Why Are Our Children Learning So Little?

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

I think it’s possible to be too solemn, even about important subjects, and it’s important not to be too solemn right at the start, especially early in the morning. So in a not-too-solemn mode I want to share with you some evidence of the underlying reason why we are here: namely, our children aren’t learning enough as they pass through our schools. This is the fundamental cause of the reform movement in which we are presently engaged, and the evidence I am going to give you is not a bunch of statistics but rather what teachers sometimes call “student bloopers” collected from the papers of students in their classes over the years. The particular teacher who collected the examples I’m going to share with you, Richard Lederer from St. Paul’s School in New Hampshire, has been collecting examples of world history as seen through the eyes of American secondary school students. I want to share a couple of excerpts with you, not to mock the kids, but rather to illustrate how far I think we still have to go with respect to the educational efforts that we are making. This is a bit of world history as seen through the eyes of middle and secondary school students.

The inhabitants of ancient Egypt were called mummies and they all wrote in hydraulics. They lived in the Sahara Dessert and traveled by camelot. The climate of the Sahara is such that the inhabitants have to live elsewhere so certain areas of the desert are cultivated by irritation. The pyramids are a range of mountains between France and Spain. The Egyptians built the pyramids in the shape of a triangular cube. Pharaoh forced the Hebrew slaves to make bread without straw. Moses led them to the Red Sea where they made unleavened bread, which is bread without any ingredients. Afterward Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the ten commandments. He died before he ever reached Canada. David was a Hebrew king skilled in playing the liar. He fought with the Finklesteins, a race of people who lived in biblical times. Solomon, one of David’s sons, had three hundred wives and seven hundred porcupines.
[Skipping over a few centuries,] eventually the Romans conquered the Greeks. History calls people Romans because they never stayed in one place for very long. Julius Caesar extinguished himself on the battlefield of Gaul. The Ides of March murdered him because they thought he was going to be made king. Dying he gasped out the words “Tee hee Brutus.” Nero was a cruel tyrant who tortured his poor subjects by playing the fiddle to them. [Skipping over more than a few hundred years,] in medieval times, most of the people were alliterate. The greatest writer of the futile ages was Chaucer who wrote poems and verses and also wrote literature. During this time people put on morality plays about ghosts, goblins, virgins and other mythical creatures. Another tale tells of William Tell who shot an arrow through an apple while standing on his son’s head. During the Renaissance, Martin Luther was nailed to the church door at Wittenberg for selling his papal indulgences. He died a horrible death, being excommunicated by a bull. It was the painter Donatello’s interest in the female nude that made him the father of the Renaissance.

The Transformation of Education

Well, this is evidence of why we have a reform movement. It’s also why we’ve become so concerned with educational outcomes rather than just intentions, plans, resources, and efforts. Indeed, I want to start with that point because I think American education is in the midst of transforming the very meaning of the word “education.” For a long time we thought of education in terms of intentions and efforts, inputs and plans, services and institutions. Now I think we are moving, though fitfully, to redefine education in terms of how much people actually learn. I think one day we will say of a person that he had no education, however long he may have spent in school and college, if in fact he hasn’t learned what he should have. The education system of tomorrow will be outcomes-driven and highly accountable for its results in relation to those outcomes.

The “Accountability Tripod”

An outcomes orientation is, I think, fundamental to any discussion of testing, because testing is one of our most widely accepted mechanisms for determining whether desired outcomes have been produced and whether important objectives have in fact been met. To the extent that outcomes matter, assessment also matters: both the formative kind, which assists us to check on progress so that we can
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alter what we do, and the summative kind, which gives us feedback at
the end of the process on how well we have succeeded in what we
were doing.

I have been talking here predominantly about students, but virtually
everything I am saying about assessment is applicable to teachers as
well, indeed to every aspect of the education system. Assessment is the
second leg of what I am going to call the “accountability tripod.” The
other two legs also have to be in place if we are serious about
outcomes. The first leg is knowing what our goals and standards are.
Only if we know what our goals are do we have a fighting chance of
reaching them, and only if we have standards can we determine where
we are in relation to those goals.

