CHAPTER 4

From *A Nation at Risk* to *No Child Left Behind* to *Race to the Top*: The US Response to Global Competition

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Introduction

Globalization and global economic competition have been the impetus for much of the present-day phenomena and dynamics of everyday life in the United States. As Cooper, Hersh, and O'Leary (2012) describe,

> …technological advances in telecommunications and transportation, as well as skills development in the developing world, are dragging more U.S. industries—including computer programming, high-tech manufacturing, and service sectors—into international competition. This development is feeding a mounting demand for high-skilled labor around the world. (p. 4)

But on the positive side, "…rising growth and incomes in other countries present potential new opportunities and markets for American workers and companies" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 3).

In a quest to effectively take advantage of these opportunities, US policymakers have endeavored to determine the measures necessary for ensuring that children in the United States, as they enter adulthood, have received an education that effectively prepares them for a place in the global economy (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 3). China and India, who run neck and neck with the United States where efforts to take advantage of these global economic

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opportunities are concerned, have initiated "ambitious national strategies of investing and promoting improved educational outcomes for children to strengthen their positions as contenders in the global economy" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 3). Moreover, "…results from international school achievement tests in many nations has heightened awareness about educational competition with other nations" (Baker & Letendre, 2007, p. 261).

Education, coupled with human capital, has been identified as primary "drivers" of long-term economic viability (Cooper et al., 2012). Here, "human capital" is defined as "the sum of the capabilities of a workforce" and "includes the health, education, skills, and talents that allow people to produce, create, and innovate their way to success—for their families and for the nation as a whole" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 13). If the United States is to continue to occupy a prominent position as contributor to the sort of innovative thought and leadership that fuels the global economy, then substantial investments are warranted, not only in education but in research and infrastructure as well.

Significantly, "human capital investment has had three times the positive effect on economic growth as did physical investment" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 4) for advanced countries like the United States. Moreover, according to growth economists, "educational investment is particularly important in early childhood development and learning…" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 4). In fact, Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman found that "The return on investment from interventions such as prenatal care and early childhood programs is higher than for virtually any class of financial assets over time" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 4).

Other important considerations stem from studies that track educational attainment and achievement gaps related to income, race, and ethnic groups. These have become progressively more worrisome. Because "groups with disproportionately lower education achievement and poorer health…will soon comprise a majority of American children" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 5), these gaps do not portend well for future US efforts to continue to occupy a respectable slot on the global economic ladder.

With such concerns foremost in mind, the past few decades in the United States have witnessed a number of educational reform initiatives aimed at re-establishing the United States' position as a primary contender for seizing a sizeable slice of the pie of economic opportunities served up by an increasingly globalized economy. These have included America 2000, Goals 2000, the No Child Left Behind Act, Race to the Top, Common Core of State Standards, and the Every Student Succeeds Act.

The Roots of 20th Educational Reform in the United States: A Nation at Risk

The early 1980s in the United States saw large-scale complaints from the business community about the current state of American schooling. As globalization produced increased economic competition, and jobs on assembly lines in manufacturing diminished, the demand for better-educated workers with both basic skills and a modicum of technological ability mounted. The existent education system in the United States was held responsible for the loss of America's advantage to other nations—Japan in particular—in the automobile and steel industries and other technological areas (Hayes, 2004). A number of business leaders complained about the amount of training in communication and math skills they were obliged to provide in order for new employees, to remain competitive. Business-Higher Education Form's *The American Competitive Challenge: The Need for Response* argued that the nation's falling productivity signaled a need for workers to be better schooled in science, math, verbal expression, and critical thinking skills (Sadker & Sadker, 2003).

Diane Ravitch identifies "The sustained assault on academic curriculum in the late 1960s and early 70s" (Hayes, 2004, p. 2) as a major culprit in this apparent decline in schooling quality. As Hayes (2004) explains, "During the 60s as high schools made a conscious effort to accommodate the increasing student pressure for increased "relevance"…many schools added electives… Classes in ecology, drama and dance were added…Increasing numbers of students spent time in high school learning vocational skills such as beautician training and auto mechanics" (Hayes, 2004, p. 2). In fact, a study of 22 schools in nine states revealed that students were being given academic credit for courses like cheerleading, student government, and mass media. Moreover, students in the "average" school had only 3 hours of instruction (Hayes, 2004).

