

## We Need the Right Kind of Standards, Not CCSS

By Marion Brady

In a commentary in the July 21, 2014 issue of Time magazine, columnist Joe Klein takes aim at one of the usual targets of today's education reformers—unions. In a dig at New York City mayor de Blasio, he says, "A mayor who actually cared about education would be seeking longer school days, longer school years, more charter schools...and the elimination of tenure and seniority rules..."

Like just about every other mainstream media pundit, Klein thinks he knows enough about educating to diagnose its ills and prescribe a cure. That he'll be taken seriously testifies to the power of what's become the conventional wisdom, that if America's schools aren't performing as they should it's because teachers aren't getting the job done.

What's the teacher's job? Raising standardized tests scores.

What's the key to high test scores? Rigor.

What does rigor look like? No-excuses teachers doing their thing for as long as it takes to get the job done.

What's "their thing"? Teaching to demanding standards—the Common Core State Standards.

The market-force-education-reform juggernaut set in motion by business leaders and politicians about a quarter-century ago is simple and easily summarized. (1) Adopt tough performance standards for school subjects. (2) Use high-stakes tests to measure performance. (3) Reward high-scorers; punish low scorers.

Which, when you think about it, is off the mark. School subjects are just tools—means to an end. We don't tell surgeons which scalpels and clamps to use; what we want to know is their kill/cure rate. We don't check the toolbox of the plumber we've called to see if he (or she) brought a basin wrench and propane torch; we want to know that when the job's done the stuff goes down when we flush. We don't kick the tires of the airliner we're about to board; we trust the judgment of the people on the flight deck.

School subjects are tools. Kids show up for kindergarten enormously curious and creative. What we need to know is how well schooling is enhancing that curiosity and creativity. Kids learn an incredible amount on their own long before they walk through school doors. What we need to know is how much improvement there's been in self-directed learning. Kids appear to begin life with an innate sense of what's right and fair. What we need to know is how successfully that sense is being nurtured.

We're on a wrong track. Standards? Of course! But not standards for school subjects. What's needed are standards for the qualities of mind, emotion, character, and spirit the young must be helped to develop if they're to cope with the world they're inheriting. The Common Core Standards, says the CCSS website, "provide clear signposts along the way to the goal of college and career readiness." Just stick to the CCSS script to be prepared for college and career.

College? Years ago, the Association of American Colleges's Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees said, "We do not believe that the road to a coherent education can be constructed from a set of required subjects or academic disciplines." I've seen no evidence that the thoughtful among them have changed their minds.

Careers? We have no idea how the interactions of globalization, automation, climate change, clashing societal worldviews, and trends not yet evident will effect careers. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that nobody knows what careers are going to be available when today's elementary school kids are looking for work.

Back in the 70s, in his book *Reflections on the Human Condition*, Eric Hoffer, philosopher, writer, and longshoreman, wrote something that the Common Core Standards don't adequately reflect: "In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists."

Standards? Sure. But not standards for solving quadratic equations, or for recalling the chemical formulas for salt, sand, baking soda, and chalk, or for interpreting Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail as some self-appointed "expert" thinks it should be interpreted.

And not standards that make it easy to create machine-scored tests that perpetuate the destructive myth that quality can be quantified and turned into data to drive education reform.

Standards—proper standards—could work wonders. Consider, for example, the effect just one standard could have on teachers, on teaching materials, on kids, on the citizenry, on America:

*Schools will be held accountable for sending learners on their way with a deep-seated love of learning and a willingness and ability to follow where that love leads.*

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