

Washington Post, “The Answer Sheet” Blog, by Valerie Strauss
Posted at 10:42 AM ET, 04/11/2011

A not-so-modest proposal

This was written by [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.

By Marion Brady

I have a proposal. Like my earlier ones to the U.S. Department of Education and members of the appropriate congressional committees, it will almost certainly be ignored. But when the “[Save Our Schools: March and National Call to Action](#)” brings thousands of people to Washington for three days at the end of July, the proposal may at least contribute to the dialogue.

FACT: We’re told that governments at all levels—federal, state, and local—are worse than broke, and that the services they provide, including education, must be cut.

FACT: There’s one multi-billion dollar cost of educating that’s not scheduled to be cut—high-stakes, standardized testing. In fact, Arne Duncan, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, says that the number of such tests is going to significantly increase.

FACT: According [to an article](#) in the April 27, 2000, Dallas (TX) Observer, the present orgy of testing got a major initial push from Democratic lawyer Sandy Kress and Republican George Bush. Their shared dream was operationalized by the [No Child Left Behind](#) (NCLB) legislation, which both political parties supported. It’s based on the naïve assumption that educating is primarily a matter of transferring information from those who know to those who don’t know.

FACT: No Child Left Behind has failed. In a December 1, 2008, [op-ed](#) in the Wall Street Journal, Lou Gerstner, retired CEO of IBM, RJR Nabisco, and The Carlyle Group, and early enthusiastic supporter of NCLB, said, “We must start with the recognition that, despite decade after decade of reform efforts, our public K-12 schools have not improved.”

FACT: No Child Left Behind hasn’t just failed; it has been extremely destructive. Constant hammering of the view that teachers can’t be trusted to evaluate student performance hasn’t just cost taxpayers money, it has seriously undermined confidence in public schooling and made the teaching profession even less appealing than it has traditionally been.

QUESTION: Why, given these facts, is [Race to the Top](#) (“No Child Left Behind on steroids”), being supported by Washington politicians and policymakers?

PROPOSAL: Given present unwillingness to fully fund education, all 50 states should immediately cancel their contracts with testing companies. What teachers did for at least a century and a half before corporate interests and politicians took over education policy they can do again, at least for the duration of the present economic emergency.

NOTE: [Test manufacturers](#) will, of course, protest loudly. But follow the money. They're already raking in billions from testing math and reading skills. If business leaders and politicians get their way and every kid in America is tested in every subject, the flow will turn into a flood. .

There are problems with machine-scored standardized tests that are more serious than their cost. Right now, however, money issues are front and center. Policymakers in state capitols and Washington are, right now, choosing between tests and teachers, so there's no time for debate.

If they opt for tests, we're talking not about a few billion to test manufacturers, but really serious money. Check out [this excerpt from](#) a March 31, 2011 Harvard Business Review blog:

“The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets . . .”

No more of those piddling, controversial state-level high-stakes tests like the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test ([FCAT](#)), the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), or the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). No more tedious fooling around trying to come up with fifty different tests for fifty different states. If kids are to be standardized, why not go whole hog and replace fifty different assembly lines with just one?

As is clear from the Harvard Business Review blog, that's what [Joanne Weiss](#) has in mind. Ms. Weiss isn't just another blogger. She's U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's chief of staff.

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