Clear goals and standards. Lamar Alexander is fond of quoting Chet
Atkins, the famous country philosopher, to the effect that “in this life
you have to be mighty careful where you aim because you are likely to
get there.” Well, I’m not sure how likely we are to get there, but I am
absolutely certain that if we don’t know where we are aiming, we
won’t get there. And clear goals and standards make up the first leg of
the accountability tripod. If we know what we want our children to
know and to be able to do upon completion of their formal education,
our other decisions begin to fall into place. If we don’t know or can’t
agree or won’t say what the system would produce if it were doing a
great job, then we will wander aimlessly through the policy wilderness
for years to come.

Goals and standards of those kinds have been in short supply in the
U.S. in recent decades. I think that situation is beginning to turn
around now, due in no small part to the initiative by the president and
the governors, who set six large national goals for American education
for the year 2000—goals that I am certain you are acquainted with,
and goals that the American people overwhelmingly endorse. The
most recent Gallup poll shows powerful agreement that these are
desirable goals for the country.

Sound information feedback. The second leg, I have already
suggested, is a sound information feedback system by which we can
tell how successfully our goals are being achieved in each of the
various levels at which we care about them being achieved, levels
ranging from the individual child right on up through the classroom,
the school building, the district, the state, and the nation as a whole. I
suggest that these are the six levels at which we care whether our goals
are being achieved, and we need information feedback at all six of them. But information feedback is not terribly helpful if we have no goals or standards; conversely, goals in the absence of sound information feedback are really no more than wishes or dreams because we have no measuring stick by which to know where we are in relation to them.

**Outcomes accountability.** The third leg of the tripod is the one that tends to make educators queasy. I call it “consequences”—consequences tied to the achievement and nonachievement of goals as revealed by the information feedback system. When the feedback system signals that the goals are being met—at whatever level we are talking about—then good things should happen to the people and institutions that are meeting them. But when the information feedback system signals that the goals are not being achieved, something has to change. Some sort of intervention or alteration must occur because if we have goals and we have information telling us that they are not being achieved, but nothing changes, we can be absolutely certain that the goals will continue not being achieved year after year.

I think it’s fair to say that any enterprise that has managed to avoid outcomes accountability in the past is not likely to be eager to embrace it now, particularly if the consequences are real. That, I think, is a major source of friction in the field of education in recent years. I don’t expect that friction to vanish, but I am pretty confident that the emphasis on outcomes and accountability is going to continue and, if anything, intensify. The widening interest in outcomes assessment has been most visible at the local and state levels. But it’s also visible in moves toward a national examination system.

**Establishing a New National Examination System**

In the past we have not had the kind of national examination system that people are now talking about creating. We’ve had national assessment for 20 years and the data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are probably our best national outcomes information data. *National* assessment was carefully designed in the 1960s to conceal the identity of all smaller jurisdictions. It was designed so that it would not be possible to recognize states, much less localities, schools, or individual children. That’s how NAEP functioned for 20 years until Congress permitted an experimental
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state-by-state comparative assessment in 1990 in eighth-grade math, the results of which became available just six months ago. It has been permitted again for 1992 in fourth-grade and eighth-grade math and in fourth-grade reading.

Under current law, this two-part experiment is underway in 1990 and 1992. But unless something further is legislated, there will be no more state-by-state data. Nor do widely used individual tests fill the void. They are all limited or flawed in some way. The SAT and ACT, for example, are widely recognized, but for these purposes they have serious shortcomings. They were not designed to be outcomes tests and are geared to college-bound kids close to the end of their secondary school careers.

