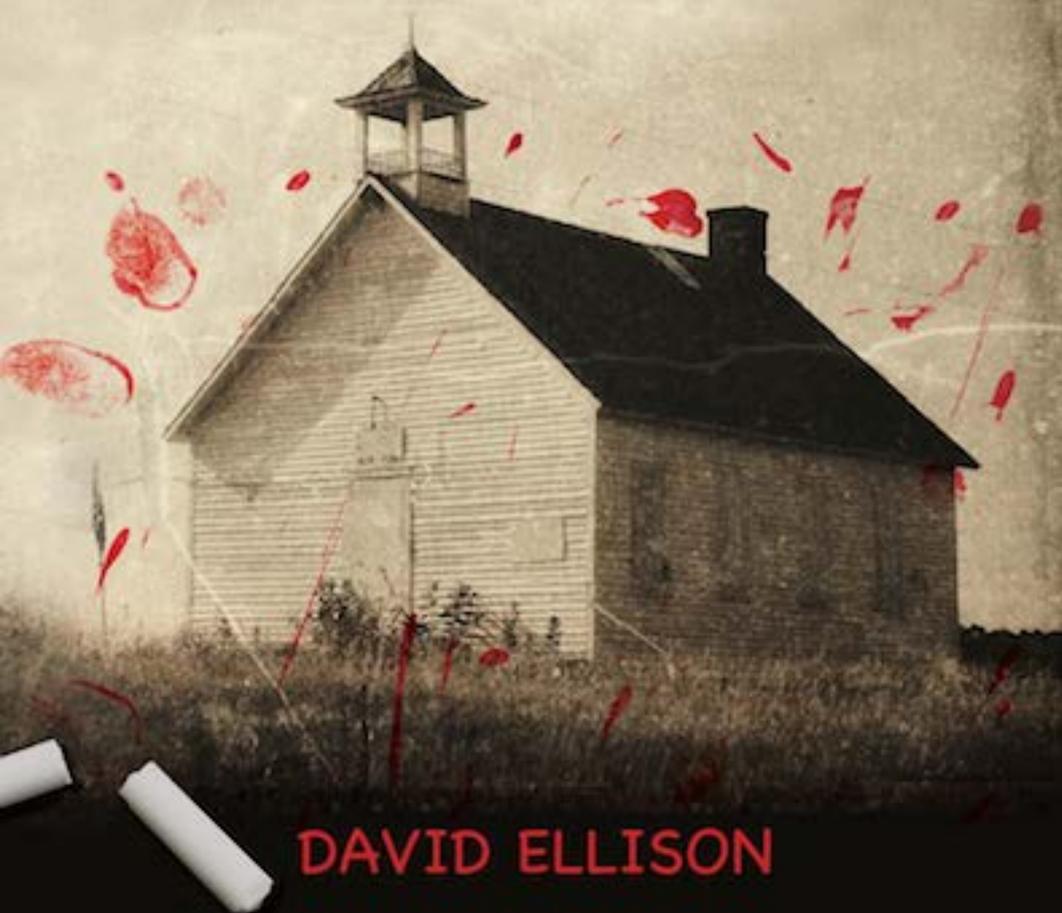


Over decades, the America education system has evolved into a complex system of competing interests. Often, the needs of children and their education fall to the bottom of the priority list. I admire David Ellison's passion in addressing these issues. Agree or disagree, Bloodletting is a thought-provoking treatise from a courageous teacher who is an insightful writer.

- Linda Darling-Hammond
Stanford Graduate School of Education

BLOODLETTING

WHY EDUCATION REFORM
IS KILLING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS



Bloodletting

Why Education Reform is Killing America's Schools

By David Ellison
*Author of *Chalk Dust: A Teacher's Marks**

Bloodletting
Why Education Reform is Killing America's Schools

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For the teachers who, in spite of all the “reforms”
besieging them, persevere, nurturing our nation’s most
desperate children.
And especially for those children.

*All who have meditated on the art of governing
are convinced that the fate of empires
depends on the education of youth.*

—Aristotle

*The evidence is clear. If you rely on prescription,
testing, and external control over schools,
they are not likely to improve.*

—Pasi Sahlberg

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Introduction

NOT SO LONG ago, physicians believed that most maladies—everything from headaches, acne and asthma to diabetes, pneumonia, and even cancer—were caused by an imbalance in the body’s “humors,” which usually meant too much blood in the body. The logical remedy was to drain out the excess. For nearly two thousand years, kings and peasants willingly bared an arm so that doctors could slice open a vein.

The beauty of bloodletting was that it was such an easy, “commonsensical” cure for virtually all ailments, a one-size-fits-all medical panacea. Nonetheless, today we smile at that primitive practice. (And grimace!) We understand that those well-meaning doctors-of-old had misdiagnosed their patients. Indeed, diseases are much too diverse and complex ever to allow for any simple, generic cure. Thus, instead of healing, bloodletting often made people even sicker, or worse.

This book reveals how the same is true for current attempts at school reform in the United States. It is a primer providing a brief overview of the various strategies, the “commonsensical” assumptions behind them, the evidence debunking them, and the harm they are causing. Finally, it reviews the true and truly daunting challenges confronting American public education; and, if we really hope to save our schools and our children, what we must do.

The good (and sobering) news is that, while nothing short of a revolution in American education and culture will suffice, another nation, whose schools rose from mediocrity to rank first

in the world, has already led the way. The answers stare us in the face. We need only muster the courage to look and to act.

On December 14, 1799, George Washington woke up with a severe sore throat. Martha summoned several doctors who, during the course of the day, bled our ex-president four times. Finally, Washington begged to be left to die in peace. He did, just before midnight.

In trying to save Washington, his doctors bled him to death. I hope this book will help prevent well-meaning (and not-so-well-meaning) school reformers from doing the same to our children's schools.

Part One

A Terrible Misdiagnosis

Some Convenient Untruths

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

—Saint Bernard of Clairvaux



Chapter 1: Why?

Ideology, Cowardice, and Cabal

The most important men in town would come to fawn on me! They would ask me to advise them.... And it won't make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong. When you're rich, they think you really know!

—Tevye, in *If I Were a Rich Man*
from *Fiddler on the Roof*

I HATE TO look a gift hundred million dollars in the mouth. Nonetheless, I am concerned about Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's lavish gift to the Newark, New Jersey's schools.

Zuckerberg thus became the newest member of what former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch identified as "The Billionaire Boys' Club."

