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## **Pols must grasp why teachers oppose testing**

By Marion Brady, guest columnist

Imagine the leadership of the Democratic and Republican parties concluding that failure to upgrade America's air traffic control system or to address surgical problems in America's hospital operating rooms had reached crisis stage. Imagine they called together the governors of the 50 states for a two-day summit to decide how best to proceed, but neither invited nor consulted airline pilots or surgeons about the issues.

In September 1989, 49 state governors met in Charlottesville, Virginia for the education summit that led to the present education "reform" campaign. No professional educators were invited.

The standards-and-accountability campaign they kicked off with No Child Left Behind hasn't just failed. It's been hijacked by ideologues and corporate interests convinced that the economist Milton Friedman was right when he argued in a 1955 paper that privatizing public schooling would harness market forces and improve school performance.

Myriad projects and experiments have demonstrated that Friedman was wrong. Profit-taking creates counterproductive institutional aims, a fact the general public seems to understand. Put to a vote, school vouchers, tax write-offs, and other devious schemes to publicly fund privately owned and managed schools almost always fail.

For school privatizers, public resistance is a problem. To counter that resistance, standardized tests have been put to work. Their arbitrary pass-fail cut scores are routinely set high enough to fail enough test-takers to "prove" that public schools (to quote U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos), are "dead ends" needing to be replaced by charters.

Here's the main academic reason why standardized tests are counterproductive, and why experienced educators oppose their use:

Schooling's bottom-line purpose isn't to master the contents of school subjects but to improve learner ability to think clearly and productively—to abstract, adduce, analyze, anticipate, articulate, and so on. Thinking clearly and productively exercises dozens of thought processes, only two of which standardized tests are able to measure—learner ability to recall secondhand information, and apply it to a problem chosen by the writer of a test item.

All other thought processes—the processes that make humanness and civilized life possible—are too complex for standardized tests to evaluate. Is an ability to predict the likely eventual consequences of a year-to-year drop in the water table supplying a

learner's hometown considered of value? What about an ability to see a relationship between the design of a particular neighborhood and citizen safety, or to imagine promising alternatives to the enforced, unnatural passivity of traditional schooling? Are those thought processes of value? If they are, using standardized tests that can't evaluate their relative quality must stop.

Conservatives and progressives, Democrats and Republicans, will surely agree that schooling's primary purpose is improving learner ability to think, from which it follows that policies that impose and perpetuate the use of commercially produced, machine-scored tests that can't measure complex, real-world thought are unacceptable.

Standardized testing isn't just a criminal waste of money, time and learner potential. It invites societal disaster. Thoughtful candidates who understand and explain this problem clearly—and who promise to try to end it—will attract votes. And, if those candidates discover that the testing stupidity is buried too deeply in bureaucracy or too protected by special interests to stop, they'll encourage and support opt-out movements to kill it by direct action—refusing to take the tests.

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