

Discussion

WHAT IS THE APPROPRIATE ROLE FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS?

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The Boston Plan for Excellence, a private, nonprofit organization, is a local education fund whose mission is to improve instruction and student performance in the Boston Public Schools. As such, we often work with and learn from education reform taking place in the nation's largest cities so as to bring lessons to Boston from other districts. Our knowledge base is derived primarily from studying what is happening to the students in the 35 largest cities. These students comprise 15 percent of the country's students. Generally, these students are poor, and they often begin school without preschool or other advantages enjoyed by middle-class children. A majority of them are children of color. A few statistics from our experiences are relevant:

- In a study of three Boston kindergarten classes that tested students' skills upon entering, Voices of Love and Freedom found that 60 percent of students knew fewer than 10 capital letters, 70 percent knew fewer than 10 lower-case letters, and 90 percent could make fewer than 10 letter-sound correlations.
- Nationwide, only 68 percent of all students complete high school in four years; in the 35 largest cities, fewer than 50 percent do so.
- Nationwide, half of ninth graders entering high school read at a sixth grade level.

RESPONSE TO BISHOP

Our experience in Boston coincides with Bishop's conclusions. Our on-site observations in 50 Boston and other schools is that curriculum-

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based exit examinations do what he suggests. Tests that are aligned with and carefully measure high standards do affect a school's priorities, teachers' decisions, and students' decisions; they also influence the redirection of resources within schools to core subjects.

If we are to meet our civic and moral responsibilities as a country, however, setting standards, aligning assessments to measure whether students are learning them, and creating an aligned accountability system are only the foundation. Without the creation of a coherent system of improving instruction in classrooms—which will involve extensive professional development for principals and teachers and a deliberate reorganization of schools—urban students will not meet standards.

EXAMINATION OF UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

Standards-based reform rests on certain assumptions that do not hold in the 35 largest cities. These assumptions include the following:

1. The system described will give students and teachers information about what students are not learning in a timely, usable way;
2. Students will be motivated to invest more in their learning because they face consequences and because they realize how much they need to know;
3. We have the right type of classroom instruction for these students;
4. There is an adult accountability system that creates the right information, sanctions, and incentives that lead to instructional improvement;
5. There are other professionals who are better equipped, prepared, and willing to take the places of those let go because they do not succeed with students; and finally,
6. Schools are coherently organized, at scale, to respond to the standards-based foundation laid out by Bishop.

Such an accountability system rests on the idea that educators already possess all the knowledge and skills they need to bring about substantial improvements in instruction that will lead to greater learning for urban students. Further, it assumes that teachers and principals (a) need more political and civic pressure to do what is effective; and (b) are not rewarded enough by the present system to be motivated to do what they know they should.

Let's look more closely at each of these assumptions.

Assumption 1. The present system gives good information that helps teachers know the extent and depth of student learning in a timely way. Virtually no large city district has a data system that puts into the hands of teachers and principals fine-grained, user-friendly information about individual students that teachers can use on an

ongoing basis. For the most part, large-scale testing directed by the state takes place once a year, and considerable time passes before individual student results are reported. Students have usually moved on to a different grade and teacher, and sometimes to a different school. Few districts have a “formative” system to supplement these summative tests, and even if they do, management of these data is a challenge at the school level. Further, principals and teachers have not been trained in data analysis, so what might be useful lies unused.

Assumption 2. Students will be motivated to invest more time and energy because they face consequences, and because they are aware of how much they need to learn. Most teachers can teach the students easiest to teach (those who come into their classes with the store of basic knowledge about literacy and numeracy that readies them to learn). These students also come with the understanding that leads them to value what the teachers tell them is important, or at least they are compliant enough to suspend their disbelief.

Many of those far behind, however, have had previous academic experiences that have led them to believe school has little value for them. They may know abstractly that it has value but are not convinced that they will benefit from it because they never have. Many do not read well enough to learn or to enjoy reading, for instance. They know that they face consequences, and are disappointed in themselves, but have no sense of how they might turn the situation around.