That’s just not satisfactory. Nor is Advanced Placement, which I take to be our best student test today, the kind closest to being the kind of test or exam I would like to see designed for everybody. It is taken only at the end of high school by a relatively small number of fortunate students. About 7 percent of all graduates get near one or more achievement tests during their high school career, but 93 percent never do. And commercial achievement tests—well known to you—are what gave rise to the Lake Wobegon effect, the phenomenon first identified by Dr. John Cannell in which 48 out of the 50 states discovered that their kids were “above the national average.” This has given a bad name to standardized achievement tests and is a problem that still hasn’t been solved. It is also contributing to a curious schizophrenia in which Americans believe that the nation is at risk and yet also believe that their child, their school, and their town are basically okay.

Developments That Support a New System

Giving people misleading information about what their kid, their school, their district, and their state are doing is not a good way to attack our problems in education. But some things have happened in the last couple of years that have built interest in a new national exam system of some kind. I’d like to talk about these developments now.

The six national goals. The first, of course, was establishment of the six national goals. Implicit in the idea of national goals is some sort of national measuring stick about where we stand in relation to those goals. This is particularly true of goal three, which says that all children shall leave grades four, eight, and twelve having
demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter in English, math, history, geography, and science. Note well: five core subjects, three key grade levels, and then this tantalizing phrase, “competency over challenging subject matter.”

Well, how do we define competency? How do we define challenging subject matter? How do we know whether that goal is being reached? Implicit in all such goals is some kind of a measuring system for determining where you stand in relation to them. But if you paid close attention to the National Report Card that was issued a couple weeks ago by the National Goals Panel, showing where we stand with respect to all six national goals at the national and state levels, you saw more blanks than cells with data in them. Many parts of that chart had no information at all because such information does not exist.

**Interest in comparative outcomes.** A second development has been the widening interest in comparative outcomes: in comparative state-to-state outcomes, the kind of thing that governors want to know; in comparative country-to-country outcomes, the kind of thing that congressmen and business leaders want to know; and in child-level data, the kind of thing that is sought by parents who want to know how the outcomes relate to their own child. Something that used to be taboo, making comparisons, is now in great demand.

**Accountability.** A third changing circumstance has been the press for accountability coming from policy makers, the business community, and voters and taxpayers, all of whom want to know if the system is working and if they are getting their money’s worth. Observe an example here in Illinois, a measure passed just weeks ago by the legislature, a new statewide accountability program, operative at the building level and overseen by the state board of education, designed to measure outcomes and progress toward goals.

**Improvements in methods of assessment.** Fourth, there have been marked improvements in methods of assessment. We’re no longer tied to the multiple choice test or even essay-style assessment but are moving toward performance-style assessment and utilizing technology for computer interactive assessments and simulations. The multiple choice test retains its place—and I think it has an honorable though limited place—but the development of other kinds of assessment possibilities has made a new national examination look more desirable.
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Public support for testing standards. Fifth, we see widening support for standards in testing. A huge gap exists between what the public thinks and what the education establishment takes for granted as to the desirability of these kinds of things. Let me illustrate this, using the latest Gallup Education Poll as reported in the *Phi Delta Kappan* last month. On the question “Would you favor or oppose requiring the public schools in this community to conform to national achievement standards and goals?” 81 percent of the public were in favor, 12 percent were opposed. On the question “Would you favor or oppose requiring the public schools in this community to use standardized national tests to measure the academic achievement of students?” 77 percent were in favor, 17 percent were opposed. And so it goes through a progression of questions in much the same vein. The public appears to be ready for this kind of thing, whatever the costs to traditions of local control and local decisions. I think this is a fundamental political shift that needs to be understood and taken seriously.

The bandwagon effect. Sixth is a flurry of what I am going to call “respectable groups” urging some sort of national test—one gets the sense of almost a bandwagon effect. These groups range from Al Shanker’s column and Saul Cooperman’s Educate for America Organization to the president’s Education Policy Advisory Committee, the secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, and so on.

