Standards Assessment: Another Side of the Question

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Signs of Our Times

This morning I awoke to my clock radio's informing me that more of our high school students know the names of the Three Stooges than know the names of our three branches of government. It was also reported that over 90 percent of students surveyed know that Will Smith is or was the Fresh Prince of Bel Air (a popular television sitcom) and only 2 percent know that William Rehnquist is the chief justice of the Supreme Court. Other similar statistics followed. Shocking news? Not particularly. Sad? Absolutely!

As someone who has taught for many years, I have, along with others, witnessed our young people move from a time when we read to a time when we view. Television, movies, and other visual media have replaced the slower but often more thoughtful modes of learning. It seems as though all issues can be resolved in a 30- or 60-minute episode, always leaving time for commercials. Fast food has replaced dining as the way to take in not only food but also knowledge. Entertainment has taken over top billing and has shoved serious study into second- or lower-class status. We wonder why our young people seem to stray from traditional values but remain riveted to the next episode of the Washington sex scandals. Truth is just not as much fun as sensationalism.
Examining the Complete Picture

The answer to some of our educational riddles seems obvious. Demand more from our schools, teachers, and students. The key word in this issue is standards. Critics of our educational systems seem to believe that if academic standards in fact exist, they are set at a very low level. The position of this paper is that these assumptions are wrong—that they are based on incorrect or misinterpreted data and do harm to the continual battle being waged in this country not only to maintain our standards but also to reach out for increased excellence. Do we have poor schools, poor teaching, and low achievement? Yes! Is this the norm rather than the exception? No! I will argue that we do have academic standards in place and that every effort is being directed at their continual review and upgrade. I will argue also that many of our difficulties lie not in the fact that we have no standards but rather in that standards are only being examined on the academic, or cognitive, side of things and not on the character, or affective, side of our development. In other words, we are examining only half the issue.

Putting Assessment of Education in Context

In a paper presented at the National Academy on the alignment of standards and teacher development for student learning on June 5 and 6, 1998, in Washington, D.C., Roy Edelfelt and James Raths identified at least 20 occasions in our history when the topic of national standards was discussed regarding improving the quality of our schools. Going as far back as 1869, we can observe sincere attempts to raise the level of both teaching and learning in the United States. We can observe that each time our country faces some sort of dramatic change, our methods of educating our young people are reexamined.
In the fairly recent past we have seen the space race (*Sputnik*), the era of computer technology, economic shifts, and the emphasis on the global economy all play major roles in our review of educational goals. Today, our nationwide preoccupation with national, state, and local testing has made many of us feel the need to retain our educational priorities. We are now aware of how our children stack up against children from other schools, other communities, and other nations. Somehow, the abilities of children in Japan are so important to us as to cause alarm. Teachers in America are put on notice that curricular changes are in the works due to an increase in the sales of Japanese cars. Obviously, if their cars are popular here, it must be due to a failure in our schools. We have standards, we have had standards, and it is clear that we will continue to have standards. They will change as times and circumstances dictate. This process is what is happening today.

Practically all content-oriented teaching organizations (e.g., the National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM]) have reexamined their goals for both teachers and students. These goals, or standards, have been published and are being utilized throughout our schools. In addition, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires that these content standards be in place before it will accredit any college's or university's teacher education program. It is assumed that the recently formed Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) will do the same. The reality is that our academic standards are being raised, and it seems clear that this trend will continue.

**What Aspects of Education Should Be Measured?**

I recently participated in a panel discussion at which academic credibility was in question. How do we as a nation know that any standards are being met? What is a high
school diploma worth? Is this degree the same whether it is achieved in middle America or on the East or West Coasts of our country? Is the body of knowledge acquired by inner-city students similar to that gained by suburban ones? Should it be? Of course, the fundamental question is, How do we know? How do we assess knowledge? The question of the validity of putting so much emphasis on test scores when we know that much of what we expect from our learners cannot be measured in this fashion has degenerated into a discussion of test reliability rather than, or in addition to, what should be measured. Hence, other important questions surface: Who should be involved in establishing our standards? What measures would a more heterogeneous population demand from our learners?

