

Our Kids Face Unprecedented Crises. Standardized Tests Won't Prepare Them.



A nationwide opt-out-of-standardized-testing campaign can be our first step toward meaningful education reform.
JARED RODRIGUEZ / TRUTHOUT

[Marion Brady](#), [Truthout](#) October 11, 2019

A century ago, H.G. Wells summed up a great truth: “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.”

Clearly, catastrophe has a commanding lead. Our children and our children’s children face a future for which traditional education isn’t preparing them. The accelerating rate of change will significantly intensify existing problems of inter-societal conflict and add to their number in ways no one expects.

To prepare the young for that future, most of America’s middle and high schools offer the familiar math, science, language arts and social studies curriculum. That curriculum, assembled by the National Education Association’s “Committee of Ten” in three days in 1892, was a fix for a bureaucratic problem. High schools were teaching too many courses for college admissions officers to compare applicants’ grade transcripts. The committee’s recommendations were for the very small number of students intending to go to college. They were never meant to shape the school day for millions of kids for well over a century.

The Committee’s fix had an unintended consequence. Their recommended curriculum acquired the label “core,” greasing the slippery slope that was already taking schooling in a wrong direction — a single-minded emphasis on learners’ being able to remember, at least until tested, secondhand information delivered by textbook, teacher talk and technology.

The label “core” implied that the college prep curriculum was *essential* knowledge — knowledge so important that it needed to be standardized and required of all students whether or not they were college bound.

The notion that *any* curriculum, let alone one well over a century old, is equally appropriate for all learners no matter their differing natures, experiences, situations, abilities, interests, expectations, life chances or luck, is ridiculous. The core never was, isn't now, and never will be an acceptable organizer of general knowledge. It's a massive, continuously expanding hodgepodge of disconnected information fire-hosed at kids in unreasonable volumes at impossible-to-learn rates.

Disagree? Take a couple of minutes to skim what Buckminster Fuller, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Thomas Merton, Stephanie Pace Marshall, David Bohm, Stephen Jay Gould, Peter Senge and other [internationally known thinkers](#) have said about the curriculum in near-universal use worldwide.

The Academic Challenge

Ignorance, compounded by greed, has played an important role in bringing Planet Earth to crisis. To back away from that crisis far enough to survive, breakthrough ideas are needed. Such ideas are most likely to come from the well-schooled, but the knowledge-fragmenting core curriculum created by the NEA committee was, and is, counterproductive. When information is compartmentalized by subject, the relating process that creates individual and collective knowledge is blocked.

Notwithstanding federal and state insistence that schooling is to “prepare learners for college and careers,” its overarching purpose is societal survival. Survival requires citizens to recognize problems as they arise, find solutions and successfully adapt to changes beyond their control. This requires continuous creation of new knowledge and a citizenry with sufficient understanding of change and its probable and possible consequences to generate, accept and apply new knowledge.

Generating new knowledge requires thought — the ability to infer, hypothesize, predict, generalize, correlate, synthesize, imagine, value, relate, abstract, estimate, intuit, empathize, extrapolate and so on — processes not being taught because standardized tests are shaping education policy, and *standardized tests can't quantify quality and produce meaningful scores.*

It boggles the mind. Humankind faces problems of unprecedented complexity created by environmental, demographic, technological, economic, political and social change, and America is betting its future on a one-size-fits-all 19th-century curriculum locked in place with subject-matter standards monitored by tests that can't evaluate the thought processes that make humanness, routine human functioning and civilized life possible; and blaming poor school performance on teachers' “low expectations,” parents' lack of school choice and kids' lack of grit.

Wrong diagnoses of the causes of poor academic performance don't just invite societal suicide, they assure it.

An Alternative to the Core as a Basic Organizer of Knowledge

Fifty-three years ago, the *Phi Delta Kappan* published the first of many articles of mine about a systems-theory-based alternative to the core as the basic organizer of information and knowledge. Officials at Prentice Hall, Inc., read the article and were sufficiently convinced of its merit to undertake several years of nationwide classroom testing of middle-school level instructional materials based on my suggested alternative.

Their enthusiasm increased as the testing proceeded, but a reactionary “back-to-basics” fad in the 1970s prompted Prentice-Hall’s marketing department to conclude that the traditional curriculum was too deeply embedded in public expectations and multi-layered education bureaucracies to dislodge. The project was discontinued.

