

# Dogs - an unusual guide to school reform



Driving the country roads of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, I have sometimes been lucky enough to be blocked by sheep being moved from one pasture to another. I say 'lucky' because it allows me to watch an impressive performance by a dog -- usually a Border Collie. What a show! A single, mid-sized dog herding two or three hundred sheep, keeping them moving in the right direction, rounding up strays, knowing how to intimidate but not cause panic, funneling them all through a gate, and obviously enjoying the challenge.

Why a Border Collie? Why not an Akita or Xoloitzcuintli or another of about 400 breeds listed on the Internet? Because, among the people for whom herding sheep is serious business, there is general agreement that Border Collies are better at doing what needs to be done than any other dog. They have 'the knack.' That knack is so important that those who care most about Border Collies even oppose their being entered in dog shows. That, they say, would lead to the Border Collie being bred to look good, and looking good isn't the point. Brains, innate ability, performance -- that's the point.

Other breeds are no less impressive in other ways. If you're lost in a snowstorm in the Alps, you don't need a Border Collie. You need a big, strong dog with a really good nose, lots of fur, wide feet that don't sink too deeply into snow, and an

unerring sense of direction for returning with help. You need a Saint Bernard. If varmints are sneaking into your hen house, killing your chickens, and escaping down holes in a nearby field, you don't need a Border Collie or a Saint Bernard, you need a Fox Terrier.

It isn't that many different breeds can't be taught to herd, lead high-altitude rescue efforts, or kill foxes. They can. It's just that teaching all dogs to do things which one particular breed can do better than any other doesn't make much sense.

We accept the reasonableness of that argument for dogs. We reject it for kids.

The non-educators now running the education show say American kids are lagging ever further behind in science and mathematics, and that the consequences of that for America's economic well-being could be catastrophic. So, what is this rich, advantaged country of ours doing to try to beat out the competition?

Mainly, we put in place the No Child Left Behind program, now replaced by Race to the Top and the Common Core State Standards Initiative. If that fact makes you optimistic about the future of education in America, think again about dogs. There are all kinds of things they can do besides herd, rescue, and engage foxes. They can sniff luggage for bombs. Chase felons. Stand guard duty. Retrieve downed game birds. Guide the blind. Detect certain diseases. Locate earthquake survivors. Entertain audiences. Play nice with little kids. Go for help if Little Nell falls down a well.

So, with No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top as models, let's set performance standards for these and all other canine capabilities and train all dogs to meet them. All 400 breeds. All skills. Leave No Dog Behind!

Two-hundred-pound Mastiffs may have

a little trouble with the chase-the-fox-down-the-hole standard, and Chihuahuas will probably have difficulty with the tackle-the-felon-and-pin-him-to-the-ground standard. But, hey, no excuses! Standards are standards! Leave No Dog Behind.

Think there's something wrong with a same-standards-and-tests-for-everybody approach to educating? Think a mathematics whiz shouldn't be held back just because he can't write a good five-paragraph essay? Think a gifted writer shouldn't be refused a diploma because she can't solve a quadratic equation? Think a promising trumpet player shouldn't be kept out of the school orchestra or pushed out on the street because he can't remember the date of the Boxer Rebellion?

If you think there's something fundamentally, dangerously wrong with an educational reform effort that's actually designed to standardise, designed to ignore human variation, designed to penalise individual differences, designed to produce a generation of clones, send this article to your friends. If you think it's stupid to require every kid to read the same books, think the same thoughts, parrot the same answers, make several photocopies. Then in the margin at the top of each, write, in longhand, something like, "Please explain why the standards and accountability fad isn't a criminal waste of brains," or "Why are you trashing America's hope for the future?" or just, "Does this make sense?"

Send the copies to your senators and representatives before they sell their vote to the publishing and testing corporations intent on getting an ever-bigger slice of that half-trillion dollars a year America spends on educating.