The America 2000 Initiative. The seventh development is that the president is in favor of such tests. His and Lamar Alexander’s America 2000 Initiative calls for creation of what are called “American Achievement Tests.” These would be new tests—achievement tests administered at grades four, eight, and twelve—that would be used by schools, colleges, and employers for what one should call high-stakes purposes. It is important to understand that the purpose of such testing isn’t just to keep track of where we are. We have national testing to leverage change, to alter behavior, so that people act differently than they would otherwise act. You do that by creating high-stakes tests, the results of which are used in the real world to make real decisions. This will make people behave differently and in time will improve how much they learn.

The “Lauren Resnick insight.” I call the eighth recent development the “Lauren Resnick insight,” though I think it could be attributed to many people. This is the suggestion that it would be good to have tests
worth teaching to as a way of altering behavior and causing people to learn more. Ours is the only country in the industrial world where teaching to the test is regarded as a vice; preparing people to pass the exams is regarded as a virtue everywhere else. Exams are calibrated to the curriculum, which in turn is calibrated to what those countries want young people to learn and be able to do, and preparing people to pass them is regarded as an honorable activity for schools and teachers rather than some tawdry form of cheating.

Obviously you can carry teaching to the test to an extreme and start drilling people on specific test questions. That’s cheating! But preparing people in knowledge and skills they have to master in order to do well on an exam is, I think, a desirable thing to do. Lauren Resnick has been trotting around the country urging that we do just that. And, of course, we do it in some places already. The New York Regents’ tests serve that sort of purpose. The Advanced Placement exams have a syllabus that every A.P. teacher in the land basically understands. The teachers know what they have to teach successfully in order for their students to do well on those exams. So teaching to the test is not a wholly foreign notion; it’s simply something that we’re not accustomed to doing with our regular testing.

Activity on the National Testing Front

As a result of such changing circumstances, there is quite a lot of activity on the national testing front that includes Lauren Resnick’s own New Standards Project and the new effort by the College Board to come up with a national test. It also includes the six-month-long National Council on Education Standards and Testing, chaired by Governors Carroll Campbell and Roy Romer, which is appraising the desirability and feasibility of national standards and tests and will make recommendations about how to define what these might be.

Issues to Be Addressed

There is a lot of activity, but there are also a lot of uncertainties and many unresolved issues. I want to discuss briefly eight such issues that need to be resolved as we work toward any kind of national testing program.

The need for design and management. The first is the lack of an obvious mechanism to design or manage such a system. There is no national school board or superintendent of schools. I don’t know
anybody who thinks that elected government in Washington, either its executive or legislative branch, should be put in charge of saying what ought to be on this test or placed in charge of administering it. Since we don’t have a suitable mechanism in place, we may need to create one.

**Resistance to testing.** Second, as you well know, there is a continuing drumbeat of opposition to any kind of testing, ranging from groups like Fair Test to all four of the congressional members of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing. Twenty-eight members of this council appear basically in favor of some sort of national exam, but the four members of Congress who serve on it are generally opposed. So there is continuing resistance to this idea from various quarters.

**Concern about testing overload.** Third, people are worried about the testing overload. If we had new national exams, what would they be “instead of”? Nobody wants to add them “on top of.” Can we synchronize, rationalize, and amalgamate a testing and assessment system so it in fact takes the place of something?

**Refining performance assessment.** Fourth, there are all kinds of issues still associated with the performance assessment. We are all for it, but how do we implement it in a fair and even-handed way? How do we afford the costs of doing it? How do we handle the test security issues associated with it? These are some of the many issues that remain, especially with regard to performance assessment of the high-stakes variety.

**Formative and summative assessment.** Fifth, there is a question of whether formative assessment can be done at the same time and through the same instrument as summative assessment. In other words, the feedback you get to alter what you are doing so that the kids will learn more may not be obtainable via the same instruments as the program assessment or summative evaluation of how whole institutions are doing.

**Handling the consequences.** Sixth, if there is to be high-stakes testing, it’s going to have real consequences, and that is something the school system alone cannot handle. Which is to say, those who create the consequences, namely employers, college admission officers, and a
wide variety of other institutions outside the K–12 system, will have to cooperate in the creation of meaningful consequences for high-stakes tests.