Thirty years ago, in a book titled, *What’s Worth Teaching?* published by the State University of New York Press as part of their Philosophy of Education Series, I tried again to call attention to the core curriculum’s failure to help learners organize general knowledge simply, comprehensively, logically and holistically. I explained in detail how the core subjects and all future fields of study are working parts of a single, easily understood, systemically integrated, culture-based structure of meaning and knowledge. I backed up the book with an illustrative course of study for adolescents, and arranged year-long pilot projects with middle school principals who had helped with the earlier Prentice-Hall project.

Too late. The “standards and accountability” campaign engineered by corporate interests and enabled by federal and state politicians ended the effort. Calls and letters of apology explained that scores on standardized tests keyed to the content of the core curriculum would now determine teacher and administrator reputations and professional futures. The pilot programs were cancelled.

Six years ago, appalled by efforts of the rich and famous to double down on the core curriculum, standardized testing and other superficial school reform strategies, I requested and got from Prentice-Hall the copyrights to the instructional materials my brother Howard and I had written. Several thousand dollars went to another publisher to buy back the rights to my most recent book, *What’s Worth Learning?*, and our retirements gave my brother and me time to edit our earlier work and put it online, free for the downloading, no strings attached.

Rethinking General-Knowledge Curricula

Traditional schooling’s dominant theory of learning — that if enough information is sprayed at kids some of it is bound to stick — is unacceptably simplistic. Every normal human infant is born with a brain equipped to (1) sense information, (2) to create meaning by selecting from that “noise” information related to a particular aim, (3) integrate that meaning with her or his “master” mental organizer, (4) hypothesize

possible systemic relationships between aspects of reality to create new knowledge, and (5) apply knowledge in useful and imaginative ways.

Long before school age has been reached, long before adults begin trying to educate them, kids are using those processes in ways far too sophisticated for standardized tests to evaluate, and learning at rates that traditional instruction will never equal.

Teachers can't teach the young to think, but they can use traditional core curriculum content in non-traditional ways to create thought-demanding sequences of lessons that build on the information organizers the young begin using at birth, lifting them into consciousness, elaborating and refining them to construct the mental models of reality that will guide their thoughts and actions for the rest of their lives.

Replacing the knowledge-fragmenting, intellectually unmanageable core curriculum with a single course of study that connects and integrates all knowledge not only lifts learner performance to levels not now possible; but also, due to the course's efficiency, frees up hours a day to do something of enormous importance that traditional schooling has never done well — identify, develop and exploit individual learner potential.

It's late in the race and H.G. Wells's warning hasn't yet come even close to making the country's highest priority the improvement of the quality of Americans' thought. Powerful interests continue to beat the near-dead "standards and accountability" horse with market-based whips and clubs — choice, vouchers, virtual schooling, tax write-offs, charters and other devious schemes designed to privatize public schooling without the broad public dialogue such a radical change deserves. The situation calls for action, but educators have no levers of power and aren't organized to act.

Clearing a Path to Curricular Improvement

Given the money and power driving the privatizing juggernaut, there's only one surefire way to stop it — a nationwide opt-out-of-standardized-testing campaign.

Standardized tests can't evaluate the kind of thinking that could save our skins; they don't tell teachers anything they don't already know; they perpetuate a simplistic conception of what it means to "educate"; they waste teacher and learner time that can be put to far better use.

If those problems aren't enough to end the high-stakes testing scam, consider that behind the walls of secrecy erected to protect standardized tests from examination and attack, a very important fact is hiding. Test publisher control of pass-fail cut scores allows failure rates to be bumped up or down to levels just short of enough to arouse suspicion about test validity.

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Why might test publishers manipulate failure rates? To fatten their bottom lines for retesting and to sell test-prep programs and materials.

An Essential First Step Toward Meaningful Reform

Given the money and power driving the privatizing juggernaut, there's only one surefire way to stop it — a nationwide [opt-out-of-standardized-testing campaign](#). If caring parents, grandparents and thoughtful citizens will do the responsible thing and get behind the opt-out movement, the wrench thrown into institutional gears should at the very least shake loose enough educator autonomy to allow a rethinking of the 1892 curriculum.

Note: In the spirit of open source, [marionbrady.com](#) offers free instructional materials that use content from civics, American history, world history, world cultures and personal experience to engage learners in a full range of thought processes. Written for middle school and older learners, the lessons and supportive materials are entirely free of cost or other obligation when downloaded by teachers for use with their own students. Notwithstanding the lack of advertising, and instructional materials requiring thought processes too complex to be evaluated by standardized tests, they download at a rate never dropping below 5,000 a month.

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