MARION BRADY

Brady began his career in education in 1952, teaching in a semi-rural high school in northeastern Ohio. Since then he has taught at every level from 6th grade through to university, been a county-level school administrator, publisher consultant, teacher educator, textbook author, contributor to professional journals, author of professional books, writer of instructional materials, visitor to schools across America and abroad, and long-time education columnist.

## Footnote

US Education Secretary Arne Duncan on September 2 announced the recipients of millions of dollars in federal grants to provide new state assessment systems to test students' 21st-century skills. The announcement comes as part of the recent push from the federal Education Department for higher-performing schools and common standards.

Two large state coalitions won this 'Race to the Top' competition to create a series of new national academic tests to replace the current patchwork system: the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) from Washington state and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) from Florida.

SBAC, which submitted an application on behalf of a group of 31 states, received \$160 million. It will focus on formative assessments and the use of technology for testing to measure student growth over time through computer adaptive testing. It will continue to use one test at the end of the year for accountability purposes but will create a series of interim tests to inform students, parents, and teachers about whether students are on track.

PARCC, which submitted an application on behalf of a group of 26 states, received \$170 million. It will focus on testing students' critical thinking skills by examining their speaking skills, reading analysis and essay skills, digital media skills, and project-building skills. It also will replace the one end-of-year, high-stakes accountability test with a series of assessments throughout the year that will be averaged into one score for accountability purposes, reducing the weight given to a single test administered on a single day - and providing valuable information to students and teachers throughout the year.

## A message from Sarah Farquhar on early childhood

For more than 25 years I've been involved in early childcare and education as a teacher, as a lecturer, as a researcher, and through a previous childforum website that focused on the interests of early childhood researchers. I started the NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Network in 1988 and we had a website for researchers and student researchers. That was fantastic.

But what I've discovered as someone from a teaching and research background, as a busy mother of 5 children, and as someone who has just recently spent a year at the Early Childhood Council dealing with many varied issues for centre owners and managers that we didn't really have the capacity to help sufficiently with, is that people want and need something very different to what is available:

Something that meets their needs for quick and relevant information in easy to understand language. A non-political organisation that is inclusive of people working in a range of early childhood settings and in different roles. To receive support and belong to an organisation that doesn't cost a lot in membership fees and that they can truly be a part of.

Make time to check the new website out now. Go to [www.childforum.com](http://www.childforum.com)

As you'll see this new ChildForum is a unique concept, bringing fresh thinking to early childcare and education in an innovative way. In addition to the research network, members can now get access to two new networks: a network for teachers and parents, and a network for service managers and administrators.

ChildForum is the place now where families, teachers, directors, early childhood leaders, owners, administrators, committee and board members and decision-makers can all go to pick up information and share information as members. You may have already received, or seen, the first monthly newsletter published by the brand new ChildForum. If you haven't, you'll

find this online at: [www.childforum.com](http://www.childforum.com)

In the first newsletter are articles on: Whether the Free Kindergarten of Old is (Almost) Dead and Buried Who are the Big Providers of Early Childcare and Education? There is a listing of new early childhood articles and information online and links to feature articles on selected early childhood services. There are also Information Alerts such as: The Power of the Media to Influence Education Policy Children Not Enrolled in a Formal Early Childcare & Edn Service GST increase - Are You Ready? Sick Leave Policy Change - Employee and Employer Concerns Proposal for Raised Academic Standards for Entry into Teacher Training

As a member of ChildForum you can: Discover and share information on early childcare and education, Find informed comment and analysis by experts, Be challenged to think of different early childcare options and choices, Have your say in the comments, Follow what others say, Get access to ChildForum resources and guides as they are published, Source research evidence,

The new childforum will be around for many, many, many years. Jump on board now and be part of something good, something strong, something wise, caring and helpful for all.

I trust you will visit [www.childforum.com](http://www.childforum.com). And when you do you will see that ChildForum offers a lot. We are working extremely hard to be able to make more and more information and resources available for members as quickly as we can.



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