**Equal opportunity concerns.** Seventh, there is continuing anxiety about equal opportunity issues associated with high-stakes testing. There is something of a collision between what I call the national exam agenda and the civil rights agenda, particularly with respect to the use of tests by employers as conditions of hiring. The pending civil rights legislation would make it harder for employers to do this. At the very same time, employers are being urged by many to do just that in order to create real world consequences that, it is hoped, will trigger changed behavior on the part of young people so that they will study harder and learn more. There is a significant issue here.

**Changing the educational delivery system.** Eighth and last in this list, let’s assume that we have standards and exams because we want kids to meet the standards and pass the exams, not because we need a social sorting mechanism. If so, profound changes in the education delivery system are implied—in how people spend their time, what people do, how resources are allocated, and so on. Are we ready to make those kinds of changes in order to achieve the desired results?

These are some of the issues that I think remain with the national testing idea. I am not sure at this moment what will come of it, especially if the federal government is involved. The panel that is wrestling with these things has three meetings to go before it is due to report. One could conceive of national standards without national exams. One could conceive of standards spelled out in different subjects but leave the testing to individual states, consortia of states, commercial firms, or nonprofit groups like the College Board and so on. But if that happens—and it’s certainly a possible outcome—we would then have to consider whether we are going to recreate the Lake Wobegon effect once again.

**A Look at Teachers and Teacher Testing**

I’ve been addressing issues that explicitly involve testing kids but implicitly involve testing teachers. I want now to turn a little more directly to teacher testing. I’d like to make four points about how I think we should be regarding teachers and then one point about teacher testing.
On Regarding Teachers

Regarding teachers includes where we look for them and how we treat them once we’ve got them. My first point is that I believe that we should greatly enlarge the pool of prospective teachers. Instead of defining prospective teachers as recent graduates of approved teacher education programs, we should define them as any and all well-educated adults of sound character who know their subjects and are willing to try teaching those subjects to children. All such people should be considered candidates for entry into the classroom. In other words, I believe in the underlying concepts of alternate, or alternative, certification. The implication for you to ponder is that if we are going to be more catholic in how we define the pool of prospective teachers, then we have to be more persnickety about how we evaluate people once we’ve let them set foot in the classroom. This may suggest a long-term change of emphasis from assessment of pre-service teachers into evaluation of teachers on the job, especially of new teachers on the job. In effect, it heightens the importance of performance evaluation on the job.

Second, we should compensate teachers in accord with the dictates of the marketplace. This means paying good teachers more than bad teachers, paying teachers of shortage subjects more than those in overstocked fields, paying those who assume extra duties more than those who don’t, and paying those who take on uncommonly challenging or hazardous situations more than those who are in comfortable surroundings. This, too, underscores the importance of performance evaluation.

Third, the basic decisions to hire, promote, and retain a teacher, and also the decision about how much to pay that teacher, ought to be made at the building level. I think the inevitable consequence of decentralization and site-management, carried to their logical conclusions, is that such decisions will come to be made at the building level. Naturally, such decisions must also be based on evaluation, not just opinions and friendships. Here in Chicago, the decentralization plan means that the decision to hire and fire the principal is now made at the building level by the local school council. It doesn’t yet include the right to do that with teachers, but I think that there will be more rather than less of this kind of thing in the future.
Fourth and perhaps most obvious, we should be providing teachers with working conditions that befit their status as professionals. When visiting Asian schools I have been struck by the fact that the teachers rarely have corridor duty, lunch duty, playground duty, and things like that. They do work long days, work full years, and handle large classes, but they are on duty only when they are teaching. At other times they can go to a reasonably pleasant place, where each of them has a desk and a phone, and work there on lesson plans, correct homework, work on curriculum, meet with individual kids needing help, and so on. Teachers in those schools, let me emphasize, often meet with parents by visiting the homes of their students, and many of them seem to do a great deal more than their job descriptions call for. Rarely do you see them head for the door when the bell rings at the end of the day. But just about everything they do is consistent with the belief that teaching is a profession, indeed an honorable calling.

