

A radical idea to transform what kids learn in school

By Marion Brady

Exxon-Mobil is airing education-reform television ads. In the one I’ve seen most often, implicit and explicit messages are simple and clear: (a) We live in a dangerous, technologically complex world. (b) Our lives, liberties, and happiness hinge on our ability to cope with that world. (c) Coping requires mastery of math. (d) On standardized math tests, America ranks 25th in the world. (e) Be ashamed and afraid. (f) Get behind corporate education reform efforts.

I’ve no confidence in the standardized tests that produced that ranking or the ranking itself. Scores on tests that can’t measure the qualities of mind and spirit upon which survival depend are useless. And oversimplifying statistics to support an ideology-driven agenda is inexcusable.

I agree, however, that America needs good mathematicians.

How many? The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says, “Employment of mathematicians is expected to increase by 16 percent from 2010 to 2020.... There will be competition for jobs because of the small number of openings in this occupation.”

Take math teachers out of the mix, and the number of mathematicians America needs is tiny. If one kid in each high school in the country became a professional mathematician, it would glut the market.

So, what’s now different in math education as a consequence of corporate pressures? Math requirements have been boosted for every kid. School days and years have been lengthened to expand math instruction time. Recess, art, music — even other academic subjects — have been dropped or scaled back to allow more time for math drill. Math courses have been moved down a grade level to make them tougher. Reading instruction has been refocused to emphasize “informational text” of the sort mathematicians might use. Constant testing monitors math performance, and failing a single high-stakes math test can keep even an honors student from getting a high school diploma.

Stupid. Running every kid in America through the math gauntlet to get a handful of mathematicians is like buying a bakery to get a loaf of bread. But even if thousands were needed, it makes no sense to force everybody to line up and run that gauntlet. Putting a kid with superior math ability and potential in a class with thirty-plus other kids will either hold her or him back or drag the thirty-plus forward at a rate beyond their ability to cope. How smart is that?

What the reformers have done in math they want to do across the board — push every kid through the same narrow standardizing hole in every subject. It can't be done, and it shouldn't be done, but it's being tried on a monumental, nationwide scale.

And when it doesn't work, instead of blaming THE SYSTEM, teachers and kids are punished.

Shaping THE SYSTEM, of course, is the belief that studying a mix of pre-selected, required subjects provides a comprehensive, well-rounded education. That's an admirable aim, but it's never even come close to being met. When, long ago, big guns in education policymaking sat down around a conference table to decide what courses students had to pass to get a high school diploma, they didn't start from scratch and look at all possible options. They chose from an existing, much shorter list set by custom, reinforced by familiarity, unsupported by research or an articulated philosophy.

Over time, that list of school subjects has acquired an extremely powerful label. It's called "the core curriculum," and the assumption that it does indeed provide a comprehensive, well-rounded education is simply taken for granted. So firm is the place "the core" holds in the public mind, there wasn't a peep from the mainstream media when the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers rammed through something they called "The Common Core States Standards Initiative."

Disregard the word "States" in that title. For all practical purposes, the core is now America's national curriculum. The governors and school officers who pushed the Initiative think that standardizing the curriculum provides "a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn..." Corporate interests also think it's a good thing, but for a different reason: It standardizes the education market, thereby significantly upping profit potential.

The secretive, long-running, organized, well-financed campaign to centralize, standardize, and privatize American education is on track. To follow the campaign, follow the money.

Standardized or not, there are at least two dozen reasons why faith in the core curriculum is misplaced (see <http://www.marionbrady.com/articles/2011-WashingtonPost11-1.pdf>). Here are three:

- (1) Humankind's hope for the future lies, as it always has, in the richness of human variability. We differ in experience, situation, aspirations, attitudes, abilities, interests, motivations, emotions, life chances, prospects, potential, and luck. To survive and prosper, these differences need to be exploited to the maximum. The core curriculum minimizes them.
- (2) Knowledge is exploding at an ever-accelerating rate. Whole new fields of study unimagined even a few years ago are emerging. The explosion isn't just going to continue, it's going to accelerate. Thinking we know enough to lock ANY curriculum in place — much less one that's more than a hundred years old — is either naïve or malicious.
- (3) The future is unknowable. Period. Even if it were possible to standardize and program kids, we don't know — NOBODY knows — what they'll need to know next week, much less for the

rest of their lives. They may need technical skills no one now has, or the ability to survive on edible weeds and a quart of water a day. Neither the Common Core nor the tests that manufacturers are able to write can take adequate account of an unknown future.

What's an alternative to today's mandated, standardized curriculum? An elective curriculum.

By "elective," I don't mean offering kids a couple of options if they pass all their math, science, language arts and social studies courses, or are willing to stick around after hours. I mean that, starting no later than middle school, kids set their own schedules, going in whatever directions their interests, abilities, and respect for parental and teacher opinion lead.

Of course, that's not going to happen. Bureaucrats, pointing to statutes, would quickly shut down any school that gave kids real freedom of choice. Politicians would resurrect the accusation they once used to sell No Child Left Behind, that teachers were guilty of "the soft bigotry of low expectations." Policymakers would argue that workforce needs trump individual needs. Corporations making billions selling "solutions" to the educational problems they're helping create would threaten to cut off political campaign contributions. Many (maybe most) educators, comfortable in their niches, would defend those niches by pointing to personal successes.

And all will dismiss my proposal by arguing that kids don't know what's best for them.

There's some truth in that. Kids have needs they aren't able to articulate (a particular interest of mine). But given freedom to choose, their choices will be far wiser than those spilling out of the Trojan horse the American Legislative Exchange Council and its allies slipped through public education's gate — the Common Core States Standards Initiative.

That Initiative solves no significant problem. It is itself the problem. Its quick, unquestioning acceptance by most of the education establishment and the general public is yet another manifestation of the widening authoritarian streak in American character.

Boycott the tests, and hammer the clueless politicians who support them. Do that, and they'll suddenly discover an interest in talking to people who actually know something about educating.

When that dialog begins, you can do future generations and the world an enormous favor: Insist on a post-elementary-level curriculum that's at least 90% elective. Let human nature do its thing.

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