

# Education or catastrophe? HB 7069 tips the balance

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‘Human history,’ said H.G. Wells, “is a race between education and catastrophe.” Any day’s news leaves no room for doubt that catastrophe has a commanding lead. Skeptics should take a look at the [Florida Legislature](#)’s handiwork: House Bill 7069.

I’m not optimistic about the outcome of the race, at least not in America. For more than a century, the institution of public schools was reasonably effective. Bureaucratic rigidities and institutional inertia got in the way, but when classroom doors closed, most teachers had enough autonomy to do their thing. The best of them figured out ways to capitalize on kids’ abilities and interests, and out of that freedom came people who went on to lead the world in patents, Pulitzers, Nobels and other evidences of quality of thought.

When, a couple of decades ago, corporate interests took control of education policy, that small window of teacher freedom slammed shut. Lou Gerstner, Edward Rust Jr., Bill Gates, Jeb Bush, Mike Bloomberg, and other wealthy and influential individuals worked through the Business Roundtable, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Education Trust, Democrats for Education Reform, the American Legislative Exchange Council and other organizations to pressure Congress and state legislatures to buy into their theory. Whatever ailed the institution, they were certain, could be cured by bringing market forces to bear — choice, vouchers, business partnerships, tax-write-off schemes, pay for performance, privatization via charter chains, and so on.

HB 7069 is the latest offspring of their efforts, clear evidence of the drive to privatize Florida’s public schools without the public debate such a radical action deserves. Its jumble of provisions simultaneously micromanage traditional schools and smooth the way for charters with public funds, assets, minimal oversight and protection from local control.

What’s underway is a massive demonstration of the Dunning-Kruger Effect — individuals who don’t know enough about educating to understand how little they know about it. Confucius said real knowledge is knowing the extent of one’s ignorance. In “As You Like It,” Shakespeare has Touchstone say, “The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.” Corporate reformers are convinced educating is easy, a mere matter — to use Bill Gates’ words — of “delivering information.”

In fact, nothing, *nothing humans try to do, is inherently more complicated than educating* — helping the young understand what’s going on in their heads to maximize their ability to think clearly and productively about themselves and the world around them. Nothing equals it in complexity — not rocket science, not brain surgery, not

anything. The market forces that Congress and state legislatures have imposed on America's public schools don't just fail to address educating's challenges; they're destructive, destroying the cultural coherence essential to school effectiveness.

The single most effective tool being used to undermine public confidence in public schooling is standardized, machine-scored testing. Because the pass-fail cut score is arbitrary, it can be raised or lowered to achieve a political end. Want to make public schools look bad? Raise the cut score enough to fail an alarming number of kids. Want to make a reform look successful? Simply lower the cut score.

Those with influence who advocate standardized testing, and those with authority who mandate or perpetuate it, should be required to satisfactorily answer a couple of questions and defend their answers.

**One: Given the life-altering consequences of high-stakes standardized testing, is it not morally reprehensible and ethically indefensible to continue the use of standardized tests incapable of evaluating the relative merit of thought processes essential to human functioning, problem solving, and civilized life?**

**Two: Should not the use of all commercially manufactured, machine-scored standardized tests of learners and teachers be discontinued until test manufacturers demonstrate an ability to evaluate the relative quality of the complex thought processes upon which societal survival depend?**

Public education has serious problems, a major one being its failure to rethink the dysfunctional core curriculum adopted in 1893. There will be no significant improvement in learner performance until problems being ignored by both the education establishment and reformers are satisfactorily addressed.

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