

Washington Post, "The Answer Sheet" blog by Valerie Strauss

How to save taxpayers billions of \$\$ — really

Posted October 24, 2012 at 4:00 am

By Marion Brady

My last of several jobs in industry before I began teaching school was with Atlas Powder Company. At Atlas, I learned something useful for the current education reform effort.

The production facility was about as wide as an average kitchen but a hundred or so kitchens long, stitched together along its length by a conveyor belt moving 155-mm artillery shells. Empty at the start, the shells moved down the belt, were poured full of hot, light-brown liquid explosive, then allowed to cool and harden. A four-inch-deep hole was drilled into the solidified explosive at the nose, a proximity fuse was inserted, the shells' tips were screwed in place, then off they went to underground storage.

The building's unusual shape was designed to minimize damage in case someone got careless.

Main problem: When the explosive mix cooled inside the shell, air bubbles would sometimes form. No kind of see-through-the-shell technology was in use, so inspection involved a very close look at the hole drilled in the nose. Was every square millimeter of it absolutely smooth?

Finding out took time and really good lighting, and the conveyor kept moving. So defense department mathematicians did studies and said, "You don't need to check every shell. You can find out if you have a bad batch by pulling off the line and carefully inspecting 6% of them."

Which is what the inspectors did. Sampling six out of a hundred did the job and helped keep costs under control.

Which brings me to your local, state, and federal tax bill for last year, this year, next year, and into the foreseeable future. And also brings me to the famous warning in President Eisenhower's January 1961 Farewell Address to the Nation. "We must," he said, "guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence ...by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."

Here's another version of that warning: "Beware the education-test manufacturer complex. The potential for disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."

Right now the scale on a per-dollar basis of the education-test manufacturer complex isn't on par with that of the military-industrial complex. However, companies that create and sell tests are on the problem and moving fast.

Forget for now the money involved. Think about the long-term consequences of taking control of kids' minds away from homes and parents, away from neighborhood schools and teachers, away

from locally elected school boards and local press, and handing it over to people for whom quality education is far down their list of priorities, if it appears at all.

Do that, and you may come to the conclusion — to continue Eisenhower’s warning — that this is a greater danger to our children’s and grandchildren’s “liberties and democratic processes” than that posed by the military-industrial complex.

What’s the education-test manufacturer complex’s long-term strategy, as coordinated by the American Legislative Exchange Council?

(1) Invent an education emergency and make skillful use of the mainstream media to push it.

(2) Attack the legitimacy of public education by destroying trust in its most obvious representatives — teachers.

(3) To make manipulation easy, centralize decision-making for standards and accountability at the highest possible level.

(4) Work behind the scenes with politicians from both political parties, wealthy foundations, and Wall Street types to push vouchers, charters, and funding for anything public that can be profitably privatized.

(5) Call congressional hearings on the matter and invite to testify only those “educators” and think-tank “experts” who — if they taught long enough to understand what they were doing — have long since forgotten it.

(6) Dazzle the continuous stream of new, young, inexperienced teachers with slick, colorful, ready-made instructional materials heavy with current jargon about it being “data driven,” “child-centered,” “research-based,” “technology enabled,” “blended,” “aligned with the new Common Core Standards.”

Take these institution-destroying steps without checking out the history of previous similar attempts, without talking to real teachers, without research, without pilot programs, without trial runs, without cost-benefit analyses, without apology for a sneaky coup.

And keep bribing everybody in sight with campaign contributions, travel, sponsored conferences, free breakfasts, free lunches, free hospitality rooms, free whatever-your-little-heart-desires, just-ask-and-we’ll-see-what-we-can-do.

Like the military-industrial complex, the tentacles of the education-testing complex reach into hidden places beyond the reach of democratic processes. Firmly backed (no questions asked) by both political parties, high-stakes standardized tests aren’t going to go away. In fact, lots more are on their way.

But money is short, and some aspiring young office-seeker may see electoral gold in asking a simple question related to my Atlas Powder Company experience: What are we getting from the

billions being spent on mass testing that couldn't be learned from representative sampling at a tiny fraction of the cost?

Answering that question will lead to other questions which, investigated, will yield a clear answer: Nothing. Mass, standardized, high-stakes, machine-scored tests tell us nothing useful that we couldn't learn with greater precision in other, far less costly ways.

Every testing company knows this. But they also know that most Americans have a sick fascination with measuring, labeling, and ranking, they know they're in the testing business to make money, and they know that taxpayers are an easy mark if they're not suspicious.

Thus far, most aren't. To keep it that way, test manufacturers work behind closed doors, keep test items from public scrutiny, get laws passed that make it a crime to examine them, and wrap the scores in mathematical formulas so complex few understand them well enough to even ask a question.

After our sick fascination with testing and ranking has run its course, after we finally decide to listen to real experts (<http://www.pta.org/2553.htm>) on testing rather than politicians; after thousands of neighborhood schools have been closed; after the best teachers have been driven out of the profession; after math and reading drills have replaced powerfully productive childhood play, art, music, and other drivers of personality development, creativity and ingenuity; after all the non-standardizeable kids are out on the street with nothing to show for the work they've done; after a bedrock of real democracy has been destroyed rather than thoughtfully enhanced, attention may be paid.

But the damage, irreversible, will have been done.

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