As Hayes (2004) notes,

> During the 20th century, the emphasis in schools moved like a pendulum between those who support student-centered learning for critical thinking and those who believed that the primary function of schools is to teach basic content and skills in English, math, science, history and foreign language. The introduction of progressive education by Dewey and others at the beginning of the 20th century began a debate that continues….The student centered learning so evident in the schools in the 60s and 70s was seen by many as a failure in the 80s. (pp. 4–5)

At the politically conservative end of the pendular swing, E. D. Hirsh argued that

> …the common knowledge characteristically shared by those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder in the US should be readily available to all citizens because people who lack it suffer serious handicaps. This 'core knowledge' is needed for productive communication and establishing fundamental equality as citizens. (as quoted in Hayes, 2004, p. 5)

At the opposite end of the pendular swing, John Holt, author of *How Children Fail* (1964), shot back

> …the idea that it is the duty of schools to get as much "essential knowledge" as possible into children is absurd, harmful nonsense. Children quickly forget all but a small part of what they learn in school. It is of no use or interest to them. (Hayes, 2004 p. 5)

Ronald Reagan entered the White House in 1981 and appointed Terrell Bell Secretary of Education. Bell requested a commission to study the state of the nation's schools (Hayes, 2004). When his concerns were rebuffed, he established a National Commission on Excellence in Education. Although Reagan's conservative cronies wanted only Republicans on the panel, Bell aimed for a "balanced group," including a black college president, Norman Francis and Dr. Francisco Sanchez, a Hispanic superintendent. The group had only 18 months to write a final report (Hayes, 2004).

A Nation at Risk, published in 1983, comprised ideas from several reports and publications in the early 1980s, for example, Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal,* "a philosophical defense of a liberal arts curriculum as the basis for the uniform education of all students, grades 1-12" (Hayes, 2004, p. 37). The recommendations of A Nation at Risk focused on teaching students "effective study and work skills," giving more homework and "firm and fair codes of student conduct…" that were "enforced consistently." Alternative classrooms were to be created for persistently disruptive students (Hayes, 2004, p. 32).

The report also advocated for making teaching a "more rewarding and respected profession" via higher performance-based salaries. Teacher evaluations involving peer review were likewise recommended. Career ladders that distinguish between beginning experienced, and master teachers were

to be put in place (Hayes, 2004, p. 32). Grants and loans to entice exceptional college students into the field of teaching were also recommended.

Textbooks were to be updated with more challenging content. Collaborative work between community members, school leaders, and parents, both at the local and state levels was encouraged. Parents were charged with "model(ing) in their own lives a commitment to continual learning" and "instill(ing) the importance of intellectual and moral integrity" (Hayes, 2004, p. 34). All the while, the federal bureaucracy was expected to be "… unobtrusive and place a minimal amount of administrative burden on schools" (Hayes, 2004, p. 33). Finally, *A Nation at Risk* proclaimed, "We firmly believe that…It is by our willingness to take up the challenge, and our resolve to see It through, that America's place in the world will be either secured or forfeited" (Hayes, 2004, p. 35).

Critiques of a Nation at Risk

William Buckley characterized the recommendations of A Nation at Risk as "unimaginative and banal" and "call(ing) for nothing new" (Hayes, 2004, p. 44). Noted educational historian Lawrence Cremin (1989) adds,

> American economic competitiveness with Japan and other nations is to a considerable degree a function of monetary, trade and industrial policy, and of decisions made by the President and Congress, the Federal Reserve Board, and the Federal Departments of the Treasury, Commerce and Labor. Therefore, to conclude that problems of international competitiveness can be solved by educational reform, especially educational reform defined solely as school reform, is not merely utopian and millennialist, it is at best a foolish and at worst a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible for doing something about competitiveness and to the lay the burden instead upon schools…a device that has been used repeatedly in the history of American education. (pp. 102–103)

Education policy researcher, Gerard Bracey, described A Nation at Risk as "a golden treasury of selective and spun statistics" (Hayes, 2004, p. 45). In his "The Propaganda of 'A Nation at Risk,'" Bracey presents challenges to several "indicators." He maintains that the only reason a decline in science achievement test scores by American 17-year-olds was included in the report was that "it was the only one of nine trend lines that showed a dramatic decrease." Meanwhile, the science scores of nine- and thirteen-year-olds were inching up (Hayes, 2004, p. 45).