"The Gates, Walton, and Broad foundations came to exercise vast influence over American education," Ravitch reported, "because of their strategic investment in school reform.... These foundations set the policy agenda not only for school districts, but also for states and even the U.S. Department of Education."¹

Indeed, according to a joke widely disseminated in the press, "The real Secretary of Education is Bill Gates." (Only, it's not funny.)

What is Gates' and his compatriot billionaires' agenda? Competition, choice, deregulation and other market-based approaches. After all, these enabled the billionaires to amass their

Chapter One: Why?

fortunes. Therefore, they can't help but raise the "fortunes" of public education as well. There's no need to ask fundamental questions—such as What are the real challenges facing public schools?—before so blithely touting such easy panaceas.

These men are billionaires. They know.

It matters not that none of them are educators; that none of them have worked in a segregated, dilapidated, poorly staffed inner-city school teaching immigrants struggling to learn English; that none of their pet proposals—such as high-stakes testing, charters, and merit pay—are supported by any comprehensive peer-reviewed research. On the contrary, emerging data indicates these policies are harming public education.

Undeterred by such trivialities, the Billionaire Boys' Club has molded the Obama Administration's educational policy according to its ideology, not the facts, much like what The Club did during the prior Bush Administration.

The Club has been elected by no one, appointed by no one, and remains accountable to no one. (The press remains ever so kind since editors know very well who butters their bread.) No, like Napoleon, the billionaires have placed the mantel of educational power upon themselves.

It's really not all that surprising. If one billionaire can attempt to buy California's governorship, what's to stop a cabal of billionaires from buying America's educational system?

Now a 26-year-old computer geek has decided that he will buy, um, I mean save Newark, New Jersey's schools. (A decision certainly not motivated by nor timed to coincide with the opening of *The Social Network*, a film portraying Zuckerberg in a rather unflattering light.) He teamed up with New Jersey's governor and Newark's mayor to decide what was best for the school district's 39,000 students.

Newark suffers from nearly a 50% high-school dropout rate, so any change at all will seem an improvement. Who can blame Newark and other public school districts for accepting The Club's

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money, despite its strings? All schools and districts are desperate for funds and reform.

I fear, though, that the Billionaires' apparently benevolent strings may strangle public education to death.²

In 1985, Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hammond documented that those states that had adopted high-stakes standardized testing as a means of education reform all suffered a subsequent decline in student achievement.³ Nonetheless, the Bush Administration made such testing national policy.

In 2009, the most comprehensive study of charter schools revealed that, despite their significant advantages, only 17% of charters outperformed their public school counterparts, while fully 37% lagged behind.⁴ Still, the Obama Administration featured charters as the centerpiece of its education policy.

In 2011, the first scientifically rigorous investigation of merit pay concluded that it had never raised student achievement.⁵ Even so, the very next day U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan released an additional \$1.2 billion to promote merit pay programs nationwide.

Why? This book will review these and other disastrous efforts at school reform. But first, it's important to understand why: Why would politicians, pundits, and self-appointed school reformers continue to tout policies that have been shown to be at-best ineffective, thus squandering billions of dollars, precious time, and, perhaps worst of all, our nation's hope for better, if not world-class schools?

The most obvious explanation is their powerful and pervasive market ideology, one that led them to completely misdiagnose what's ailing public education in America today.

The problem, The Billionaire Boys' Club proselytizes, is that America's schools are not run like a business. If they were—if educators faced both the accountability (standards, high-stakes testing, merit pay) and competition (vouchers/choice, charter

Chapter One: Why?

schools) of an open, capitalistic market—then those lazy teachers would finally have to get off their duffs and get to work. Destroy teachers unions. Fire the worst teachers. Close the worst schools. Reward the good teachers and schools. Then, wait for the inevitable miracle in American education to occur.

Trouble is, of course, the miracle never happened.

That's because, such ideologues maintain, (completely unfazed by mounting research to the contrary), we never implemented the market-based reforms enough. (Just as we didn't win the Vietnam War because we never bombed Cambodia enough.) So now, let's switch to the new Common Core Standards, and raise the stakes on standardized testing even higher by using it to evaluate, not just schools, but individual teachers.

Of course, those who are the most zealous for market-based reforms typically are farthest removed from and have the least experience with public schools. Also, typically but ironically, they themselves haven't been quite faithful to the supposedly fair market they espouse. Microsoft monopolized much of the computer industry. Zuckererg allegedly stole the idea for Facebook, then apparently cheated his friend.

The fact is that unbridled, laissez-faire capitalism has been disastrous for America, leading to the Great Depression, the more recent Great Recession, environmental degradation, spiritual/cultural bankruptcy, an emerging corporatocracy, and an obscene, yet growing chasm between the mega-wealthy and the rest of us.

This is an ideology that will save our country's public schools?

Still, it has tremendous allure because market-based educational reforms are so simple, so cheap. Everyone can conveniently avoid the actual, festering, intractable, and shameful problems hobbling public schools in America today, which include:

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- The least qualified of our college graduates usually become teachers.
- 20% of our children live in poverty.
- Our neighborhoods and, therefore, our schools are now more segregated by race and class than they were before the Civil Rights Movement.
- We send the least experienced educators to teach our most disadvantaged kids.
- Our families, parents, and culture are faltering.
- We continue to employ a century-old, age-based, assembly-line system of education.

I'll address each of these in Part Two of this book. Make no mistake: America's public schools do need drastic reform.

Unfortunately, none of these market-based educational strategies deal with any of the above. In fact, as I'll explain, they usually make them even worse.

Who in power, though, wants to acknowledge, much less address segregation and poverty? Or to propose an expensive, radical restructuring of our entire system of education?

No Child Left Behind touched on how public education mistreats this country's most disadvantaged. When Presidents G. W. Bush and Obama confronted just how complex a problem it was, however, how its roots reached out to most of the other underlying issues facing America, and how taboo a subject it was, they quickly let it go. In a consummate act of cowardice and despair, they emphasized the much easier market-based reforms.

Ideology and cowardice are not the only culprits, however. There is another far more frightening and even more controversial explanation for why this country has defied all evidence and continued to blood-let its public schools: the cabal to destroy them.

The terrible truth is, America's schools are under attack.

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They face an insidious, callous, crafty, and unfortunately highly successful assault that's been carried out with ruthless consistency for decades.

One of the most poignant examples is the case of the Sandia Report, an astounding piece of research, completed in 1991 by the Sandia National Laboratories.⁶ Few people have ever heard of it, and there's a reason for that.

The Sandia researchers, charged by the first Bush Administration to get to the bottom of "The Problem" with public schools, came to a stunning conclusion: "To our surprise, on nearly every measure we found steady or slightly improving trends."

