

## **Dogs: An unusual guide to school reform**

*My guest today is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.*

By Marion Brady

Driving the country roads of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, I have sometimes been lucky enough to be blocked by sheep being moved from one pasture to another.

I say ‘lucky’ because it allows me to watch an impressive performance by a dog – usually a Border Collie.

What a show! A single, mid-sized dog herding two or three hundred sheep, keeping them moving in the right direction, rounding up strays, knowing how to intimidate but not cause panic, funneling them all through a gate, and obviously enjoying the challenge.

Why a Border Collie? Why not an Akita or Xoloitzcuintli or another of about 400 breeds listed on the Internet?

Because, among the people for whom herding sheep is serious business, there is general agreement that Border Collies are better at doing what needs to be done than any other dog. They have ‘the knack.’

That knack is so important that those who care most about Border Collies even oppose their being entered in dog shows. That, they say, would lead to the Border Collie being bred to look good, and looking good isn’t the point. Brains, innate ability, performance – that’s the point.

Other breeds are no less impressive in other ways. If you’re lost in a snowstorm in the Alps, you don’t need a Border Collie. You need a big, strong dog with a really good nose, lots of fur, wide feet that don’t sink too deeply into snow, and an unerring sense of direction for returning with help. You need a Saint Bernard.

If varmints are sneaking into your hen house, killing your chickens, and escaping down holes in a nearby field, you don’t need a Border Collie or a Saint Bernard, you need a Fox Terrier.

It isn’t that many different breeds can’t be taught to herd, lead high-altitude rescue efforts, or kill foxes. They can. It’s just that teaching all dogs to do things which one particular breed can do better than any other doesn’t make much sense.

We accept the reasonableness of that argument for dogs. We reject it for kids.

The non-educators now running the education show say American kids are lagging ever-farther behind in science and math, and that the consequences of that for America’s economic well-being could be catastrophic.

So, what is this rich, advantaged country of ours doing to try to beat out the competition?

Mainly, we put in place the No Child Left Behind program, now replaced by [Race to the Top](#) and the [Common Core State Standards Initiative](#). If that fact makes you optimistic about the future of education in America, think again about dogs.

There are all kinds of things they can do besides herd, rescue, and engage foxes. They can sniff luggage for bombs. Chase felons. Stand guard duty. Retrieve downed game birds. Guide the blind. Detect certain diseases. Locate earthquake survivors. Entertain audiences. Play nice with little kids. Go for help if Little Nell falls down a well.

So, with No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top as models, let's set performance standards for these and all other canine capabilities and train all dogs to meet them. All 400 breeds. All skills. Leave No Dog Behind!

Two-hundred-pound Mastiffs may have a little trouble with the chase-the-fox-down-the-hole standard, and Chihuahuas will probably have difficulty with the tackle-the-felon-and-pin-him-to-the-ground standard. But, hey, no excuses! Standards are standards! Leave No Dog Behind.

Think there's something wrong with a same-standards-and-tests-for-everybody approach to educating? Think a math whiz shouldn't be held back just because he can't write a good five-paragraph essay? Think a gifted writer shouldn't be refused a diploma because she can't solve a quadratic equation? Think a promising trumpet player shouldn't be kept out of the school orchestra or pushed out on the street because he can't remember the date of the Boxer Rebellion?

If you think there's something fundamentally, dangerously wrong with an educational reform effort that's actually designed to standardize, designed to ignore human variation, designed to penalize individual differences, designed to produce a generation of clones, photocopy this column.

If you think it's stupid to require every kid to read the same books, think the same thoughts, parrot the same answers, make several photocopies. And in the margin at the top of each, write, in longhand, something like, "Please explain why the standards and accountability fad isn't a criminal waste of brains," or, "Why are you trashing America's hope for the future?" or just, "Does this make sense?"

Send the copies to your senators and representatives before they sell their vote to the publishing and testing corporations intent on getting an ever-bigger slice of that half-trillion dollars a year America spends on educating.

##