



Why Education “Standards” Don’t Work

Jesse H. Rhodes’ new book, *An Education in Politics: The Origin and Evolution of No Child Left Behind*, provides us with much detailed information on how our great business leaders got involved in the education reform movement but failed in the end to improve our public schools. Unfortunately, Mr. Rhodes, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), wears the usual liberal blinders, and thus gives us a skewed history which, nevertheless, is useful to anyone interested in why even high-powered business CEOs haven’t been unable to improve our public schools.



For years, business leaders had been complaining about potential employees unable to write or think mathematically. They lacked the skills needed by our high-tech economy, and something had to be done about it. Finally, the Business Roundtable, the National Alliance of Business, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce decided to act. They said:

We need a clear national strategy for addressing education reform ... to ensure that every student leaves compulsory school with a demonstrated ability to read, write, compute, and perform at world-class levels in general school subjects as well as to learn, think, work effectively alone and in groups and solve problems.

In April 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education had produced its famous *Nation at Risk* report, which said that low student achievement was pervasive and threatening the nation’s economic and social well-being.

It was President Reagan’s secretary of education, T. H. Bell, who created the Commission in August 1981, directing it to examine the quality of education in the United States and to make a report within 18 months of its first meeting. The final report contained some practical recommendations for educational improvement, but it also contained some very harsh criticism of American educators. It said:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.... [T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur — others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves... We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.



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But it wasn't until 1989 that President George H. W. Bush established a President's Education Policy Advisory Committee (PEPAC) to bring together "leaders from business and labor, educators at every level, state and local government officials and the media in a partnership to improve our schools."

Paul O'Neill, CEO of the Aluminum Company of America assumed chairmanship of the Committee. Other participants included David Kerns of Xerox and John Akers of IBM. Their most important recommendation was the adoption of achievement-setting standards, tests to see if students were meeting those standards, and accountability of teachers. There was also talk of a longer school day and a longer school year.

In other words, their plan for improvement simply consisted of standards, tests, and accountability. What is a standard? It says that a sixth-grade student should be able to read at a sixth-grade level, whatever that is. The test is supposed to indicate whether or not the student is meeting that standard, and if the entire class is not meeting that standard, then the teacher is held accountable for the students' failure.

But the plan didn't work for one reason. While these intelligent CEOs had thought they had found a way of reforming American education, they were totally unaware that left-wing, progressive educators were creating their own "reforms" designed to make things worse.

Indeed, the business CEOs may have thought they had the support of the educators because of the strong cooperation they got from such neoconservative educators as Bill Bennett, Diane Ravich, and Chester Finn. These individuals may have played an important role in the Reagan administration, but they had no power to stop the left-wing educators from implementing such destructive programs as Whole Language, creative spelling, and the New Math. Thus, student achievement declined even further.

In case you're unfamiliar with Whole Language, this is how the program is described by three Whole Language professors in a book published in 1991, *Whole Language: What's the Difference?* They wrote:

Whole language represents a major shift in thinking about the reading process. Rather than viewing reading as "getting the words," whole language educators view reading as essentially a process of creating meanings. (See the development of this view in the writings of Kenneth Goodman [Gollasch 1982] and Frank Smith [1971, 1986].) Meaning is created through a transaction with whole, meaningful texts (i.e., texts of any length that were written with the intent to communicate meaning). It is a transaction, not an extraction of the meaning from the print, in the sense that the reader-created meanings are a fusion of what the reader brings and what the text offers.... In a transactional model, words do not have static meanings. Rather, they have meaning potentials and the capacity to communicate multiple meanings.

What is your standard for a student who has been taught to read by the whole language philosophy? Is there a standard for institutionalized educational insanity? Meanwhile, student achievement continued to decline, particularly in districts where whole language was the method used to teach reading.

In 1986 the test scores of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suffered a sharp decline among 9- and 17-year-olds. In 1963, the SAT verbal score was 478; the math score was 502. In 1986, the verbal score was 431, and the math score was 475. In 1994, the SAT verbal score was 423; the math score was 479. The plummeting verbal score was no doubt due to whole language instruction in the schools. And so standards, testing, and accountability were meaningless in this kind of academic environment.



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In Boston, the Athens of America, students who took the SAT in the spring of 1994 scored 339 on the verbal test, 84 points below the national average of 423. Its math score was 402, 77 points below the national average of 479. Standards, testing, and accountability had become empty words.

Back in 1988, when the American Newspaper Publishers Association and the International Reading Association held a seminar in Washington on the growing problem of American illiteracy, I predicted that this latest campaign against illiteracy would fail. Anyone who knew anything about the International Reading Association knew that this organization of professional teachers of reading and writers of reading textbooks was engaged in blatant educational malpractice and would continue to promote the whole-word teaching method. But for some reason, the intelligent members of the American Newspaper Publishers Association were completely oblivious to this fact.

Arthur O. Sulzberger, publisher of the *New York Times* and chairman of the publishers association, opened the Washington symposium by praising the growing number of organizations dedicated to “turning the tide in the national effort to improve literacy.” He said:

Today up to 60 million Americans — one third of the adult population — cannot read their local newspaper. As we edge closer to the 21st century, life is becoming more complex and will become more difficult for adults who cannot read.

Mr. Sulzberger went on to cite data from the Hudson Institute, estimating that by the year 2000 the percentage of new jobs falling into “low skill” categories would drop 27 percent from the 1988 level of 40 percent. “Yet, even as we are aware of the problem, adult illiteracy continues to grow,” he said.

What was the result of the symposium? A Working Group on Adult Literacy was created to focus attention on the extent to which millions of Americans lacked basic reading and writing skills and to develop a consensus on how to fight the problem.

In its proposal for a national policy, the Working Group called for a doubling of Federal appropriations from \$135 million to \$270 million to fight illiteracy. Throwing money at a problem is Washington’s favorite way of dealing with the problem. The group also urged that the next president make the literacy problem a theme of his State of the Union address and “explain the clear linkages between literacy and other issues, such as welfare dependency, parenting skills, crime, international competitiveness, productivity and job creation.”

The Working Group also proposed the creation of a National Institute for Adult Literacy modeled after the National Science Foundation, eligible to receive both public and private money. It would conduct applied research on effective ways to fight illiteracy, make the flow of information about the subject easier and provide training for state, local, and private organizations.

And who do you think would be advising the National Institute for Adult Literacy? The very members of the reading establishment responsible for the illiteracy problem to begin with. The Working Group urged an initial Federal appropriation of \$12 million. It could operate at a level of about \$20 million a year. That amount of money could provide a nice number of comfortable jobs for bureaucrats concerned about illiteracy. And what’s it doing today? According the its web site:

The National Institute for Literacy is a federally-funded organization that is committed to literacy programs, research on literacy rates, and learning techniques. The Institute provides programs that benefit all people, from early childhood to adults. The literacy center has programs available for all reading levels, and for adults who are learning English as a second language.



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Apparently, since its inception in 1988, the Institute has not solved the illiteracy problem. That was to be expected. It could, of course, solve America's reading quite easily by having children in our primary schools taught to read with Noah Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller*, the little book that made early America the most literate nation on earth. Or they could use my own book, *Alpha-Phonics* to do the job. But that would be too simple in our complicated world.

And so, with all our standards, tests, and accountability, and with No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, our literacy continues to decline. Only parents who are informed enough to teach their children to read at home can save their children from school-induced illiteracy. There are Christian schools doing a fine job. Catholic parochial schools used to do a good job, but ever since they got rid of the nuns, they've generally become more humanistic than Catholic. Whatever the case, America will muddle through and suffer the consequences.



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