

The Federal Government's Impact on United States' Public Schools: The Unnecessary Standardization of the American Student

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Abstract

Twentieth-century American public schools have been subject to increased federal control, with one consequence being the loss of important facets of local control. A study of the history of education reform reveals a long history of misguided attempts to standardize student learning. The intrusion of the federal government in local schools has forced educators to standardize curricula and has inflated the importance of standardized assessments. American educators are keenly aware that standardization neglects the most important functions of the educational process. There are alternatives to the current system; rather than motivate education reform through political or financial interests, contemporary reformers must create a balanced curriculum dedicated to the needs and interests of all learners in our diverse and democratic society.

Throughout the twentieth century, many of the national reform efforts for American education were doomed from the start because they neglected or distorted the nature of the learner, subverted the democratic interest to narrow nationalistic or special interests, imposed aims on the schools that were outside the educational situation, and failed to develop an integrated curriculum structure to meet the unified and diversified functions required of a cosmopolitan society. (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 146).

The framers of the United States Constitution deliberately left school development to individual states. The Tenth Amendment (1791) states, «the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people» (LaMorte, 2008, p. 469); in many cases, education was a local function administered by school boards in each town. From the earliest days of the Union, states have had sovereign power to create schools. However, for more than five decades, the state and federal governments have increased their influence on local schools. In particular, the federal government, in an attempt to increase control over traditional local public schools, has capitalized on fear and, more recently, the perceived lack of accountability in public education. In this paper, I will describe the increasing influence of the federal government over local public schools and will argue that federal involvement strips away important facets of local control. In the conclusion, I will present alternatives to the current system.

October 4, 1957, was an important day in the history of public education in the United States. On this date, the former Soviet Union, America's Cold War communist foe, launched *Sputnik*, the first artificial satellite, into orbit. Until the launch, «the United States had held itself to be the world leader in space technology and missile development» (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sputnik_crisis). The launch of *Sputnik*, and the resulting belief that a 'missile gap' existed between the Soviet Union and the United States marked the beginning of modern federal involvement in education, a right traditionally reserved for state and local governments (Zhao, 2009). The federal government created a space race panic leading to public fear; this «public fear enabled American politicians to achieve many things that had not been possible before, including providing federal assistance to public education» (Zhao, 2009, p. 22).

Ordinary citizens believed that the United States was behind its Cold War enemy. In response, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958. The Act provided federal funds to launch innovative math, science, and foreign language programs for students of all ages; Americans were told that students who excelled in these areas would be better prepared than our foreign competitors. NDEA was «the first piece of comprehensive federal education legislation in the United States to provide aid to education at all levels, public and private» (Zhao, 2009, p. 23). Studies of the effects of NDEA revealed that federal funds provided by NDEA allowed schools to provide innovative curricula that «helped to boost scientific and technological advancement», but there is little evidence to suggest that the «investment in the nation's K-12 schools was responsible for maintaining the nation's superiority in science and technology» (Zhao, 2009, p. 25). In fact, fewer students were enrolled in math and science during the 1970s; students rejected the essentialist philosophy adopted by the federal government.

In the mid-1960s, President Johnson launched his War on Poverty. In an attempt to provide equal access and quality to public education for all students, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. The goal of the Act «was to improve the basic skills of at-risk children» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 465); in addition, the Act mandated professional development for educators, provided instructional materials for schools, and promoted the involvement of families in the education of their children. «For more than three decades, [this legislation] offered federal grant moneys to public and private schools in exchange for their provision of remedial education services» (Fowler, 2009, p. 252). The ESEA is the: «most far-reaching federal education legislation ever passed by Congress. A 1980 study revealed, implementing Title I took a long time [and], although its early implementation was tumultuous, the quality of Title I implementation improved significantly as the policy matured» (Fowler, 2009, p. 275); since its inception, Congress has reauthorized ESEA almost every five years. However, since 2002, Congress has failed to reauthorize the Act. In 2011, Title I and Title VII funding continue to provide remedial education services for children of poverty and students for whom English is a second language. However, critics of the policy argue that basic skills instruction simply helps students «answer questions at a low cognitive level [...] by means of drill» and that basic skills instruction creates «a curriculum polarity between poor children and children from families of higher socioeconomic status» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 465). Again,

the focus of the federal government was on improving students' essential skills rather than tailoring curriculum to meet the needs of the students.

