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Wrong question, wrong answer

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

By Marion Brady

A hundred and fifty years ago, the rich and the royal came from as far away as Europe and South America to Carthage, North Carolina.

Then, as now, Carthage was a small town in an out-of-the-way area in the south central part of the state.

But it had something going for it.

That “something” was the Tyson & Jones Company, one of the best-known enterprises in America. The company had won “the race to the top” in its field, and visitors were traveling thousands of miles to buy what they were selling.

Exceedingly high production standards led to the company’s fame, business success, and a gold medal in the 1895 Cotton States Exhibition in Atlanta. Those standards grew out of a question: “How can we build the best buggies in the world?”

Wrong question. The Tyson & Jones Company was in the people-moving business. Karl Benz, Gottlieb Daimler, the Duryea brothers, and Henry Ford, were in the same business, but they were asking a different question: “Is there a better way to move people than by horse-drawn buggy?”

Everybody knows how that ended.

Today’s education policymakers — corporate CEOs, hedge fund managers, members of Congress, state governors and legislators, big-city mayors, (non-educators all) — are asking, “How can math, science, and other school subjects be taught better?”

And then, certain they know more about educating than educators, they turn up the volume on the media megaphones they’ve monopolized and answer their own question: “Standards! Rigorous standards!”

Wrong question, so wrong answer.

Standards, certainly. But not standards for school subjects, not standards that fall into the Tyson & Jones trap. Standards shouldn’t say what to teach, they should say what teaching should produce — the qualities of mind, emotion, and spirit most likely to see the young through whatever lies ahead for them.

For example, “curious” probably belongs on the list of such qualities. It’s no exaggeration to say that curiosity creates humanness, underlies all sciences and arts, drives civilization.

Open-minded, empathic, imaginative, tenacious, and honest are also qualities that probably belong on a list of standards —standards that challenge learners to become the best they can be, and push teachers to try to think of ever-better ways to help them meet that challenge.

Don't dismiss this as hopelessly idealistic. Traditional schooling somehow manages to drain curiosity out of most kids by about the fourth grade. Surely, if we know how to destroy it, we can, if we try, figure out how to nurture it.

The same is true for open-mindedness, empathy, imagination, tenacity, honesty, and other qualities the value of which are obvious.

I'm dead serious. If the current "standards and accountability" campaign is successful, we'll be stuck forever, trying merely to do better, via rigor, what we've always done.

Falling into the Tyson & Jones trap happens so routinely in human affairs that social science has a word for it: institutionalization. Armies prepare to fight the last war, not the next. Religions lose themselves in rituals the origins of which no one remembers. Teaching math and science becomes more important than solving the problems that gave rise to math and science.

Those so-called "[Common Core Standards](#)" that the Business Roundtable and its allies are foisting on public education, and the standardized tests they spawn, are classic examples of institutionalization. Standardization is the parent of stagnation, and standing still in the face of change will do us in. If parents and grandparents really understood what the current reform effort is doing to their kids and grandkids, it'd be pitchforks and torches time. They'd converge on state capitols and Washington in such force that contracts with test manufacturers would be cancelled, with penalties gladly paid.

The amateurs now running the education show will ignore the call to attach standards to human qualities rather than to school subjects. But if public pressure made that impossible, they'd mount a ferocious campaign to protect the status quo. Billions of dollars have been invested in promoting subject-matter standards and standardized testing. Billions more are being made as politicians stack test requirement on top of test requirement. That big pipeline to the public purse isn't going to be shut down if there's any way that corporate money can bribe politicians to keep it open.

The sales pitch can be predicted. When you're being hammered with the word "accountability," when you read that "decision-making must be data-driven," when you hear blather about the necessity for "measurability" in the form of test scores, know that you're being snookered. Quality can't be quantified.

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