than half of the teachers supported formative assessments, but many were suspect of high-stakes summative assessments. None liked the idea of being professionally assessed through students’ test scores.

The CCGPS (common core standards; now, Georgia Standards of Excellence) are being learned on the fly as teachers use pull-down menus and online lessons with their digital dashboards. Of particular concern is how the new standards will be tested by Milestone. Teachers know very little about the new Milestone tests. They have been told Milestones will be language intensive with constructed responses from students—much more difficult than last year’s CRCT tests. These concerns are justified because a significant number of students across the state failed to pass CRCT tests. Teachers feel that each new mandate seems to take time away from students, teaching and lesson development—the reasons most teachers teach. All the teachers stated this year had more workshops and meetings than previous years—mostly about TKES. The consensus was new mandates decreased their time planning and narrowed their teaching to team-set lessons. The national high-stakes content emphasis is a problem when it mandates almost exclusive, lockstep teaching of reading, writing and math to the near elimination of other subjects—particularly the arts. All of the teachers in this study wished they had more freedom to engage students in lessons and units about which they are passionate.

Many teachers seemed unfulfilled professionally. More than half flatly said, “No” to the question about fulfillment. A repeated theme was, “It is what it is.” Discontentment with current

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circumstances in teaching is quite evident. The idea of teaching being test- and curriculum-focused rather than student-focused lessons disturbs many. The lack of professional prerogative was also mentioned. Many teachers feel they have fewer and fewer professional choices to make in their classrooms.

Only three teachers planned to stay in teaching until retirement. The remaining twenty doubted they could stay in teaching until retirement. Some said they would quit now if they could afford it. Slightly less than half said they would eventually drop out because of families.

Conclusion

In the midst of our “perfect storm,” teachers across the country are reeling from waves of NCLB accountability and the landfall of RT3 and ESSA accountability. The stronger front has overpowered the weaker front. Diane Ravich (2015) points out why RT3 stands to be much more pervasive than NCLB. The U.S. Department of Education controls much of public education today without congressional consent—power came through \$5 billion awarded as part of the economic stimulus plan following the 2008 recession. RT3 compliance is assured because cash-strapped states gobbled up education funds. Georgia received \$400 million in RT3 funds to alleviate teacher layoffs and furloughs, larger class sizes, eliminated art and music programs and to restore 180-day school years (PageOne, 2015). The problems facing Georgia were outlined in Alyson Klein’s (2014) *Education Week* article, aptly titled: “Georgia Battles to Beat Race to Top Head Winds.”

Under the current conditions, one may reasonably conclude teachers are trapped between Department of Education funds and state budgets. Teachers constantly face changing professional expectations. Furthermore, teamwork and team efficiency, key components in successful teaching, are virtually ignored. Institutional trust, morale and professional fulfillment decrease as federal and state agencies continue to “reform” education. Clearly, teachers, parents and politicians see education very differently.

Students are perceived as coinage by corporate America.

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Corporate lobbyists want one thing—more coins. Politicians, under various influences, push public schools to mint more coins for the corporate machinery. The subtle difference may be our students more closely resemble the various denominations of our nation’s currency—single cents to \$100 bills. Each denomination finds its value in the marketplace. Schools are expected to make each child high-value to the economy—such is statistically impossible. Assessment axiom: If the bar is low; all will pass. If the bar is high; few will pass.

Many of the teachers interviewed alluded to public schools as assembly lines where teachers manufacture a product—the state’s version of education. Teachers mint coins for corporate America’s use. Indeed, as we view students, a manufacturing paradigm is evident—high-volume quantities are preferred over low-volume quality. Politicians and their supporters hope for quality while mandating quantity.

Ironically, the assembly line (even if a sound paradigm) fails because the line is continually retooled—“upgraded” and “improved”—by management (elites). Teachers and their teams spend much of their time repairing and retooling the line instead of manufacturing the product.

Today, public education policy has failed to improve education for the masses or achieve excellence. Freshmen enrollments and senior graduation rates should be similar, but are not. Richard Murnane (2013) studied graduation rates from 1970-2010; finding graduation rates to be stagnant or declining. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011; Murnane, 2013) graduation rates in the South, New Mexico and Nevada are less than 70%—about the same or worse than 1970. NCES (2011) reports growth in social studies and geography has been flat since 1994. The average freshman graduation rate has grown marginally from 73.7% to 75.5% between 1990 and 2009 (NCES, 2011).

Thus, Goals 2000, NCLB and RT3 are failed reforms for public education. In light of decades of mediocrity or failure, one harkens back to *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983). This time around, the saboteurs are politicians. NCLB is dead and few in Washington,

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D.C. attended its funeral. Yet, NCLB data indicates the likelihood of RT3 or ESSA succeeding. The author predicts RT3 and ESSA will follow NCLB in a few years and the nation will have little or nothing to show for two decades of reform. In the United States, student growth models, PARCC, Milestone and similar tests will *again* reveal students from households above \$50,000 annual income test best. Low achievement will continue to mirror poverty (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Reardon, 2011; Kohn, 2000). Education occasionally defeats poverty, but poverty regularly defeats education. Ending poverty would generate better test scores than any politically mandated accountability measure (Kohn, 2000; Sirin, 2012; Coe, et al, 2013).