Assumption 3. We have the right type of instruction for these students. Most teachers have not been prepared to teach students with differing levels of preparedness and knowledge, nor do they work in schools organized to make differentiated instruction reasonably possible. They do not know how to assess accurately where each student is, design a course of study for each depending on need, and then manage all these different levels. Most do not know how to teach in a sophisticated, highly intellectual way to build students’ knowledge and skills, which is what a standards-based reform system requires.

There is a further problem with the instruction urban students receive. The crucial relationship in teaching is the one between the teacher and students, and their mutual engagement in the content. In most urban classrooms, however, teachers have an uneasy sense of the unknown and unknowable lives of their students and fear losing control. This leads teachers to minimize interactions with students and to make the exploration of content, ideas, and differences rare, even though these are essential to the higher learning demanded by standards. There is little “talk” or discourse in average urban classrooms. All of this results in a lacking sense of efficacy on either teachers’ or students’ parts, and little overall engagement.

Finally, the organization and use of resources and time in most schools is not conducive to change or improvement. Adults have little time to learn or to interact with each other, nor a means to reorganize themselves.

Assumption 4. Adults are held accountable for the learning of students. In virtually all states and urban districts, the unit of analysis for accountability is the district, the school, or the student. It is not the teacher. Principals are evaluated, and are sometimes held accountable and let go if there are available replacements. But because replacements are not often available, districts stick with mediocre principals. Furthermore, the current teacher evaluation system rarely includes student performance results, teacher knowledge of the material on the state's standards, or the practice of effective pedagogy. When teachers are evaluated, the evaluation seldom includes an analysis of the effectiveness of their instructional practices in a deep way that leads to improvements in their classrooms. Many teachers report being visited by their principal rarely.

Intensive teacher evaluations are usually centered on the worst teachers, not the average ones, and rarely do evaluations highlight and elevate the superb practice of the best, who are obtaining wonderful performance with their students. Many critics blame unions for protecting teachers, but teacher evaluation problems go well beyond teachers' union issues. Although few districts have the contractual relationships right yet, there could be steps taken within existing contracts that would begin including student performance as part of evaluations. This would lead to a more robust adult accountability system.

Assumption 5. There is a supply of well-prepared and interested individuals ready and willing to step into urban classrooms, were we ready to terminate the mediocre ones. This is demonstrably untrue, as a look at California and cities elsewhere makes clear. Reports by the Education Trust, the National Commission on Teaching for America's Future, and others have documented the supply problem well. Beyond the numbers, even when states are tightening up qualifications, they tend to be assessing only low-level skills of future teachers. Teacher preparation institutions receive accreditation routinely without making any substantive changes in how teachers are prepared and trained.

Assumption 6. Schools and systems are coherent, and we have, at scale, examples of how to organize time, money, people, and support to get instructional improvement. We do not have the examples of high-performing districts that we need. The knowledge base about large-scale improvement is shallow. The Annenberg Institute for the Redesign of Urban School Districts has created a task force to find good models to

inform and improve support for schools so that instruction improves, but their work is incomplete. To date, they have found some high spots, but overall, the research in this field is weak.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: IS THE SITUATION HOPELESS? NOT NECESSARILY

The situation can be changed if we collectively take several important steps.

Step 1: Recognize and accept that upping the stakes and consequences for schools and students, as the new federal legislation No Child Left Behind does, will not by itself cause instructional improvement, school coherence, or improved student performance.

Step 2: Conduct much more research on instructional improvement and then highlight the visible models of how it takes place. Many cities, like Boston, have parts of the answer, but San Diego, several New York community districts, Cincinnati, Long Beach, Houston, Denver, and many others have other pieces to the puzzle.

Step 3: Start making greater investments in the right things: improving teacher and principal knowledge about content, pedagogy, and the relationship between them. School staff cannot do what they do not know how to do at a high level: teach urban students to master challenging content no matter where they begin and how far behind they are.

Step 4: Get the data systems right so that they yield useful and fine-grained information for students, parents, and teachers. Technology has a greatly underdeveloped role in helping to solve this problem, but the knowledge and skill of teachers and principals to reflect on and use data about students' performance also must be addressed.

Step 5: States and the media should stop misusing assessments so we can build public understanding of the true problem and the solutions. Tests are important and useful, but not a good instrument to pinpoint the problem to be solved.