

## The Harm of Teaching by the Numbers

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In a Thursday debate at Cato Institute on the Common Core Standards Initiative, a fundamental question seemed to drive the discussion: How should we measure students' educational proficiency—at the state or national level? Few (if any) seemed to question the benefits and harms of proficiency measurement itself.

Those espousing the Common Core, Thomas B. Fordham Institute President Chester Finn and Executive Vice President Michael Petrilli, said the Common Core would not dictate content taught in a classroom. It provides curricular suggestions, but primarily focuses on setting higher skills-testing standards. One audience commentator likened it to a bike-riding test: the standards would insure students are properly riding their bikes, but would not tell teachers *how* or *what* teaching methodologies to implement in teaching them to ride bikes. If parents and teachers want a better measuring mechanism with which to determine their students' educational progress, then Common Core could be the perfect tool. It will (supposedly) measure student skills, and tender the quantifiable numbers associated with those skillsets.

The Common Core opposition, represented by Cato's Center for Educational Freedom Associate Director Neal McCluskey and Preserve Innocence Project Executive Director Emmett McGroarty, advocated long and hard for a federalism-minded education system. They said that an educational curriculum should be accountable to parents—and the nationalized nature of Common Core would hamper parent's ability to make changes or suggestions. As to determining the skillsets and progress of students, they argued competitive and differentiated state standards would be the best methodology to truly measure how students are doing. Rather than all states being accountable to one inflexible standard, a wide swath of competing standards would foster true growth. Texas would compare its standards with Massachusetts, for instance, and see how it measures up. States who fall short would mimic those who are excelling.

Talk of competing states ensuring student growth, the mention by Finn of completely machine-graded national tests, the emphasis on skills development rather than actual content: it makes one wonder how beneficial a quantifiable education actually is to *students themselves*. Of course, when it comes time to apply to colleges and universities, an ACT or SAT score comes in handy. But up to that point, what good does testing do for the student? Will nationalized standards, enforced through a nationalized testing system, actually foster students' love of learning? Or will it become a sluggish treadmill for students, who must focus on practice sheets and exams just to

ensure an A or B on tests? Will it become a frightening prospect for teachers, who increasingly fear their jobs will be on the line if their students don't get good grades?

Numbers are inflexible. They are also non-specific. Yet people are incredibly diverse—academically, emotionally, and socially. And all of these multitudinous facets inform the student. What of the student who is incredibly smart, but doesn't test well? I have met such individuals at the high school and college level. They speak brilliantly in personal conversation and overflow with information, but always perform poorly on multiple-choice tests. Such tests simply are not their forte. What of the student who has been transferred from school to school due to an unstable home life? Even the smartest students have trouble keeping up in such a changeful environment. To use the bike analogy: Is it fair to administer the same bike-riding test to one student barely 3 feet tall, and another student whose father is a professional biker?

This is not to say we should throw out tests or standards. But they can be rather inhuman principles to found an entire national education system upon. Education should not become a nationwide skill set competition. Education, in its oldest and truest sense, is about learning for its own sake. It is about fostering a true love for knowledge itself. That is something that cannot really be measured. A student who develops a love for math should be encouraged and applauded—even if they receive a C on their standardized math test. The student who prefers science experiments to spitting out science definitions on a test should, in my mind, be encouraged. They have their priorities straight. They love the thing itself, not the grade behind it.

Thursday, I spoke with a Teach For America teacher currently working for the Tulsa, Oklahoma public school system. Bridget Degnan is in her second year with the TFA program, and spent her first year teaching as many as 28 to 34 kindergartners in an impoverished district. While Degnan believes the testing culture is well intentioned, she sees problems with it as well: “Often testing requirements emphasize numbers and scores, and we miss the point—that students are learning.” Degnan of course gives her students the appropriate test assessments. But she also administers her own tests to the students. These are meant to determine whether they're actually learning, and “to inform my own instruction,” she said. They are designed with her specific students in mind.

Degnan mentioned off-handedly that her students have done exceedingly well on their tests, last year and this year. But it was evident that, in her mind, this wasn't the point at all.