How could this be? For example, everybody knew that high school diplomas didn't really mean much anymore. Our standards had fallen. S.A.T. scores made that eminently, and depressingly clear.

Wrong. Sandia scientists found that, while it was true that average S.A.T. scores had declined during previous decades, this was because elite students weren't the only ones taking the exam anymore. Now many, many more kids aspired to college. (Quite an achievement on teachers' part.) Since most of them were from middle and lower classes, it was only natural that average S.A.T. scores had dropped a bit. Nonetheless, the performance of elite kids during the previous fifteen years had increased by nearly forty points.

Yeah, but everybody knew that public schools were inefficient, and waste a lot of money. (It was teachers' outlandish salaries, I guess.)

Wrong again. Yes, the average per-pupil expenditures had increased dramatically. But Sandia Labs took the time to look behind those figures. They uncovered that the increase had been due primarily to special education classes—the ones for the troubled or learning-disabled kids that most private and charter schools had refused to admit. It cost roughly seven times more to

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teach them.

Once the researchers had removed these federally mandated (but unfunded) special-ed. programs from their calculations, they determined that the cost in constant dollars of regular public education had remained essentially the same during the previous decades. In other words, educators had never before done so much with so little.

These were but two of many previously scandalous statistics regarding American public schools that the Sandia Report turned on their heads. It concluded, “The U.S. education system is performing as well as or better than ever before.” (Which, of course, was not to claim “well enough” for the 21st Century.)

So, why have so few people heard of this vindication of public schools?

Gerald Bracy, author of *What You Need to Know About the War Against America’s Public Schools*,⁷ described in detail the Sandia Report’s systematic suppression. Not only did the Bush administration order repeated and pointless peer reviews in order to delay indefinitely its publication, but “Secretary of Energy James Watkins, who had asked for the report, called it ‘dead wrong’ in the *Albuquerque Journal*. Briefed by the Sandia engineers who compiled it, Deputy Secretary of Education and former Xerox CEO David Kearns told them, ‘You bury this or I’ll bury you.’ The engineers were forbidden to leave New Mexico to discuss the report.... Lee Bray, the vice president of Sandia, supervised the engineers who produced the report. I asked Bray, now retired, about the fate of the report. He affirmed that it was definitely and deliberately suppressed.”

But why? Why would anyone want to keep such wonderful news secret?

David Berliner and Bruce Biddle, who collaborated on *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools*,⁸ explained:

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The more we poked into our story, the more nasty lies about education we unearthed; the more we learned about how government officials and their allies were ignoring, suppressing, and distorting evidence; and the more we discovered how Americans were being misled about schools and their accomplishments.... The myths seem also to have been told by powerful people who—despite their protestations—were pursuing a political agenda designed to weaken the nation’s public schools, redistribute support for those schools so that privileged students are favored over needy students, or even abolish those schools altogether. To this end they have been prepared to tell lies, suppress evidence, scapegoat educators, and sow endless confusion. We consider this conduct particularly despicable.

The enemies of public education want vouchers. They hope to transfer millions of dollars from poor and public schools to wealthy and private ones. And the best way to accomplish this is to discredit utterly public education; first by concealing the truth, fomenting untruths; and then, as this book will underscore, by implementing “reform” they know is doomed to fail.

They’re as ingenious as they are malicious.

My state, California, provides another stark example of this.

In 1998, Republican Governor Wilson decreed that California must immediately develop a statewide standardized test for all students. This was odd because at the time the state was developing new curriculum standards. Shouldn’t he wait until those standards were completed, allow schools time to teach them, and only then implement an exam to evaluate them? Why the hurry to collect data which would almost immediately be useless? Even more baffling was Wilson’s decree that even recent non-English-speaking immigrants take the test in English. Why? It

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didn't seem to make any sense.

Actually, it makes perfect sense if your goal is to make public schools look awful. Proposition 226 was on the spring ballot, which, had it passed, would have silenced the teachers' union just before a voucher initiative would appear on the fall ballot. And the damning test results would be released, coincidentally, just prior to the fall election day.

Is it really crazy on my part to smell a rat?

Wilson is gone, but other governors have since taken up his mantle, assisted, if not outright directed by ALEC, the shadowy American Legislative Exchange Council. Founded in 1975, ALEC produces archconservative state legislation. It's "an organization hidden in plain sight," claims Bill Moyers, "yet one of the most influential and powerful in American politics."⁹ And, as Dianne Ravitch explains, "ALEC is the guiding force behind statewide efforts to privatize public education and turn teachers into at-will employees who may be fired for any reason. The ALEC agenda today is the 'reform' agenda for education."¹⁰

Bill Gates ceased his contributions to ALEC only after its machinations finally came to light in 2011.

Ideology, cowardice, cabal. They explain The Why for the "bloodletting" of American public schools. But, even if I've failed to convince you, even if you firmly believe market-based reforms are the panacea for everything including education, please read grudgingly on. "By your works ye shall be known."¹¹ Let me show you the terrible "works" of such reform, how it is killing American education.



Chapter 2: Standards

High Standards vs. Standardized Education

I LEARNED A remarkable lesson early in my teaching career, one that has served me well ever since.

I had just begun a new job teaching Spanish in a small, Catholic high school in San Antonio, Texas. Unfortunately, Spanish was only an elective there, and so was considered a fluffy, easy course.

My predecessor, for example, had been anything but strict. She had rarely assigned homework, but had almost always given her students at least a “B,” whether they could speak any Spanish or not, the latter being predominately the case. It seemed as if she’d made an unspoken pact with her students: She wouldn’t force them to really learn anything as long as they behaved. Everyone had appeared content.

Then I arrived. I announced the first day that I would give homework every night, and not one, but two quizzes a week; and that, after a brief introduction, I’d ban English in class.

Jaws hung open, eyes grew wide, and heads shook slowly. Several students immediately dropped my class. The rest fought me bitterly. In fact, the principal remarked dryly at the first staff meeting that I had earned a dubious distinction: After only one week, my name had already made it to the bathroom walls.

Then a strange thing happened: My students learned some Spanish. In fact, they began to jokingly call out phrases like “*Cállate*” (Shut up!) and “*Date prisa*” (Hurry up!) in the lunchroom and hallways. Soon they were tossing around complete sentences;

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and for some of them, Spanish became a secret language they flaunted among their monolingual friends.

The clincher came in the spring when I organized a student-exchange program with a high school in Monterrey, Mexico. Somehow—sometimes haltingly, often with grammar that made me wince—my students managed to communicate. I was so proud of them, and they were proud of themselves.