Dr. Calvin Sia and his colleagues are engaged in a project in Hawaii that continues to show great promise. Their project "grew out of recommendations of Healthy People 2000, and the resulting objectives are identified in the National Agenda for Children with Special Health Care Needs: Achieving the Goals 2000." Their goal is to "create a collaborative health, education, and human services system for children, including those with special needs, and their families." This collaboration of health officials, families, educators, and community organizations is establishing education and curricular objectives based on best practice. Kathleen Bishop and Hal Lawson from the Department of Social Work at the University of Vermont are involved in similar partnerships and are achieving similar results. Higher Education Curricula for Integrated Service Providers, a project sponsored by the Teaching Research Division of Western Oregon State College, continues to discover that integrated services have unlimited potential for establishing educational priorities as well as for assessing their accomplishments. In the work presently being done in the field of academic standards, standards are being created by professional associations as identified by their disciplines. The work of the groups
engaged in interprofessional collaborations goes beyond this concept. These groups work in concert with professional groups. This additional input guarantees a more balanced approach to curriculum development. It clearly establishes the involvement of character development as a critical component of educational goals for this nation, a topic seemingly forgotten or ignored by our educational content experts. Agencies accrediting our colleges of education demand little in this area, thereby almost eliminating affect, or character, from our expectations of future teachers. This, of course, flies in the face of what our interprofessional groups report. Most of us want smart kids. We also want healthy kids—healthy of body and healthy of spirit. Our newspapers almost daily report instances of "smart" children hurting others. "Smart" people have demonstrated that knowledge of subject matter can be both an instrument for evil as well as for good. A Ph.D. can turn into the Unabomber. An honor roll student can, without reason, turn a gun on other children and ruin the lives of many. These are not our successes. They are our failures. They are not only the schools' failures, although schools must assume their part of the problem; they are the failures of a society that may place its values on the wrong characteristics. We have seen case after case of academically acceptable students who test well on standardized measures but fall short of acceptable behavior when it comes to issues of civility, morality, and character. It is abundantly clear to those of us not inclined to worship at the feet of standardized tests that more than the acquisition of facts requires examination.
Assessing Character

Addressing the issue of bringing affect into line with cognitive or academic attainment will require dramatic changes. Some of these changes include:

1. A recognition on the part of the educational establishment that character counts and requires curricular commitments equal to those for its cognitive cousin.

2. Acknowledgment on the part of politicians in control of educational funding that educational decision making can be made in concert with all stakeholders, not a select few. All efforts should be directed toward developing partnerships. Pitting one group against others is totally unproductive.

3. Asking test and measurement experts to work closely with subject-matter specialists in developing measures that can reliably determine whether we are indeed dealing with the "whole child."

4. Demanding that organizations accrediting colleges of education require evidence ensuring that prospective teachers are able to address all aspects of the teaching/learning process.

5. Asking organizations such as the Association of Teacher Educators, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education to sponsor conferences that bring together all constituencies involved in helping to educate our youth. (A model established at the National Conference on Teacher Education held in Washington in 1995 can be used to facilitate such meetings.)

6. Recommitting ourselves to helping public education be all that it can be for the majority of our children. Establishing a variety of educational alternatives to the
public schools fragments our educational dollars as well as our loyalties. We can have more than adequate parental and community involvement in our schools without destroying the fabric of public education. Pitting parent against parent or parent against teacher, with the learner caught in the middle, serves no one other than those with their own personal agendas.

7. Recognizing that there are common values that can and should be emphasized in our curricula. These values are common to those held by the family, church, and community. The question of where these common values should be taught should be a nonissue. We will need help in identifying appropriate measures to assess their occurrence. It is possible. Again, working partnerships can be the instrument for constructive change. Common goals taught in both home and school are imperative.

8. Schools must view themselves as facilitators for constructive change. Most parents, social organizations, and political groups want quality education for their children. However, they may not be in possession of the best and most recent data to direct the best methods to accomplish these objectives. Professional educators must help the public understand what we want to teach, how we can assess these teachings, and why such actions deserve the public's support.

9. As we examine issues of cognition and affect, it is important to remember that we should not focus on either-or discussions. Most states have identified core subject areas. Our testing procedures evaluate these priorities. We must find ways to integrate these subjects with a healthy dose of problem-solving techniques that allow students the opportunities for finding personal meaning within the content. In this way, we are indeed implementing an integrated curriculum.
Summary

Americans have traditionally looked to schools to change society and to respond to changes in society (McGee-Banks, 1963). There have been major questions of whether or not schools have succeeded in this noble task. Today, we seem to be at a crossroads. Many argue that schools have failed and only a takeover by parents and community activists can save our youngsters from total ignorance. Standardized test scores are usually offered up as evidence supporting this view. Others (this writer being among this group) argue that dismantling the public schools as we know them only shifts the educational problems and does little to solve them. What is necessary today is what has always been true: Education is too important to be the responsibility of only one segment of society. Our society will only advance to the extent that each of us holds dear the education of all our children. Good schools will be available to every group in our society when they become everyone's concern. Good citizens will result when we realize that character and content go hand in hand in the development of the individual.
References


