The 9th problem with the Common Core standards

By Marion Brady

On August 15, the Washington Post's "The Answer Sheet" ran a column by me titled "Eight Problems with the Common Core Standards."(http://www.marionbrady.com/articles/2012-WashingtonPost8-13.pdf)

Marc Tucker, long-time major player in the current test-based education reform effort, in an Education Week "Top Performers" blog, took me to task with a piece called "8 Problems With the Common Core State Standards? I Don't Think So." (http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2012/09/8_problems_with_the_common_core_state_standards_i_dont_think_so.html)

My Washington Post piece was a little over 1,000 words. Mr. Tucker's response was twice that. If I were to respond point by point to his objections to my eight criticisms of the standards—which I'd really like to do — it would almost certainly double that word count. Few readers would stick with me for 4,000 words, even if editors were willing to publish them.

I'll stand by my criticisms, but try to move the dialogue along by adding a ninth. I'd have included it before, but couldn't squeeze it into a paragraph.

Mr. Tucker buys the conventional wisdom, that the subjects that make up the core — math, science, language arts, and social studies — "cover" the important stuff that kids need to know, from which it follows that anything that nails down more precisely what actually gets covered is a good thing. Ergo: the Common Core Standards.

He says, "…the core academic disciplines (the core subjects in the school curriculum) provide the conceptual underpinning for deep understanding of virtually everything we want our students to know."

Most people agree, including most teachers, especially younger ones. That's what they've been taught, and experience hasn't yet caused them to question orthodoxy.

I disagree, not about the standards providing conceptual underpinning for the core subjects (which I've never questioned). I take issue with the contention that the standards provide "deep understanding of virtually everything we want students to know…"

I'm not alone. Buckminster Fuller, Kurt Vonnegut, Alfred North Whitehead, Felix Frankfurter, Harlan Cleveland, Neil Postman, John Goodlad, David Orr, Ernest Boyer, Arnold Thackray, and

dozens of other nationally and internationally known and respected people are on my side of the issue.

But we have a problem. The idea we're trying to get across isn't part of the current education reform dialogue. That means that in a few hundred words, I have to try to introduce a new (and very abstract) idea, explain why it's of fundamental importance but at odds with the standards, and offer an alternative.

Here's that idea, as articulated by Peter M. Senge, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In his book, "The Fifth Discipline," he says:

> "From a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole."

That "larger whole" is reality. We want kids to make better sense of it. To that end, we send them off to study school subjects that explain various parts of it. We don't, however, show them how those parts fit together, relate, interact, elaborate, and reinforce each other. When the bell rings, off they go to study a different subject that, as far as they can tell, is little or not at all related to the one they just left.

As this brief slideshow (http://www.marionbrady.com/Powerpoint/TheInvisibleElephant.swf) illustrates, this is a first-order problem, and the Common Core Standards ignore it. Locking the core subjects in place tells the world that America thinks a curriculum patched together in 1892 by 10 college administrators, a curriculum that reflects the industrial policy of the era, a curriculum that fails to acknowledge the fundamental, integrated nature of reality, is the best way to organize knowledge.

It's not. Systems theory as it developed during World War II is far better. Period. It doesn't replace the core subjects (which I've never advocated), just makes them working parts of a single, simpler, more efficient "master" mental organizer.

This is absolutely central to learning. Knowledge grows as we connect bits of it — as we discover relationships between, say, street width and sense of community, between birth order and certain personality traits, between capital investment decisions and political stability.

Compartmentalizing knowledge gets directly in the way of the basic process that makes kids (and the rest of us) smarter.

That systems thinking integrates knowledge isn't an original idea. I'm just passing it along and offering a way to operationalize it.

A little story: Years ago I realized that what educators like John Goodlad, Neil Postman, Alfred North Whitehead, Ernest Boyer and others were saying in books, articles, and speeches wasn't making any difference in what was actually happening in classrooms. Knowing it isn't always

easy to translate theory into practice, I wrote a course of study for adolescents that showed how systems theory could help them see the connected nature of all knowledge and the minute-by-minute way they were experiencing it.

I chose to write for middle schoolers because they hadn't yet been thoroughly programmed by traditional instruction to compartmentalize what they knew, and because an earlier project I'd undertaken for Prentice-Hall, Inc. had led to friendships with several middle school principals around the country.

I contacted them. Would they be willing to pilot my course of study and give me feedback so I could refine it?

Nobody turned me down. Everything was in place for the fall of the year, then No Child Left Behind became law, and that was the end of that. I got letters and phone calls from the principals apologizing for having to back out of their commitment. It was clear to them that raising test scores, not improving kids' ability to make better sense of experience, was now the name of the education game.

And so it remains. Over the years, with my brother's help, I've continued to play with the course of study (http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections-InvestigatingReality-ACourseofStudy.asp),, thinking some rebel school system somewhere might pilot and help improve it, but the money and power behind the "standards and accountability" juggernaut probably make it unstoppable. The standards have been swallowed by just about everybody, and as soon as they've been digested, Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Educational Testing Service, and other manufacturers of standardized tests will be ready with contracts in hand for computerized tests in numbers sufficient to crash web servers.

The tests, of course, will build in a failure rate set by some faceless decision-maker — an easily operated spigot for meeting stockholder expectations. Open it — boost the failure rate — and up go sales of tests, test prep tools, instructional materials. And, of course, profits.

Even if I'm wrong about the eight other problems with the Common Core Standards (and I'm not), I don't see any wiggle room on this one. If I'm right, the current reform effort's centralizing of control of education, its micromanaging of classrooms by non-educators, its blocking of all innovation not tied to the core, and its reliance on destructive, simplistic tests that fail to take account of the fundamental nature of knowledge, and of human complexity and variability, will, in Senge's words, exact an "enormous price."

That price will be the inability of our children and our children's children to cope with a future shaping up to be more challenging than anything humans have thus far faced.

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