Don't get me wrong. The following year my students still came to class groaning, and my name still graced the bathroom walls.

One dramatic, very important thing had changed, though: There were twice as many kids in my classes. All of them realized I'd push them hard, give them regular homework and quizzes. They also knew they would learn. And so they came, complaining the whole while, but they came.

That's the lesson I've never forgotten: Despite all their protests to the contrary, kids really do want to learn. They, themselves, demand high standards. To hold students to anything else, whether in the name of kindness or in the pursuit of popularity, is to betray them most insidiously.

High academic standards for everyone. Isn't that what education and its reform are all about?

Yes, indeed.

Then, why have I—and so many others who have similarly spent their careers fighting for higher standards in education—opposed so adamantly the current standards movement in California and the nation?

We dreamed of standards that were few, realistic, and to be used primarily as guides for educators. Heavy sigh.

When the elite oligarchy in Sacramento wrote the California standards, for example, convinced that every high school graduate ought to go on to a prestigious four-year university, they were afraid of leaving anything out, and so too often threw everything

Chapter 2: Standards

in but the kitchen sink (the sink comprising anything that might be controversial and, therefore, interesting). In most grades and subjects, there were simply too many standards: more than 160 in my 4th grade curriculum; exceeding 70 in just one high school Chemistry course. It was not only impossible to teach them all well, but educational malpractice to attempt to do so.

Oh, some of my colleagues did “cover” the standards: “It’s the end of the first semester, so we have to be halfway through the textbook.” They rushed through the standards and text with no pause to study anything in depth.

For such teachers, it was so much easier than responding to students’ needs and interests, planning captivating simulations, projects and experiments, conducting poignant classroom discussions, guiding kids through demanding research projects, teaching kids how to read a textbook, how to take notes, how to consult a broad array of sources in addition to the text before drawing any conclusions... (The bread and butter of real teaching, posing its greatest challenge, providing its greatest reward.)

Covering standards appealed to many students, as well. After all, memorizing a list of facts only to regurgitate them on the next test was much less challenging than learning to think. Thus, standards quickly became the last and best sanctuary for uninspired, lazy educators and students alike; and the source of tremendous demoralization for the others, including me.

Of course, research had demonstrated how rushing through standards like that—implementing a curriculum that was a mile in breadth, but an inch in depth—inadequately prepared students for college (or life).

A study published in the December 2008 issue of the online journal *Science Education*,¹² for instance, indicated “Breadth-based learning, as commonly applied in high school classrooms, does not appear to offer students any advantage when they enroll in introductory college science courses, although it may contribute to scores on standardized tests.”

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More specifically, the report documented how students who had spent at least a month on one particular topic in their high school science classes earned higher grades in college science courses than students who had not.

The difference was so profound as to astound: the former performed, the researchers estimated, as if they'd received as much as two-thirds more instruction than the latter.

Clearly, mastering big ideas trumped “unrelated bits of scientific knowledge,” the hallmark of most standardized exams.

US science standards, upon which such tests were based, typically included vastly more topics than those of other countries whose children routinely outperform ours.

Nonetheless, each time international test comparisons appeared, pundits decried them anew, typically arguing for even more rigorous US standards and testing. (Just as physicians of old prescribed yet more bloodletting whenever the first round had proven ineffective.)

Thus, for decades a “standards-based” curriculum remained the predominant educational mantra, sometimes even its obsession.

California, in its maniacal zeal for high standards, decided that, since the elite in many other nations studied Algebra in 8th grade, all California 8th graders must do the same, regardless of whether they were intellectually prepared for such complex, abstract thinking. Algebra teachers were not permitted to fail substantial numbers of students, of course, so they had no choice but to lower their standards—all in the name of raising them.

Not to be outdone, one of my former superintendents rewrote the high school graduation requirements for my district, insisting that all students engage in a course of study so rigorous that it exceeded the entrance requirements for the University of California at Berkeley; and they had to earn at least a “C” in every course, or not earn a diploma.

Really?

Chapter 2: Standards

This same superintendent claimed an official standards checklist was absolutely necessary in all grades and courses to protect ourselves from lawsuits. If some of our students failed the high school exit exam, we could smugly claim, “We’re not to blame. After all, we covered all the standards. Here, look at our checklist.”

It was not one of public education’s finer moments. The community and my colleagues eventually got that superintendent fired, but not before she’d done immense and irreparable harm to the district.

Even so, the madness continued. Over-zealous administrators, for example, especially those preferring a bureaucratic approach to children, demanded that teachers include numbered standards—as in “Language Arts 7.4.3”—in daily lesson plans and on class-board lists. Some even insisted that kids write the standards at the top of every assignment. (As if teaching and learning could be reduced to a numbered list of standards!)

The next (il)logical step was a standards-based report card. For example, when I taught 4th grade, I didn’t give grades such as an “A” in math or a “B” in reading. No, I was supposed to constantly evaluate each and every child on an array of more than 75 different criteria, using the indicators of 5 for “advanced,” 4 for “proficient,” 3 for “basic,” 2 for “below basic,” and 1 for “far below basic.”

It was a report card only a desk-bound administrator could like. Any teacher who did it right, though, would have had to spend as much time testing as teaching. And, oh the hapless parents! I recall more than a few humorous moments (after all, you have to laugh or you’ll go crazy) during conferences when, after failing to decipher the two-page list of numbers on the standards-based report card, some parents blinked back up at me and asked, “So, how’s my kid doing?”

Even most administrators eventually acknowledged—at

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least tacitly—that it was impossible to teach, much less evaluate every single standard. They introduced the notion of “Power Standards.” Not all standards are created equal, you see. So, although we still needed to teach every one of them (Wink! Wink!), some deserved more emphasis than others.

One might have pointed out that, if every district and school similarly identified its own particular power standards, the whole concept of standards would now be meaningless. However, it wouldn’t have been nice (or prudent) to do so.

One of my greatest frustrations was discovering each fall that most of my new fourth graders still hadn’t memorized their addition and subtraction facts, still couldn’t use capital letters or periods appropriately. Somehow, those basics had become lost amid the multitude of other third grade standards.

Despite all the rhetoric, all our buzzwords, did we really have any standards at all? This was reform?

But wait. There’s more! Now we have the new National Common Core Standards (NCCS), which have been adopted by forty-five states and the District of Columbia. (The Obama Administration made them a requirement for relief from the worst parts of No Child Left Behind [NCLB].) The NCCS are slated for full implementation and computerized student testing during the 2014-15 school year.

