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‘What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate’

By Marion Brady

“What we’ve got here,” as [Cool Hand Luke](#) once said, “is a failure to communicate.”

Skimming the reactions to my [12/5/11 The Answer Sheet guest blog](#), Cool Hand Luke’s observation often comes to mind.

For many readers, the question raised by my account of Orange County school board member [Rick Roach’s](#) less than stellar performance on a version of a standardized test given in Florida was, “What’s wrong with Rick?”

Wrong question. Here’s the right one: What’s [wrong with standardized testing?](#) Here’s another: What’s wrong with a whole country when it isn’t in open revolt against the assumption that schools should only teach what machines can measure?

How demeaning is that assumption? How much is it costing America in lost human potential?

In a separate *Answer Sheet* guest blog [published last month](#), I said that standardized tests had no “success in life” predictive power. Rick’s story was just one example of that fact, and my mail says there are hundreds of similar stories. Albert Einstein had one. If you’re reading this, you’re reading something written by someone with yet another example.

But “no predictive power” doesn’t even scratch the surface of problems with standardized tests. In that [November 1 blog](#), I listed twenty-four MORE problems, any one of which I could write (and probably have already written) an op-ed or newspaper column exploring it, or have treated it at greater length in one of my books.

And the 25 problems didn’t exhaust my list. I didn’t, for example, point out that lots of kids are smarter than the people who write standardized test items, and tie themselves in knots at test time trying to second guess what was in the head of the writer of a particular test item. I didn’t say that the fans of testing and the scientific research on the benefits of standardized testing are in opposite corners.

What I was trying to do in my [Dec. 15 blog](#) was call attention to serious problems with the tail now wagging the education dog — standardized testing.

Rick Roach, the school board member who’s now taking a lot of flak for detailing his experience — shares that concern.

As does an army of others. The [“Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind”](#) has a list of 153 education, civil rights, religious, disability, parent and civic organizations that think America’s addiction to standardized tests is dragging us in a wrong direction.

See [“The High Stakes of Standardized Testing ,”](#)by Edward Miller, for a summary of scientific studies on the subject conducted by the [National Research Council](#).

Then read [Banesh Hoffman](#), a graduate of Oxford and Princeton universities, a world famous mathematician and theoretical physicist who worked with Albert Einstein on studies related to the theory of relativity. If you think that someone with his credentials might have something important to say on the subject, [go here and click](#) on the cover of Hoffman’s easily read, jargon-free book, *“The Tyranny of Testing.”* Read the forward by another intellectual giant, [Jacques Barzun](#), and be surprised by the fact that he was writing in 1962, then skim a few random pages from the book.

To those helpful math whizzes who either suggested that Rick resign from the school board or take them up on offers to tutor him in math, I suggest reading *“A Mathematician’s Lament”* by Paul Lockhart, [here](#). And [there’s this](#), *“Leading mathematician debunks ‘value-added.’”*

Finally, those wondering why standardized testing has become the be-all and end-all of education reform, will find food for thought by Googling [“Berliner and Biddle, The Manufactured Crisis ,”](#) and [“Emery and Ohanian, Why Is Corporate America Bashing America’s Schools ?”](#)

In the opinion of these respected researchers, today’s test-based “reforms” don’t have much at all to do with quality education, or with beating the test scores of [Finland](#) and Singapore, or with the claim that test-based reforms are “preparing the young for college and careers.”

As usual: Follow the money.

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