Three decades after the passage of ESEA, President Clinton signed *Goals 2000* into law in 1994. *Goals 2000* created the National Education Standards and Improvement Council, an agency charged with developing «voluntary national standards» (Fowler, 2009, p. 17). In addition to standards, Clinton called for the development of «assessment programs to measure progress toward meeting [the national] standards» (Fowler, 2009, p. 354). Conservative Republican politicians advocated for increased school choice, while liberal Democrats continued to push for generous federal funding for impoverished children; «moderates in both parties supported stronger accountability policies for public education and some forms of school choice» (Fowler, 2009, p. 354). With a call for increased accountability, there was «renewed impetus [...] given to the test-driven curriculum and to the announced plan to assess student achievement in meeting 'new world-class Standards' through [tests]» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 313). Professional associations gave immediate attention to creating standards for the essential subjects, with specific attention to mathematics and science; however, «insufficient attention was being given to what each subject domain can contribute to other areas of knowledge so as to create a coherent, balanced, and articulated curriculum for general education» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 313). Many of the objectives of *Goals 2000* remain in place nearly twenty years after its inception.

Accountability is an exercise in hope. When we raise academic standards, children raise their academic sights. When children are regularly tested, teachers know where and how to improve. When scores are known to parents, parents are empowered to push for change. When accountability for our schools is real, the results for our children are real (as cited in Zhao, 2009);

public education was forever changed with the election of George W. Bush in November 2000. One of President George W. Bush's first official acts was to reauthorize the ESEA as the *No Child Left Behind Act*. In order to receive federal funds under ESEA, states were required:

to develop academic standards, to establish an accountability system based on those standards, and to test students in reading and mathematics in order to see if they are meeting those standards» (Fowler, 2009, p. 355). «The explicit goal of the legislation is for 100% of American children to be proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014, and schools and school districts must make adequate yearly progress toward this goal (Fowler, 2009, p. 355).

Schools and school districts that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) face sanctions that include being labeled 'in need of improvement', having to complete improvement plans, offering their students the ability to transfer to higher performing schools, providing supplemental tutoring services for their charges, bringing in new teaching and/or administrative staff, and, in the fifth year of failure to make AYP, potential school closure and restructuring (Fowler, 2009). The Department of Education has predicted that, without waivers, up to 82% of the nation's schools could miss that target and end up facing penalties including the loss of federal education dollars (<http://www.cnn.com>).

More important is that NCLB's intense focus on tests, developed by corporations with little to no knowledge of local school curricula or cultures, «delimits the curriculum to the basics and mitigates a full and rich curriculum, especially for disadvantaged children and youth» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 314).

Increasing federal influence in our traditionally local schools has forced educators to turn to essentialist policies in order to experience success. In our contemporary age of accountability for student results on standardized tests, schools that achieve high test scores are considered successful. The federal government provides financial incentives to districts that show growth measured by state mandated standardized tests. Unions are threatened by the concept of merit pay for those educators who show the highest passing rates on annual exams. This focus on standardized assessments has «crowded out what should be an essential criterion for well-educated students: a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others» (Engel & Sandstrom, 2010, p. A.23).

«The modern history of curriculum reform, indeed education reform, reveals the repeated failure to recognize and treat the three fundamental factors in the educative process in vital interdependence» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 148). Despite vague efforts to 'reform' curriculum, politicians, business executives, and ordinary citizens have repeatedly failed to recognize the importance of creating an educational process in which the nature of the learner, democratic ideals, and the structure and function of the curriculum are treated as complementary, not independent, features. When these fundamental factors are considered separately or in opposition to one another, efforts to reform education are bound to fail (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 148). Standardized tests, touted as measures of accountability for schools and their leaders, are failing our students; these assessments, which are neither problem-based nor connected to relevant themes, neglect both the needs of the learner and democratic ideals (Bell, 2010; Tienken, 2010). However, these tests have become part of the education of every American child.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), signed into law by President George W. Bush in early 2002, mandates the use of standardized measures to determine a public school's success or need for improvement. Until the 1980's, «[American] educators were considered experts with valuable opinions about education policy» and local school districts had most authority (Fowler, 2009, p. 8); unfortunately, with the repeated reauthorization of NCLB, educators have ceded influence to policy makers, and the federal government exercises increased control over local schools. Education policy should involve educators, because these professionals are likely to «suggest to State Commissioners of Education that they should craft policy based on demonstrated empirical evidence» (Tienken, 2010, p. 152). Empirical evidence points to the necessity of treating the learner, democratic ideals, and the structure and function of the curriculum collectively, rather than separately.

