

Educational Reform in America: *The Problem With The Common Core State Standards*

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As a young man I was encouraged by my father—an inspirational and masterful educator—a desire to share my passion and enthusiasm for learning with others. As my role model he further inspired me to follow in his footsteps as a public school educator. I have been a dedicated and impassioned educator for thirty-eight years. However, for the first time in my career I am disheartened with the current reform efforts that have been foisted upon public schools by education outsiders—businessmen and politicians. As a classroom teacher, I have been an educational innovator for over three decades in bringing about real and effective change in enhancing my teaching and learning. Therefore, change is no stranger to me. Today’s global society leaves the American student at a disadvantage that can only be remedied by a significant change in the way we structure and approach teaching and learning. Nonetheless, I believe the recent nationally inspired education reform efforts from *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* to the most recent iteration of them—the *Common Core State Standards*—are leading American schools down the wrong path. Collectively these reform efforts have been *regressive, repressive and oppressive*, as well as *dismissive* of educators, who as highly educated professionals, are trained to know how best to develop young minds. The tragic irony of these reform efforts is that they are based on a 19th century mindset that is intended to prepare students for success in the 21st century! However, to paraphrase Einstein “*We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them*”. The current reform efforts are designed to *systematize, standardize and align* the learning process using a “factory” model of “*one size fits all*”.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium’s (SBAC) assessment of the Common Core State Standards is flawed in many ways.

1. *First of all*, it assumes that the learning process can be distilled to a few objective and quantitative measures. Moreover, these measures exclude those due to socioeconomic inequities, which cannot be remedied from within the educational system. Nonetheless, what matters most to fostering the learning process are intangibles that are not easily quantified. Einstein stated it more eloquently as “*Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.*”
2. *Secondly*, using the CCSS to assess student learning is a misguided approach that is not supported by any empirical studies that validate their use as substantive to measuring the skill and knowledge base proficiency requisite to be deemed “educated”. Moreover, the test is designed so that only 35-40% of students can pass it!
3. *Thirdly*, mandating the use of CCSS is insidiously undermining the development of *imagination, creativity and innovation* that made this nation a leading world power.
4. *Lastly*, linking student performance on the SBAC assessment to evaluating teachers is not only educationally unsound, but counterproductive to improving education in the first place. The

major flaw inherent to this reform initiative is that it assumes that excellence in teaching and learning can be objectively measured. If we, as a society are going to survive, we need to embrace the emerging learning paradigm that views the mind, learning and thinking in a more holistic and integrated framework. *What is needed, now more than ever, is a paradigm shift in what this country's leaders recognize as the skill-set of thinking and learning processes requisite for success in the 21st century.*

In the July 10, 2010 Newsweek article: "*The Creativity Crisis*," the point is made that while America is moving more towards high stake testing, and away from the teaching of creativity and problem solving, the rest of the world is moving in the other direction, away from testing and increasing their emphasis on creativity and "*whole-brain*" real world skills. We need to promote a systemic change requisite to restore American educational praxis to the vanguard that other nations aspired to for much of the last century. The modern world is a very different place than the one in which previous generations of students were prepared to enter following their secondary or post-secondary educational schooling. With the advent of computers, podcasts, webinars and other technologies, today's learners have access to the World Wide Web, social media, constant communication and global interaction, and through this, a myriad number of libraries, museums and informational sources of information across the globe.

Today's learners have instant access to virtually millions of other learners throughout the world. Additionally, today's learners are expected to be adept in accessing these resources and working collaboratively with others electronically. In his best selling book, *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman attributes the Internet as one of many technologies that has changed the way we communicate, learn and do business. Thus today's classroom is not exclusively confined to one inside a school or even a classroom. Rather virtual classrooms exist in the form of online cohorts, chat rooms etc. Furthermore, as Daniel Pink (Pink, 2005) discusses in his acclaimed book *A Whole New Mind*, the skills needed to survive in the 21st century workplace are no longer being developed in our classrooms. He suggests that the future depends on fostering a new set of creative and empathic "right-brain" skills to augment the "left-brain" dominant ones advocated and emphasized in the past two centuries. Howard Gardner offers similar notions in his book *5 Minds or the Future* (Gardner, 2008).

Instead of relying on high stakes testing to help us assess and develop ways to improve learning in American classrooms, it is my contention that policy makers need to include professional educators in the dialogue. Government officials and corporate leaders may have the best of intentions in attempting to reform American education. *However, authentic educational reform can only arise from professional educators whose honed skill-base, expertise, dedication and passion provides them with the ability to fully understand and respond to the needs and challenges of effectively educating children for success in the 21st century.*

Teaching is an art that involves responding *authentically* to the needs of children, curriculum and the culture without rigidly adhering to a specific methodology. Characteristics such as: *authenticity, empathy, mindfulness, and sensitivity* to each unfolding moment in a child's learning process, are qualities one might find in educators operating within what David Sobel and his colleagues at Antioch New England Graduate School calls "*authentic curriculum*". Teaching from this perspective means being mindful to the myriad learning opportunities that

typically occur during the day and employing them to foster students' recognition and appreciation of learning as real-life and ubiquitous phenomena rather than a contrived process, whose content is driven by the intentional and manipulative designs of the teacher, *or worse yet- the learning assumptions of high stakes standardized test designers*. Students learning in authentic contexts begin to view nature as alive with potential opportunities to learn and grow and construct meaning. Taking time to momentarily follow the students', rather than teacher's, interests also promotes a stronger sense of self-worth and confidence in students' ability to recognize and seize a learning opportunity and participate in the creation of their own personal meaning. Ken Robinson, internationally recognized expert on the nature of creativity and outspoken critic of the current educational reform efforts, succinctly summarizes this as follows: *"The task of education is not to teach subjects: it is to teach students. No school is better than its teachers"*(Robinson, 2011,p. 267).

Meaningful learning and thinking consists of integrating "hands-on" and "minds-on" real-life experiences that challenge learners' preconceived assumptions and level of conceptual understanding. It is here that the 21st century educator can capitalize on the learners' state of cognitive dissonance (confusion) to make a real difference in motivating them to transform misconceptions into valid conceptions. The 21st century educator embraces the notion that any individual can learn a given subject as long as he/she is provided with the opportunity to learn in a conducive (read as: loving and supportive) environment with experienced mentors willing in spirit to identify what they currently know and scaffold their conceptual development to a higher level of understanding. Meaningful learning and thinking processes foster the development of a unique and personalized relationship between the learner and the ideas and information under consideration.

In conclusion, the progressive educator, with a vested interest in educational reform that includes enhancing the way children are prepared for life in the 21st century, needs to integrate pedagogical strategies and practices into their classroom that foster learners in adopting more meaningful approaches to learning and thinking, rather than a scripted, linear and "conveyor belt" approach designed to produce more "widgets". Our "products" are impressionable children and young adults who will be the workforce, as well as the captains of industry, and statesmen of the future. We have a moral, ethical and civic responsibility to do now what is in their best interests. *In summary I offer this letter to our political leaders to consider my plea to work with, not against, educators to co-create a renewed vision of our mission—one that fosters the growth and development of authentic learners.*

References

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