



## William J. Mathis: Beat the dead horse harder

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The latest round of flagellation of dead horse flesh has been provoked by the release of the National Assessment of Educational Progress scores. After 20 years of overall progress, many of the scores went down. While all groups improved over the long haul, the gaps between white and other racial groups varied over time but generally remained in place.<sup>[i]</sup> Education critics lament and proclaim, “It’s time to get tough! Let’s do some more of what didn’t work!” Meanwhile officials whisper measured words through steeped fingers saying they are “concerned,” that we must do more to ensure our students are well prepared to compete with China and “we have more work to do.” Still others claim that this exercise in numerology is helpful.

Put plainly, standardized tests have no meaningful relationship with economic development and they are poor definers of learning needs. Nevertheless, the NAEP is a valuable outside way of examining trends.

The scores dropped across the nation — which tells us one important thing. The causes are not found in local or state initiatives. Something bigger is at play. Since the scores themselves do not tell us why they are low, we have to look at broad contemporary events and circumstances. This means looking at the research and related social and historical events.

Such is the case with NAEP. The strongest predictor of standardized test scores is poverty.<sup>[ii]</sup> In this latest release, the biggest drops were among disadvantaged students. Sean Riordan at Stanford has compiled a data base of all school districts in the nation and found that test scores are most affected by this single construct.<sup>[iii]</sup>

He goes on to note that schools are highly segregated by class and by race. In fact, society is showing signs of resegregating.<sup>[iv]</sup> Resolving these gaps is our first threshold issue. High needs children are concentrated in high poverty schools which are, on average, less effective than schools with lower poverty. In a vicious cycle, poor schools are provided lesser resources. Compounding the problem, the Census Bureau tells us the wealth gap has sharply increased across the nation. Many schools across the nation have not recovered from the 2008 fiscal crisis and the federal government has never provided the promised support for needy children.

Regardless, the schools were mandated to solve the test score problem. The trouble was that the policymakers got it backwards. Poverty prevents learning. It is the threshold issue. Without resorting to what we knew, the dead horse was beaten once more with the No Child Left Behind Act. We adopted the Common Core curriculum, punished schools, and fired principals and teachers whose misfortune was being assigned to a school with high concentrations of needy children. It was literally expected that a child from a broken home, hungry and with ADHD would be ready to sit down and learn quadratic equations. Nevertheless, the test-

based school accountability approach emerged and still remains the dominant school philosophy. While it is claimed that successful applications exist, the research has not been found that says poverty can be overcome by beating the dead horse. The irony is that the tests themselves show that a test based system is not a successful reform strategy.

Regardless of the dismal results, there is some reason to be optimistic. Policy researchers from across the spectrum agree that test based accountability has not been successful. On one end are Diane Ravitch and David Berliner who point to the lack of support provided to schools. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Michael Petrelli of the conservative CATO institute agrees. They further agree that we must attend to social and emotional learning.

We live in troubled times. We face pathological shooters, communal activities are waning, our political establishment is wobbly and basic economic well-being is threatened. We must certainly prepare the younger generations to be ready for the workforce and, that means keeping a sufficient number of independent measures of academic achievement, geared to the needed skills of society. Yet, while we teach fundamentals, our most important obligation is to prepare all of our children to enhance the values of our heritage, guided by equality and democracy, as our paramount and universal values.

Thankfully. The public gets it. But it will not be solved by beating a dead horse.