Because standardized tests fail to address these three elements in the educative process, using the results of standardized tests as the sole measure of the success of a school is not empirically sound.

Essentialism

According to the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, «education should be determined by the needs of the society to be served, the character of the individuals to be educated, and the knowledge of educational theory and practice available» (United States Department of Education, 1928, p. 8). Despite the success of the progressivist Eight-Year Study (1932/33-1940/41) during which problem-based curriculum served as guided learning experiences for the students, the current educational climate is one of essentialism. Teachers feel compelled to teach 'tested' content first; all other learning experiences happen in spare time or coincidentally. The contemporary standards-based accountability movement violates the curriculum paradigm. Although standardized tests provide easy to gather, quantifiable results, problem-based assessments provide learners with practice using higher order skills. Dewey demonstrated that, in order to educate with social change in view, schools needed to focus on qualitative, not quantitative, measures of progress (Tanner & Tanner, 2007). «Contemporary reformers must create a balanced curriculum dedicated to the needs and interests of all learners in our diverse and democratic society» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 204). Test-based education does not meet this standard.

In advocating for education that would enlighten students and prepare them for adult life, Dewey «emphasized that educational objectives must be determined from the educational function» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 128). In order to fulfill Dewey's standard, educators must unite against 'teaching to the test' and to develop problem-based projects and assessments that prepare leaders for the 21st Century.

The Nature of the Learner

In the contemporary age of accountability, standards-based curricula have become the norm. However, the intense focus on standardization of learning and standardization of the human being have neglected needs, interests, and the very the nature of the learner. Proponents of standardized student outcomes as measured myopically through improved results from narrow standardized tests of academic knowledge should reacquaint themselves with the Winnetka Plan, devised and written by Carlton Washburn in the late 1920s.

Washburn's experiment was «the first systemwide attempt to individualize the subject curriculum. It was based on the idea that the best way to improve the curriculum was to reorganize it so that each child could master it at his or her own rate» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 81). In his analysis of the Winnetka Plan, Benjamin Bloom correctly observed that «virtually all children can learn what schools have to teach through a rich and stimulating learning environment, well-designed instruction, remedial help when needed, and the time they need to master the material» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 83). Public schools are a reflection of our democratic society; they are populated with students of diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds. These individual differences must be embraced rather than standardized; a rich and varied curriculum is the critical component that ensures that today's students will learn (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 83).

In sharp contrast to the Winnetka Plan's attention to the nature of the learner was the federally funded Woods Hole Conference of 1950. Concerned with the «the long-range crisis in national security» caused by the Cold War and space race, politicians pressured scientists and scholars to transform curriculum (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 101). The resulting reform, known as disciplinarity, placed an intense focus on mathematics and science, and disciplinarity dominated the curriculum for the remainder of the 1950s and into the 1960s. According to Daniel Tanner and Laurel Tanner (2007), «the school curriculum was turned to [abstract] theoretical knowledge to the neglect of knowledge applications to the life of the learner and nature of the learner» (p. 144). Sixteen years after the Woods Hole Conference which advocated for a discipline-centered curriculum, Jerome Bruner, who was the conference chair, acknowledged the failure of disciplinarity. In *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (1966), Bruner admits that «knowing is a process, not a product» (Bruner, 1966, p. 72).

Bruner's reversal concurred with Principle VII of the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, «education must be conceived as a process of growth. Disciplinarity neglected the interrelationships among the disciplines. Only when so conceived and so conducted can [disciplinarity] become a preparation for life» (United States Department of the Interior [USDO], 1918, p. 11). Individuals who are prepared for life have an understanding of and appreciation for more than disciplinarity could provide.