Bracey (1999) also questions the report's assertion that "international comparison of student achievement completed a decade ago, reveal that on 19 academic tests, American students were never first or second, and in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last 7 times" (as quoted in Hayes, 2004, p. 45). Bracey maintains that the studies on which this statement is based had "fundamental methodological flaws" and that "the Commission could have chosen to report on other studies that prove American kids are above average in science, average in math, and second in the world in reading" (as quoted in Hayes, 2004, p. 45).

The federal government was even charged with concealing good indicators where the schools were concerned. For example, Bracey wrote,

> The most egregious example of suppression – that we know about – was the suspension of The Sandia Report. Assembled in 1990 by engineers at Sandia National laboratories in Albuquerque the report concluded that while there were many problems in public education, there was no system-wide crisis. (as quoted in Hayes, 2004, p. 46)

Deputy Secretary of Education and former Xerox CEO David Kearns told the engineers who compiled the Sandia report, "You bury this or I'll bury you." Sandia's Vice President who supervised the Sandia engineers verified that the report had been deliberately and definitely suppressed (Bracey, 1993).

As Hayes (2004) points out, this move

> presented the opportunity for those on the right in religion and politics to take control of schools…only with national and statewide curricula could ultraconservatives be assured that disquiet local voices – advocates of gay rights, abortion rights and birth control, for example – could be kept out of schools" so that schools to return to 'the good old days. (Nelson, Palonsky, & McCarthy, 2004, p. 160)

Others maintained that the report was "comparing comprehensive American schools (schools which include students from all levels of the socioeconomic, linguistic and ethnic spectrum) with limited –population elite schools in Germany and Japan" (Pulliam & Van Patten, 1991, p. 198).

In sum, critics of the Commission on Excellence's A Nation at Risk maintained

> …the case for a serious 'decline' in American educational programs was based on …weak arguments and poor data…Neither the decline in test scores, the international comparison, nor the growth of high tech employment provided a clear rationale for reform. (Hayes, 2004, p. 47)

Despite this criticism from respected experts in the field, A Nation at Risk "drew conspicuous attention…. and spurred a series of influential state-level reform efforts… in Texas, Tennessee, North Carolina and Arkansas" (Hess & Petrilli, 2009, p. 13). Recommendations for a number of measures, like boosts in teacher pay, extending the school year and more rigid measures of teacher performance followed (Hess & Petrilli, 2009).

SETTING THE STAGE FOR "NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND": AMERICA 2000 AND GOALS 2000

Having won the 1988 election, George H. W. Bush, aspiring to be "The Education President," invited the governors to attend the nation's first summit on education in Charlottesville, Virginia. The governors agreed on the priority of establishing national educational goals which took the form of six goals, intended to be accomplished by the year 2000 (Hess & Petrilli, 2006). Collectively referred to as "America 2000," the goals demonstrated a conspicuous desire for national standards, constituting a precursor for the 2010 Common Core of State Standards (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 392–393). The goals portended to "hold national standards separate from state standards and were not to serve as an automatic (nor coerced, nor mandated) replacement for state standards" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Location 393–400).

"America 2000" avowed that by the year 2000, (1) all children would begin school "ready to learn", (2) the national high school graduation rate would reach at least 90%, (3) students would master five "core subjects" before leaving grade four, grades eight and twelve, (4) American students would "lead the world" in math and science, (5) all adults in America would be literate, as well as "prepared for work and citizenship", and (6) every school would be safe and drug-free. Bush established a National Goals Panel, responsible for tracking schools' progress toward these six goals (Hess & Petrilli, 2009).

Bush's America 2000 was eventually transformed into Clinton's Goals 2000, likewise derived from a conviction that American children were insufficiently educated, especially in the "three Rs" (Hess & Petrilli, 2009).

"Goals 2000" mandated that by the year 2000, all states would create "performance-based accountability systems" based on explicit academic standards, paired with tests that determined how well students and schools were meeting those standards (Hess & Petrilli, 2009). Moreover, "Behaviorist 'accountability' mechanisms that would assign rewards and provide for interventions or sanctions based on test outcomes" (Hess & Petrilli, 2009, p. 14) were also to be put in place. Hence, the stage was set for the eventual creation of No Child Left Behind.

Nonetheless, no means were put in place to allow the federal government to ensure that "Goals 2000" was enforced. Thus, by 1999, "…only 36 states issued school report cards; 19 provided assistance to low-performing schools, and 16 had the authority to close down failing schools" (Hess & Petrilli, 2009, p. 17).