**On Evaluating Teachers**

Let me now wind up with a few thoughts about teacher testing in particular. I’d like to discuss three things: the value of paper and pencil tests, our means of evaluating actual classroom performance, and the problem with some theories of education.

**Paper and pencil tests.** First, I am convinced that paper and pencil tests are a satisfactory way of determining a teacher’s cognitive knowledge and skills, their general education, and their knowledge of their subject of specialization. Paper and pencil tests can serve such purposes pretty well. Some of the customized NES tests seem to me models of this kind of instrument, head and shoulders better than the old approach to teacher certification where we looked to see what courses were taken and relied on the integrity of people giving grades in teachers’ colleges to tell us how well the lessons had been learned. I would much rather see us use competency tests because I think they are more accurate gauges of educational outcomes that can also free us from the tyranny of the “approved teacher preparation program.”

**Classroom performance.** Second, I am less satisfied with our means of evaluating actual classroom performance and excited about ideas for new evaluations that would do this differently and better. What is it exactly that we are looking for when we evaluate classroom effectiveness? I think it’s fair to say that what the man in the street would want to use to evaluate classroom effectiveness is evidence of
how much and how well the students are learning what they are supposed to learn; in short, education’s equivalent of a corporate profit-and-loss statement. But this the organized teaching profession has stoutly resisted. If we are not to use student learning as a gauge of teaching effectiveness, we have to use something else. What is the something else? Well, that’s what some of the NES projects are about. That’s what the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is about. It will take many years and many millions to develop this something else; as yet there isn’t any evidence that they’ve succeeded, but it is certainly possible that they will. I do like the idea of board-certified teachers, but we’re not yet sure what these evaluation techniques will look like, how they will work, or how well they will function, particularly in the face of challenges by a unionized teaching profession and a litigious society. So I think a good deal more work is needed on the classroom performance aspect of teacher evaluation.

**Pedagogical knowledge.** Third, when we move beyond a teacher’s general education, knowledge of subject matter, and classroom effectiveness, into what I would call understanding of educational theories—I think Dave Berliner used the phrase “pedagogical knowledge”—I believe we run into a different problem. The field of education is full of dubious ideas, ideologies, and fads, and if we allow these to work themselves into teacher examinations and evaluations, we may well lose credibility with the large public that does not share these beliefs. What’s more, if these beliefs turn out to be wrong, we could even do some harm. I could go on at length about this issue, and indeed, in the longest chapter of my book I do so, and I hope that you might want to have a look at it.¹ I am talking about such things as extreme versions of multiculturalism, the overemphasis on self-esteem building, and the deep-seated aversion to specific content knowledge (witness the derision with which the ideas of cultural literacy and specific knowledge a la E. D. Hirsch have been greeted within the profession—in marked contrast to their popularity outside the profession). These ideologies sometimes work their way into teacher tests and evaluations.

I want to offer a single example drawn from the sample questions that NES and the Texas Education Agency provided in the registration

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¹ Dr. Finn is author of *We Must Take Charge: Our Schools and Our Future*, published by The Free Press in 1991. —ED.
bulletin for the Texas Master Teacher Exam last year. I thought it was a terrific exam, on the whole, but there was only one multiple choice question in it that I had any problem with. The item presents candidates with brief descriptions of four classroom situations and asks this question: “In which of these situations has the teacher taken effective steps to reduce the risks involved in using competition to motivate student learning?” This flows straight from one of the ideologies of the education profession that I believe most people don’t share: namely, the idea that competition is bad. The presumption underlying this question is that competition is a dangerous thing. Maybe it is, but I happen to think that its virtues outweigh its dangers and that the profession is wrong to be so jittery about it.

Conclusion

So I leave on a note of perplexity. I want the teaching profession to be self-regulating, self-policing, based on well-grounded knowledge and lore. But I also believe that the profession today has excessive reverence for some very dubious ideas that may go a long way toward explaining why our children are learning so little.