Developed under the direction of the National Governors’ Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the NCCS address, among other issues, the glaring disparities in standards from one state to another; with, for instance, Massachusetts and California setting their standards for proficiency quite high, Mississippi and Alabama rather low. Thus, “proficiency” in any subject had no national meaning. The NCCS will finally provide clear, rigorous, national standards, “common” for all states. What is more, students who move from one state to another will now be able to do so without disrupting their education as much, since their new schools will follow the same

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standards as every other school in the nation.

Perhaps most important, however, is the NCCS emphasis on mastering higher-ordered thinking skills rather than memorizing disparate, arcane facts—quite a welcome contrast to NCLB.

Who could argue with that? As with all current reform efforts, the NCCS seem so commonsensical, so unassailable at first glance.

However, to begin with, they end hitherto sacrosanct state sovereignty and local control over education. Now the national government will determine what children ought to learn, when they ought to learn it, how they'll be tested, what the standard for proficiency will be.... Given that the Feds have already seized access to our every communication and transaction, the NCCS certainly seem to be yet one more frightening example of Big Brother.

Also, who designed the NCCS? Their creation was funded primarily by a grant from the Gates Foundation. Of the sixty-five “experts” (mostly university professors) invited to participate in the “confidential” NCSS Development Work Group and Feedback Group, only one was a K – 12 teacher.¹³ The NCSS chief architect, David Coleman, is now President of the College Board; so it would be a good bet that the SAT and ACT college entrance exams will soon be aligned to the NCCS, too. The “voluntary” National Common Core Standards will likely become the *de facto* law of the land—with minimal input from the states or teachers; little debate anywhere.

The NCCS may provide an excellent guide for Ivy-League-bound students, but what of the majority of others who might benefit more from a more reasonable technical or vocational program?

More than five hundred early childhood educators have signed a joint statement arguing that the NCCS are developmentally inappropriate. 4th graders are required in Language Arts to “Describe in depth a character, setting, or event

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in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions)" and "Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations." Goodness, I'd be thrilled if my current high school sophomores could do that well!

In fact, the first states to implement the NCCS posted student proficiency scores that had plummeted 30% or more. In New York, 69% of students failed the new Common Core computer assessments, including 97% of English learners, 95% of children with disabilities, as well as 80% of African-American and Latino children. Nobody asked whether the NCCS were realistic.

Nor have the NCCS been field tested. "They are being imposed on the children of this nation despite the fact that no one has any idea how they will affect students, teachers, or schools," worries Diane Ravitch. "We are a nation of guinea pigs, almost all trying an unknown new program at the same time."¹⁴

Which is not even to mention that the NCCS are expensive, costing as much as \$16 billion over the first seven years of implementation.¹⁵ New York City spent \$56 million on the NCCS just in 2013. These are funds that might have been spent addressing at least one of the real issues in American education today.

Then, there's the sheer number of new standards. I counted 80 for 4th grade Language Arts alone. There is talk of aligning our district's new report card to the NCCS. Will "Power" NCCS be next?

We'll have to wait and see. The National Common Core Standards train has already left the station. Indeed, in an astounding case of creative, revisionist history, even National Education Association (NEA) President Dennis Van Roekel gushed in the Fall 2013 issue of *NEA Today*, "NEA has been closely involved in the creation of the new Common Core State Standards. Our members have helped draft and review the

Chapter 2: Standards

proposed standards which are voluntary....” (Perhaps such spurious claims were influenced by the nearly \$4 million NEA accepted from Bill Gates to promote the NCCS. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) accepted \$5.4 million.)

Even so, in early 2014 the board of the New York state teachers union (AFT) voted unanimously to withdraw their support for the New Common Core Standards. We live in interesting times.

I have to end this chapter by briefly questioning the whole idea of standardization when it comes to our children.

Henry Ford needed standardized tools and parts for his assembly lines. In order to provide workers for the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, we consciously designed our schools along the same assembly-line model, with inter-changeable students all receiving identical instruction, all proceeding along at the same pace. One size fit all. We labeled any children who fell behind or off the line as “deficient,” writing on their report card that they had “failed.”

Do we expect all our infants to begin to walk or to talk at precisely the same age? Then, why do we expect them all to learn to read or to solve quadratic equations simultaneously?

The truth is, children grow and learn in their own space and time. Holding them to high standards—which, as I described at the beginning of this chapter, we must do—is not the same thing as standardizing them or their education.



Chapter 3: No Child Left Behind

Turning Children into Means, Instead of Ends

THE HALLMARK OF President Bush's No Child Left Behind mandate (NCLB, pronounced "Nickel-Bee" in educational circles) is its utter simplicity.

Gone are the tortured debates regarding whole language vs. phonics instruction, heterogeneous vs. homogeneous student groupings, bilingual vs. immersion programs, a broad curriculum vs. the basics.... Nope, now all we have to do is just require that all schools enable every single student to meet high academic standards. We measure the schools'/students' success or failure with fill-in-the-bubble standardized testing and—presto!—we're done! We can then either reward or punish schools accordingly.

Why didn't we think of this long ago? In fact, it's such a good idea that I propose we implement this same straight-forward reform in every other area of society.

Let's begin with health care. We must implement the long-overdue No Patient Left Behind initiative (NPLB, "Nipple-Bee" in medical circles). You see, it has come to my attention that patient death rates at county hospitals are much higher than at, for example, the Palm Beach Gardens Medical Center. Shocking, isn't it? Well, why don't we just require that all hospitals meet the same arbitrary survival rates? Then we can sit back and watch the ensuing miracle in our nation's health care.

We can anticipate the howls of protest from those lazy doctors and nurses in our county hospitals. Yes, they'll cite the fact that poverty, crime, gangs, and homelessness run rampant in

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their neighborhoods. (Aren't these the same tired excuses educators in our inner cities hide behind?) We'll turn a deaf ear, though, and simply insist our county hospitals shape up. If not, we'll implement vouchers and allow inner city patients to saunter over to Palm Beach for treatment.

Next, we must turn our attention to police departments, because—and I'm not making this up!—many urban areas suffer from higher crime rates than, say, Beverly Hills. Why have we allowed this travesty to continue for so long?

It's high time we undertake the No Felon Left Behind program. ("Niffle-Bee" in crime prevention circles.) We'll merely require our hitherto slothful inner city cops to stop dunking donuts and get to work. Indeed, we'll measure the average yearly improvement of every single ethnic group in their jurisdiction, just like we do with schools. If a single ethnicity fails to post a decrease in crime—let's say the incidence of shoplifting among Anglos remains flat one year—we'll publish this humiliation on the front page of the local press, and threaten the police department with a state take-over...