THE EVOLUTION OF GOALS 2000: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

An important element of George H. W. Bush's 2000 presidential campaign platform included educational reform based on national use of the standards-based accountability program from his native Texas (Hess & Petrilli, 2009). In a like-minded vein, the democratic nominee, Vice President Al Gore, maintained:

> Every state and every school district should be required to identify failing schools, and work to turn them around with strict accountability for results, and strong incentives for success. And if these failing schools don't improve quickly, they should be shut down fairly and fast, and when needed, reopened under a new principal. (Hess & Petrilli, 2009, p. 18)

A few days after he took office in January 2001, Bush sent a blueprint for his proposed educational reform, "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), to Capitol Hill (Hess & Petrilli, 2009). NCLB was primarily intended to address the nation's "achievement gap," specifically "the disparity between the performance of white and Asian students…between African-American and Latino students…" (Hess & Petrilli, 2009, p. 24), and between "disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers" (Abernathy, 2007, p. 4). As Hess and Petrilli (2009) explain,

> In 2000, the average African-American 12th grader was reading and performing math at approximately the same level as the average white 8th grader, a fact that leaders of both parties deemed morally unacceptable and a threat to American competitiveness in the global economy. (p. 24)

Bush referred to the nation's apparent complacence over "… sustained low levels of performance among black, Latino, and poor children" as "the soft bigotry of low expectations" (Hess & Petrilli, 2009, p. 24).

Like the educational reform plan for Bush's home state of Texas, NCLB is built on four "common-sense pillars": (1) accountability for results; (2) emphasis on doing 'what works' based on scientific research; (3) expanded parental options; and (4) expanded local control and flexibility" (O'Neill, 2004, pp. 1–5).

NCLB's goal of equality in educational *outcomes* was "radical" compared to desegregation's and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA) goals for equality in educational *access* (Abernathy, 2007). One innovation involved the creation and implementation of "…an assessment regime with significant consequences for those who fail by holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students" (Abernathy, 2007, pp. 3–4). Previous educational reforms like America 2000 and Goals 2000 had no provisions for the imposition of significant sanctions for schools where a significant percentage of students scored below grade average on standardized math and literacy tests (Abernathy, 2007).

These innovations derived from a conviction that "…local education politics are fundamentally broken," such that "…only strong, external pressure on school systems, focused on student achievement,[would] produce a political dynamic lead(ing) to school improvement" (Hess & Petrilli, 2009, p. 23). Ultimately, NCLB was intended to encourage superintendents and school personnel to

> take controversial and difficult steps to root out mediocre teachers and administrators, shift resources to poorer schools, challenge collective bargaining provisions regulating teacher transfer and inhibiting efforts to link pay to teacher quality, and overhaul central office processes. (Hess & Petrilli, 2009, p. 23)

NCLB's rigorous accountability requirements established it as "…the most invasive federal education policy ever in US history" (Mencken, 2009, p. 50).

The Four Pillars

Assurance 1: Accountability for Results

NCLB mandates that schools conduct annual state assessments in reading and mathematics in grades 3–8 and that those scores be made public in school and district "report cards." Fourth and eighth graders are examined on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and mathematics (Bejoian & Reid, 2005).

The heart of NCLB's testing and sanctioning regime is "adequate yearly progress" (AYP). AYP is based on the results of students' scores on standardized tests administered once a year. Achieving AYP means either that a sufficiently high percentage of the students in a school or district meets the state's standards for academic proficiency or that the school or district is demonstrating, "continuous and substantial academic improvement for all students" (Abernathy, 2007, p. 5).

In addition to looking at test results "in aggregate for all of the students in a grade level," results are examined according to eight subgroups: Five involve racial and ethnic identifiers—white, black, Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian or Pacific Islander. The other three are students: (1) eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, (2) with limited English proficiency, and (3) who qualify for special education services.

For students with disabilities, achievement is measured according to the same state standards as the achievement of students without disabilities. Regarding children of immigration, any student who has been in school in the United States for at least three consecutive years is required to be measured by the same proficiency tests, even if English is not the student's first language.

Significantly, as Abernathy (2007) points out, failure in only one subgroup in one subject in one grade triggers AYP identification for that school or district. Thus, the more "subgroups" a school has, the more chances it has to fail. This means large schools with diverse populations are at a significant risk in terms of failing AYP, regardless of how the school rates in "producing high-quality educational service or how successful it is with other subgroups of students" (Abernathy, 2007. p. 6).