Democratic Ideals

Educators have long debated the issues surrounding individualization and diversity of learning outcomes for students versus standardization. Lester Ward's classic, *Dynamic Society* (1883), was a source of inspiration for John Dewey. Ward blamed the «unequal distribution of knowledge» for the «huge gap between the ignorant and the intelligent» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 57). Relying on Ward's work, Dewey emphasized the importance of equal access to knowledge by all members of a democratic society (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 57). Federal reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and *America 2000* (1991) revealed that «children in poverty do poorly on the tests, whereas children from advantaged environments do well on the tests» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 155). These reports did not reveal new discoveries; in the United States, family wealth has always related strongly to academic achievement. In spite of this disparity, schools face intense pressure to show proficiency on standardized assessments, even though out of school factors like home environment account for more than 50% of the variance in student achievement (Sirin, 2005). In fact, in none of the United States' mandated standardized tests do students, who as an aggregate group come from poor households, outperform students who are not considered 'poor' (Tienken, 2011). In response to lower than expected test scores for some students, many schools in poorer neighborhoods are forced to commit the majority of their financial resources to improving basic skills; in order to meet the added expense, these schools often reduce or eliminate extracurricular and enrichment programs.

Providing a back-to-basics curriculum to one socioeconomic group, while another receives a rich and varied curriculum, defies the basic democratic principle of American education. In addition to stigmatizing lower socioeconomic

groups and magnifying socioeconomic differences, standardized test scores have also been used to penalize lower scoring schools through reduced funding and the creation of alternative schools that compete for high-performing students.

The Structure and Function of the Curriculum

The testing pandemic not only violates democratic ideals, it also significantly influences the structure and function of curriculum. «With schools and teachers being evaluated according to student scores on standardized tests, there has been an increasing tendency for teachers to teach to the test. The test [...] exerts a powerful influence on instructional processes and largely determines the curriculum» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 104). When high stakes test results are used for evaluative or compensatory purposes, educators sacrifice the ability to tailor the curriculum to individual students. This violates Cardinal Principle VIII which states, «it is important that the work of each pupil should be so presented as to convince him [...] of its real value» (USDOL, 1918, p. 10). A curriculum defined by standardized tests is likely to be irrelevant to students and demeaning to educators. As early as 1929, John Dewey spoke against tailoring curriculum to meet such external pressure. In advocating for education that would enlighten students and prepare them for adult life, Dewey «emphasized that educational objectives must be determined from the educational function» (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 128), not from external forces.

An Empirically Sound Standard

Advocates of high-stakes testing policies postulate that high-stakes exams cause students and teachers to work harder and achieve more because the tests create teaching and learning targets that have perceived meanings to both groups. There are underlying assumptions that teachers and students do not already work hard and that one test can measure and provide information that is meaningful in terms of student achievement and systemic efficacy (Tienken, 2011, p, 262).

Principle VIII of the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education reminds us «it is important that the work of each pupil should be presented as to convince him [...] of its real value» (USDOE, 1928, p. 10). Rather than forcing students, parents, teachers, and administrators to devote time and energy to standardized tests that provide one [mis]measure of student achievement, educators and community members should dedicate time and energy to providing engaging, meaningful educational experiences for students.

In advocating for education that would enlighten students and prepare them for adult life, Dewey «emphasized that educational objectives must be determined from the educational function» (as cited in Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 128). It is time for educators to stand united against 'teaching to the test' and to develop problem-based projects and assessments that prepare leaders for the 21st Century. Perhaps funds earmarked for assessments could be reallocated for creating more comprehensive high schools that offer a high quality curricular program with a diversity of courses – schools where the varied curriculum and emphasis on problem-solving serves our diverse students (Bell, 2010).

According to the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, «education should be determined by the needs of the society to be served, the character of the individuals to be educated, and the knowledge of educational theory and practice available» (USDOI, 1918, p. 8). Present-day educators and policy makers must take a lesson from this century old document. Rather than motivate education reform through political or financial interests, contemporary reformers must create a balanced curriculum dedicated to the needs and interests of all learners in our diverse and democratic society (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 204). Our vision for students must be based on philosophy, research, and informed professional practice. Standardized tests are failing our students; they are restrained by a system that values memorization and recitation. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it; now is the time to rewrite a chapter in educational history, one rooted in progressive ideals, based on the success of The Eight Year Study, and supported by informed educators.

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