I jest, of course, but with only a trace of mirth, and an abundance of bile. Once we transpose No Child Left Behind to any other social issue, we see it as it truly is: ludicrous.

The problems our schools face—as do our nation and our world—are complex, indeed. They defy any easy, alluring panacea, no matter how cute or comforting its acronym.

No Child Left Behind broke my heart.

Congress enacted President George W. Bush's signature education "reform" in 2001. Greatly expanding the federal role in education, NCLB required all schools to set achievement goals for the basic subjects of Language Arts and Math, and to test student progress toward achieving those goals using standardized tests. Further, it insisted that every single student in the nation be proficient in both subjects by June of 2014—or else.

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The individual states were left to determine the details, and to set (vastly different) proficiency standards.

The problem was, while NCLB demanded that schools employ “research-based” strategies, there was no research at all underpinning NCLB itself, especially its focus on high-stakes testing. In fact, the evidence argued against it.

Additionally, as early as 1966 the famous Coleman Study¹⁶ documented the close correlation between socioeconomics and academic performance. While standardized test scores might correctly identify the relative wealth of the students entering each school, they would not effectively evaluate the actual quality of the instruction they received. Wouldn't NCLB end up merely punishing some schools for catering to disadvantaged, too-often minority kids, and rewarding others for not doing so?

In fact, NCLB seemed almost designed to accomplish just that: While all schools' standardized test scores were published, only Title I schools—those with more than 33% of disadvantaged kids and receiving additional federal funds to assist them—faced real sanctions if their students failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) towards prescribed achievement goals. Administrators and teachers could be fired. Schools could even be closed. However, schools and educators serving predominately middle to upper-class students were safe, no matter what their scores.

With such high stakes for some, it really shouldn't have been so shocking to discover that there was cheating. The truth is, it was inevitable.

Atlanta became the first major scandal. In 2011, Georgia Governor's Office released a scathing 800-page report describing with horrific detail Atlanta's “culture of cheating.” In fact, investigators discovered that teachers and principals had been changing student answers on standardized exams at forty-four of the fifty-six schools examined. Eighty-two educators admitted to altering tests, and their testimony implicated ninety-six others.

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Since then, similar cheating has been uncovered in New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Orlando, Dallas, Houston, Dayton, Washington, D.C., and Memphis...so far.

Atlanta's debacle was particularly galling, however, given the amount of accolades the district had received for its meteoric rise in test scores. Philanthropies such as the Gates Foundation had showered the district with grants, while the superintendent, Beverly Hall, had accepted numerous awards including 2009 National Superintendent of the Year from the American Association of School Administrators.

But it was all a sham. Worse, many children who should have received additional support failed to because of their inflated, false scores.

You see, NCLB brought out the worst in teachers and public education.

My district and I, unfortunately, were no exception.

When I first read of No Child Left Behind and its absurd goal of perfection (100% of American's children proficient), I naïvely believed that my district, hailed by the state superintendent as a model, would wisely choose just to ignore it and to continue the progressive policies and pioneering strategies that had made the district great.

All bets were off, however, when our long-standing, visionary superintendent retired, to be replaced by the first and worst of successors who systematically dismantled everything. To my horror, nearly everyone went along.

First, in an effort to align ourselves with the new (and inferior to ours) state standards, we abandoned our preeminent performance-based reading and writing assessment programs.

Next, insisting that all our decisions be "data-driven" (and, in the era of NCLB, the only data acceptable was standardized test scores), we adopted the Northwest Education Association (NWEA) testing regime, subjecting our students—even

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kindergarteners!—to three full batteries of computer standardized tests a year, in addition to the state mandated fill-in-the-bubble one. My district worshiped test scores.

This became apparent one September staff meeting when department leaders shared their analysis of the previous spring's state test. They highlighted the areas where our students had scored the lowest, then zeroed in on the one that had the highest number of questions on the test. Thus, if we focused our teaching on that one skill, we'd get a quick and easy bump in our test scores.

I suggested what seemed obvious (to me), namely that we choose our target skill based upon which one our students most needed to master in order to succeed in their future studies and in life. The ensuing silence and the many rolling eyes were my first inkling that it was no longer about the kids—which as I came to understand, was the real and insidious effect of No Child Left Behind. Individual student success no longer mattered. Only a school's score did. Kids had become the means to our own end: making ourselves look good (or, at least not so bad) with higher test scores.

For instance, my district eventually banned most field trips, limiting them to one per year per grade, citing how important it was to “keep the kids in their seats.” Important? For the kids, or for the test? I protested, claiming that the best thing we did for children was to get them out of those seats, into the world where they'd garner experiences they'd always remember, and which would help them make sense of their classroom lessons—but to no avail.

Later, when my principal outlined what a “balanced day” should look like in the classroom, with the recommended class time in minutes for each subject matter spelled out, history appeared at the bottom, in parentheses, to be taught when we could “find the time.” Art didn't appear at all. It was logical, really: history and art weren't on the test.

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The following year we focused our after-school intervention classes, not on the students who were farthest behind and, consequently, most in need of additional tutoring. No, those unfortunates came to be seen as a sink-hole of time and funds. It would be far more expedient to help the kids just below proficiency since, if they improved their performance just a little, they'd give us another dramatic boost in test scores.

Such cunning strategies soon became standard practice throughout this nation. Another clever ploy was to do nothing to discourage, if not outright encourage drop-outs. Drop-out statistics were notoriously bogus, so there were no repercussions; and the loss of such low-performing students would only increase test scores.

In the world of high-stakes testing, there are many, more subtle ways to cheat than to simply change student answers.

Everyone in education knew that No Child Left Behind was wrong, that our methods to protect ourselves from it lacked integrity, and that sooner or later all schools would fail and thereby expose NCLB's absurdity. But, rather than courageously declare how the emperor NCLB had no clothes, we cravenly competed against each other not to be among the first to be labeled a NCLB failure.

Newly elected President Obama offered a brief glimmer of hope, especially given his pledge to base policy on data instead of ideology. However, his choice for Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, only pursued market-based education reforms including NCLB with even greater vengeance.

My school had succeeded in forestalling the inevitable for a while. In fact, we'd even won the prestigious California Most Distinguished School distinction. Nonetheless, one of our subgroups finally failed to meet its mandated AYP goal: and, as became the case with the vast majority of Title 1 schools (those serving the poorest students leading the way), we, too, faced the stigma and sanctions of Program Improvement.

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I felt the pressure. I didn't want to let my school down. And so I stooped to "teaching to the test," frantically attempting to "drill and kill" all the math standards prior to the California standardized test.