Teachers in this study were skeptical. They seriously doubt common core, TKES or new achievement tests will result in valid or reliable accountability for students or teachers. In a study of Georgia teachers, 73% said testing did not benefit students (Magil, 2015). *High-stakes Testing and Student Achievement: Updated Analyses with NAEP Data* (Nichols, Glass & Berliner, 2012, p. 26) states, “The research on the impact of accountability-based policies and student achievement is varied, limited, and relatively inconclusive.” This report also examined the pressure federal mandates place on teachers and states to perform well. Georgia ranked seventh of twenty-five in state-level “test-based pressure”—Kentucky indicated the least pressure and Texas topped the list (Nichols, Glass & Berliner, 2012, p. 5).

The winds of change in education have kept teachers from refining their skills and becoming deeply invested in teaching that arouses curiosity and enflames passionate learning. This year’s perfect storm has made a difficult job worse. Furthermore, as with most storms, a trail of destruction and disappointment remains. Teachers have almost reached the limits of their flexibility and commitment to their profession. Many of those interviewed find themselves unfulfilled and looking for the exits.

Public education needs no more “accountability” reform—no more storms—if for no other reason than teachers need a degree of stability and predictability in their profession. Education politics

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has failed. According to the College Board (2010), scores on the *Scholastic Achievement Test* (SAT) from 2000 to 2010 are approximately the same. A similar test, the *American College Testing* (ACT), has similar trends from 2002-2012, indicating less than half-a-point increase on composite scores (ACT, 2013). California's *Standard Testing and Reporting* (STAR) scores have decreased over the past decade (Edusource, 2013).

In more than a decade of test-driven “accountability” we have not significantly raised achievement and have failed to address other roads to success through a work ethic, persistence and service. Public education needs teaching professionals meeting the needs of every family and student under their tutelage—not on their assembly line. Teaching is a social rather than a scientific endeavor. Teachers motivate and engage rather than manufacture students.

Recommendations

At the outset, we can give teachers a break! In a sound system of governance, teachers protect students, principals protect teachers, superintendents protect principals, boards protect superintendents, and states protect boards. Current testing policies do not serve students well. As tens of thousands of parents refuse PARCC and similar RT3 tests (Nickerson, 2015; NJkids, 2015; Stouffer, 2015), teachers should be able to affirmatively accept refusals or join the movement without repercussions from principals. Principals should not face sanctions for supporting parents and teachers. Superintendents should defend parents, teachers and principals before boards and so on. The best place to begin this system of governance is in the school board room.

The best we can hope for is an enlightened group of politicians who will close the mints and assembly lines and reopen the schools. Politicians and corporations would do well to consider how poverty defeats attempts to mint identical coins. Poverty and education have a complex relationship. Does education decimate poverty or does poverty decimate education? Politicians see the former while teachers see the latter. Experience and research

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suggest education alone is no foolproof vaccination for poverty. Poverty's children are often immune to education. Paradoxically, if all children can be educated, poverty ends; if poverty ends, all children can be educated. The federal and state governments might work on poverty while communities provide an education of intellect, industry and inspiration.

Perhaps the way to crack the poverty chestnut is adult education. If federal and state governments applied help (career training) where the hurt (unemployment) is in our nation, states and communities would be better off. High school-college-career may work for white-collar workers, but tech high schools and vocational schools are largely missing in our culture. Intellect stands with integrity and industry in varying degrees to yield a completely educated student. Experience and common sense suggest "being smart" is pointless without character and hard work. Many students will succeed in life relying on their hearts and hands.

Finally, public school curricula should flow from clients and communities. Relevant, passionate learning is meaningful and resilient—remote, mandated learning is not. All subjects have local content if teachers are allowed to create and integrate teaching and learning. Our public-school curricula should include as much of human experience as possible—literature, mathematics, sciences, social studies, arts, physical education and play. Accountability testing has failed to significantly validate its existence. Testing should return to the last century—intelligence and achievement tests—when students were tested, but stakes were low and data were valid, reliable and helpful for explaining a student's progress (or lack thereof) in the context of ability and others' progress. Such an approach will free and invigorate the teaching profession, restore the hope of service that drew most teachers into the field and meet the needs of unique students in unique communities.

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Tables

Topics	<i>p</i> Positive	<i>n</i> Negative
Pre-planning	.43 (10)	.57 (13)
Teams	.91 (21)	.09 (2)
TKES	.09 (2)	.91 (21)
SLO/SGM	.0	1.00 (23)
Curve (SDM)	.13 (3)	.87 (20)
Fulfillment	.13 (3)	.87 (20)

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