Consequences for schools who fail to make AYP for successive school years are as follows:

> 2 years: Identified as "in need of improvement;" school officials must develop a school improvement plan; spend at least 10% of Title I funds on professional development; allow parents to transfer their children to successful schools in the district; notify parents of their options under this plan.
> 3 years: All consequences from previous years; school officials must implement improvement plan; provide supplemental educational services for students.
> 4 years: Corrective action-this may include replacing staff, overhauling the curriculum, reducing management at the school level, hiring outside experts, or lengthening the school day and/or year.
> 5 years: Plan for restructuring – either by reconstituting school as a charter school, replacing all or most of the school personnel, contracting out for private management, state intervention or other restructuring efforts.
> 6 years: Initiate restructuring. (Abernathy, 2007, p. 8)

Assurance 2: Focus on What Works

Federal monies were to be made available for practices and programs "proven effective" through "scientific research"—for example, class-size reduction and commercially available programs. A primary element of this piece involved advancing children's math and reading performance in preschool and kindergarten through second grade. "Incentive awards" were to be granted for "teacher excellence," reflect through test score gains (Bejoian & Reid, 2005, p. 222).

Assurance 3: Expanded Parental Options

Each school served under this part shall jointly develop with parents for all children served, a school-parent compact that outlines how parents, the entire school staff, and students will share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement and the means by which the school and parents will build and develop a partnership to help children achieve the State's high standards. (NCLB, 20 U.S.C. §6318(d)) An important piece of this involves school choice, "implemented through a voucher system for parents of students attending persistently low-performing schools" (Bejoian & Reid, 2005, p. 223).

Assurance 4: Reduced Bureaucracy and Increased Flexibility

> Schools may now blend federal funds to operate school-wide Title I programs in schools whose poverty threshold is 40% (reduced from 50%). Since one of the major goals of NCLB is to allow greater fiscal flexibility, up to 50% of the funds may now be transferred among programs. (Bejoian & Reid, 2005, p. 222)

Bejoian and Reid (2005) explain the benefits of such flexibility, namely that it allows for states to locate the most suitable means for improving teacher performance. Notably, this includes removing students "perceived to be violent or persistently disruptive" (p. 222). Although this might be beneficial for student performance and for the school's overall performance, it raises questions as to the eventual fates—educational and otherwise—of such "persistently disruptive" students.

However, increased flexibility also makes it possible for schools to sponsor practices that are research-based and have been proven to be effective, for example, after-school programs sponsored by community groups. Other possibilities include having schools initiate partnerships with institutions of higher education, for example, for math-science programs.

CRITIQUES OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Abernathy (2007) relays that "The little empirical evidence that exists on the achievement effects of NCLB is mixed" (p. 11). In March of 2005,

> 72% of school districts reported that academic achievement was improving on the state-designed tests. School district personnel uniformly reported that they were 'aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and assessment (99%) and providing extra or more intensive instruction to low-achieving students (99%). (Abernathy, 2007, p. 11)

Twenty-three states saw evidence of improvement of math and reading scores between 2001–2002 and 2003–2004. Nonetheless, "…recent year-by-year growth in student test scores had declined since NCLB was put into place" (Abernathy, 2007, p. 11). And, importantly, a national assessment report documented that "…the number of schools identified as failing has increased since NCLB" (Stullich, Eisner, McCrary, & Roney, 2006).

Other critics have pointed to "the challenges of measuring anything as complex as student achievement with any set of standardized tests - no matter how thoroughly or thoughtfully implemented" (Abernathy, 2007, p. 12). The fact that these tests and the scores students receive on them have significant consequences for school curricula, for students, and for the fate of schools in general makes this realization all the more poignant. As Abernathy (2007) notes,

> Decisions about what to include on these tests are themselves highly political and often result in watered down consensus curriculum that fails to make any real cognitive or evaluative demands on students. (p. 12)

The general concern is that "…in their single-minded desire to improve test scores, schools and teachers have damaged the breadth and quality of the curriculum" (Abernathy, 2007, p. 12).