At the end of the year, I came upon some math projects that a colleague had enabled her students to complete dealing with perimeter and area. While my students had dutifully completed the textbook questions on the topic, hers had measured their own bedrooms; then designed on graph paper entire houses, carefully measuring each room's area and perimeter, even calculating how much it would cost to carpet or tile it.

My colleague had insisted on teaching. I had resorted to "covering." Her kids had a ball, and really learned the topic. Mine had a bore, but posted higher test scores. I felt ashamed.

My inglorious efforts were in vain. The school remained in Program Improvement, and so faced the next level of sanctions: we had to send a letter to every family inviting them to transfer their children to one of the other two middle schools in the district. We weren't allowed to mention that those schools hadn't met their AYP goals either; or that our test scores were improving faster than theirs; or that similar school comparisons ranked our school much higher than theirs. Since we were the lone Title 1 middle school in the district, we alone faced the sanctions.

Which families chose to transfer? Why, those with kids posting the highest test scores, of course, thus making it even more difficult for us to meet standards. We were doomed.

In more ways than I'd imagined. The district, citing a budget crisis, decided to close one of its three middle schools. Since only two, including mine, had recently been refurbished and were capable of accepting the influx of hundreds of students from the closed school, you'd think the choice would be easy. It was. The district closed my school since it had fallen under the dreaded Program Improvement. The cost of upgrading the other middle school? More than \$20 million. (And, in a bizarre twist, the

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district sent half the district's middle school kids to my school for a year while upgrading that other one, but renamed mine during the interim the "temporary home" of the other, all to get out from beneath Program Improvement.)

Thus, just as I had betrayed my core values, my district did as well. It destroyed the school that had catered to its poor kids, and insisted that they bus themselves at their own expense to one of the other schools.

This is how No Child Left Behind affected me, my once-beloved school, and my previously renowned district. (This was reform?) I couldn't accept the tragedy, especially the loss of the school where I'd made my home for eighteen years as mentor teacher and assistant principal. I took a two-year leave of absence from education.

Meanwhile, Arne Duncan finally could defend NCLB no longer. He offered states relief in the form of a NCLB waiver—but only if they agreed to both implement the New Common Core Standards and to use them and standardized testing in teacher evaluations. Duncan essentially held states hostage, blackmailing them: "Either adopt this next round of federal 'reforms,' or you'll continue to suffer from the previous, namely NCLB."

The Los Angeles Times offered a preview of Duncan's brave new world of education reform. In 2010, *The Times* posted on its website its analysis of seven years of student standardized test data, focusing on how kids' performance had improved, and rating teachers accordingly.

The Times rated fifth grade teacher Rigoberto Ruelas "less effective."

Its analysis did not take into account the fact that Ruelas reached out to the toughest kids in his school's gang-ridden neighborhood of South LA. He tutored them after school and on weekends, visited them often at their homes, and encouraged them to set their sights on college. During his fourteen years

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teaching, he'd rarely missed a day of school.

None of that mattered. *The Times* determined Ruelas to be "less effective." He subsequently committed suicide. (We can only imagine the scores of better teachers vying to take his place.)

When would this nightmare of "school reform" end? For the first time in my 30-year career, I stopped encouraging my students to become teachers.



Chapter 4: Merit Pay

Extinguishing Teachers' Intrinsic Motivation

U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION, Arne Duncan, hopes to link my salary to my performance, implement some sort of merit pay. I guess the party is over. Now I'll finally have to get to work.

First, I'm going to change my reading program. Thus far I haven't focused on raising test scores, but on my students: strengthening their basic skills and nurturing enduring attitudes. I've worked to get them to read more and better by requiring reading logs linked to challenges and goals, creating literary circles and other opportunities for kids to discuss intriguing literature, strengthening crucial reading abilities such as making inferences and connections, practicing powerful reading strategies like Reciprocal Teaching and Reading Workshop...

Silly me! Although backed by research, such a holistic approach may not immediately raise test scores. I'll never convince Arne I'm a worthy teacher that way! What's worse, the next years' teachers will take credit for my work! I'll just have the kids read lots of short, arcane passages and then answer a fill-in-the-bubble questionnaire afterwards. They'll hate it, but their test scores will rise. As long as I make it appear like they're learning, I'll get my money.

Also, I'm going to inform the principal that I will no longer allow special education kids to be clustered in my class. Not only have they required much more effort on my part over the years, but they've lowered my test scores. Yep, those needy kids made

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me look bad! Well, not any more.

In fact, given that so many of the students at my school are poor, why don't I just transfer to the school on the other, wealthy side of town? I'll work less, but seem to be more successful. (The teachers there already make a higher salary than I do.) What a fool I've been!

No matter where or whom I teach next year, I will stop sharing my lesson plans and teaching strategies with any of the new teachers. After all, there's only so much of that merit money to go around; and if those young whippersnappers outperform me, I'll lose out. Let them learn how to teach the painstaking, hard way through trial and error, the way I did. I'm sorry, but in the era of merit pay, it's every teacher for himself!

Oh, but whom am I fooling? I'm forgetting I so publicly opposed the former superintendent when she closed the continuation high school (thus dooming untold numbers of kids to failure) and when she attempted to implement that disastrous reconfiguration plan (wasting over sixteen million construction dollars). Now, for all my efforts to defend children and my district I've been labeled a troublemaker.

From now on, I'm going to keep my big mouth shut, no matter what. Maybe if I just go along with everything administrators say for a few years, I can earn my way back into their good graces, their good evaluations, and some merit pay.

Lord knows, I'll deserve it after all that!

If high-stakes testing provides the stick to drive education reform, then merit pay offers the carrot. Teachers will work harder and better, the market-based ideologues promise, if we just provide them a modest financial incentive. And the already-great teachers deserve finally to be recognized and rewarded. Perhaps more of this nation's best and brightest might even choose to become teachers if the education profession honored excellence instead of mediocrity. More common sense, right?

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Actually, not so much. Let's begin with a primary question: Can we accurately identify our best (and worst) teachers?

Not yet. "Reformers" rely on standardized test scores. The trouble is, as educational pundit Alfie Kohn delineated in his devastating primer, *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising Test Scores, Ruining Schools*, raw testing data correlates primarily with student socioeconomics, not teaching quality:

A study of math scores on the 1992 NAEP found that the combination of four variables that had nothing to do with instruction (number of parents living at home, parents' educational background, type of community [e.g.: 'disadvantaged urban,' 'extreme rural'], and state poverty rate) explained a whopping 89 percent of the difference in state test scores. In fact, one of those variables, the number of students who had one parent living at home, accounted for 71 percent of variance all by itself. (Robinson and Brandon, 1994).¹⁷

Standardized tests reveal primarily who walks through the front door of a given school or classroom, not what goes on inside.

And, according to a briefing paper issued in 2010 by the Economic Policy Institute, even Value Added Measures (VAM)—that is, measuring by how much students improve from one year to the next, supposedly as a result of a teacher's efforts—are suspect:

For a variety of reasons, analyses of VAM results have led researchers to doubt whether the methodology can accurately identify more and less effective teachers. VAM estimates have proven to be unstable across statistical models, years, and classes that teachers teach. One study found that across five large urban

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*districts, among teachers who were ranked in the top 20% of effectiveness in the first year, fewer than a third were in that top group the next year, and another third moved all the way down to the bottom 40%. Another [study] found that teachers' effectiveness ratings in one year could only predict from 4% to 16% of the variation in such ratings the following year.... This raises questions about whether what is measured is largely a 'teacher effect' or a wide variety of other factors.*¹⁸

Indeed, when Florida published its state-wide VAM teacher scores in the spring of 2014, a third of its reigning teachers of the year posted negative scores.¹⁹ Just as embarrassing, confusing, disconcerting (pick your adjective) was the fact that many teachers' scores, both positive and negative, were smaller than the test's standard of error, which "means that the teacher's contribution to students' learning growth can't be determined one way or the other, according to the DOE [Department of Education]."²⁰ The American Statistical Association issued a similar cautionary statement in 2014.²¹

I've found this to be true with my own test scores. The first year I taught 4th grade, for instance, my students scored near the top relative to my school colleagues, even using VAM; but then plummeted to the bottom the following year when I'd had more experience. Go figure. One year, some of my students advanced dramatically on the state exam, others declined a bit (including even one kid whom I'd motivated to progress from skimming *Captain Underpants* stories to devouring Scott O'Dell's historical novels), while still others seemed to stagnate. They all had the same teacher: me.

A secondary, but no less important question remains: Assuming we someday create an effective way to measure teacher effectiveness, is merit pay itself effective at getting teachers to

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work harder?

No again. Gates, Duncan and their ilk would be wise to catch up on the research regarding human motivation. They could begin with a powerful recent summary, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, by Daniel Pink,²² especially since he focused on the corporate workforce, the area where those market-based reformers profess to be experts.

Carrots and sticks, rewards and punishments—what Pink refers to as “extrinsic motivation”—can be effective in the short term to get people to engage in repetitive, mindless tasks, such as assembly-line work. But “intrinsic motivation”—the sheer joy of mastering in a unique way something great, perhaps even noble—enables most individuals to excel at any sort of intellectual or creative challenge. In fact, for such complex endeavors, carrots and sticks ruin everything, even in the world of business:

Four economists—two from MIT, one from Carnegie Mellon, and one from the University of Chicago—undertake research for the Federal Reserve System, one of the most powerful economic actors in the world. But instead of affirming a simple business principle—higher rewards lead to higher performance—they seem to refute it. And it’s not just American researchers reaching these counterintuitive conclusions. In 2009, scholars at the London School of Economics—alma mater of eleven Noble laureates in economics—analyzed fifty-one studies of corporate pay-for-performance plans. These economists’ conclusion: “We find that financial incentives...can result in a negative impact on overall performance.”²³

Pink identified “Seven Deadly Flaws” of using carrot and sticks to motivate professionals. Extrinsic rewards can extinguish intrinsic motivation, diminish performance, crush creativity, crowd out

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good behavior, encourage cheating, shortcuts, and unethical behavior, become addictive, and can foster short-term thinking.

Well, for once—just this once—I’ll agree with the BBC that what’s true in the corporate world is also true in the “lowly” world of education.

Honestly, how could anyone believe some sort of token merit bonus would motivate teachers, who came into the profession accepting that they’d be paid far, far less than other similarly educated professionals? I’ll let you in on a little secret of the trade: what really gets us excited is not our paltry paycheck, but the moment when we show a student who never thought she could succeed that she can.

However, as my tongue-in-cheek introduction to this chapter implied, merit pay may stifle the best in teachers, and bring out the very worst, just as NCLB did. Would you really have wanted to reward me for my kids’ high math scores that year I taught to the test? Would you have penalized my colleague who shamed me by daring to really teach?

Emerging research regarding merit pay’s efficacy in the world of education is mixed at best. The most noted investigation, completed in 2010 by the federally funded Vanderbilt University National Center on Performance Incentives (NCPI),²⁴ focused on the metropolitan Nashville School District. The three-year study—according to researchers, the first scientifically rigorous study of merit pay—found no evidence at all that the city’s pay-for-performance plan had raised overall student achievement.

Merit pay is not “the magic bullet that so often the policy world is looking for,” summarized NCPI Director Matthew Springer. At least in his study, “It doesn’t work.”

Let’s review: The field of education currently has neither a fair nor an accurate measure of teacher effectiveness. Even if one existed, using monetary incentives would not only fail to encourage teachers, but would likely cause them and the

Chapter 4: Merit Pay

profession great harm.

This is reform? Why would anyone champion it?



Chapter 5: Vouchers/Choice

The Big Fat Lie

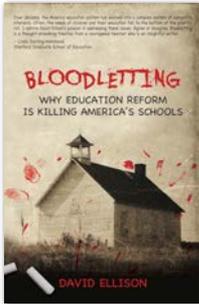
ONCE UPON A time there were two schools on different sides of the tracks.

The first school, Ravenstree High, was on the wrong side. It ministered to poor, minority students. Many of them came from troubled, single-parent families that had never seen a high school diploma. The kids were only too familiar, though, with gangs and drugs. As a result, Ravenstree's dropout rate was high, its test scores low. Ravenstree wasn't well respected in the community.

It was a shame. The teachers who taught at Ravenstree were among the most dedicated. Many of them had turned down higher-paying positions at more prestigious schools because they wanted to work with disadvantaged kids. They put in long hours calling parents repeatedly, tutoring kids patiently, and planning innovative lessons. Their work paid off. When the Ravenstree's test scores were compared with other wrong-side-of-the-track schools, they were among the highest.

But few in the community ever made that comparison. And so they ridiculed Ravenstree and its teachers.

Meanwhile, the sun was shining at Palo Blanco High, on the other side of the tracks. It had recently been singled out as the best in the state, since it had the highest percentage of kids passing advanced placement tests. Parents—most of them wealthy, white or Asian—took time off from their jobs at the university to attend a special ceremony in the school's monstrous, new theater. The



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