Another problem with NCLB centers on the General Accounting Office's early finding that there was a great deal of variance in how well states were measuring academic proficiency. For example, California required that only 14% of its elementary students be proficient and Colorado required 78% proficiency in the same year (Abernathy, 2007, p. 15). Thus, as New Jersey Representative Scott Garrett noted, although NCLB was intended to raise educational standards,

> …what we've accomplished is a proverbial race to the bottom. The states understand all too well how to game the system … and they realize that if they simply lower their standards, then they could say, "Hey, we met our goal and we get our funding, and we don't have any of the additional restrictions". (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 520–525)

Thus, as Schneider (2015) points out, NCLB provided an incentive for states that once had a good standard to set that standard much lower (Schneider, 2015).

A 2012 report by FairTest, entitled "NCLB's Lost Decade for Educational Progress," recounts:

> A review of a decade of evidence demonstrates that NCLB has failed badly… It has neither significantly increased academic performance nor significantly reduced achievement gaps, even as measured by standardized exams. In fact, because of its misguided reliance on one-size-fits-all testing, labeling and sanctioning schools, it has undermined many education reform efforts. Many

> schools, particularly those serving low-income students, have become little more than test-preparation programs. After 5 years of NCLB—with its test-driven consequences—NAEP scores remained flat. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 532–547)

Although NCLB was due to be reauthorized in 2007, in spite of the passing of several election years, legislation for reauthorization did not materialize.

Big Business Gets a Stronghold on Educational Reform—The Genesis of the Common Core

"Achieve" Establishes Itself

Business-interested parties were heavily represented at both of the above-described educational summits—George H. W. Bush's 1989 educational summit and the 1996 National Governor's Association (NGA) educational summit—that anticipated the development of the Common Core (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 577–580). The 1996 NGA summit proposed a "national nonprofit organization allied with states and business interests that could serve as a clearing house for information and research on standards and assessment tests" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 577–580). This not-for-profit "clearing house" was allowed to accept "tax-deductible donations from businesses and philanthropies with interests in influencing the development….as well as the subsequent implementation and related products of standards and assessments" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 588–589). This meant that as it collected and distributed information on educational standards and assessments, the "clearing house" was "…vulnerable to…the wishes of individuals and groups providing the tax-exempt donations it accepted" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 596–599). This clearinghouse came to be known as "Achieve, Inc" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Location 599) and eventually played a major role in the Common Core's creation and promotion (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 599–602).

Achieve's board, consisting of governors and businesspeople, was chaired by IBM CEO Louis Gerstner Jr. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 605–606). As Schneider points out, "Notice who still is not seated among this intended decision-making group: the teacher practitioner"

(Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 607–608). At a 1995 meeting, Gerstner told governors that "an 'urgency' was placing national security squarely onto the American public school classroom, that the solution was a set of national standards" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 816–818). By way of establishing his qualifications for spearheading this work, Gerstner noted that he had "spent a lot of time on education." He continued,

> So have many of you. We all have scars to prove it…Not actual, practical, classroom-teaching 'scars.' Just those top-down, shape-the-system-from-the-outside "scars". (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 612–616)

Thus, Gerstner revealed his perspective that "running America's schools is like running a company." His statement, "But I've also spent a lot of time helping troubled companies get back on their feet" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 617–618), reflects a perception that reforming an educational system was synonymous with helping a business get back on its feet.

Making matters worse, Gerstner "…campaigned for 'a fundamental, bone-jarring, full-fledged 100 percent revolution that discards the old and replaces it with a totally new performance-driven system'" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 620–627). Frighteningly, he insisted that "all of us would be held accountable for the results. Now. Immediately. This school year" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 620–627). And then, Gerstner's crowning zinger: "We cannot be side-tracked by academicians who say it will take five years just to set the standards" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 627–629).

Clearly, from Gerstner's perspective, academicians, individuals who actually conduct in-depth, substantial research into educational issues, and policy and implementation of these have no place in this project. As Schneider notes, Gerstner's demanding "national standards 'now'" obviates his cluelessness with regard to the complexities of developing national standards; most conspicuously, that this necessitates, first and foremost, "…care in organizing teacher practitioner involvement for planning, drafting, review, testing, modification, and voluntary adoption" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 641–642).

Achieve got its foot in the door with the 2008 publication *Out of Many, One* report, focused on a "common core of standards" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1109–1113). In this 2008 report, Achieve wrote:

> While state standards….share a common core, they are not identical… The common core discussed in this report came about organically, through action by individual states, working in their states to identify what their high school graduates need to know. The common core reflects the reality of the world—that there is fundamental knowledge in English and mathematics that all graduates must know to succeed and that is not bound by state lines—but the common core also respects the traditional role of state decision making in education. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1094–1100)

Thus, "Achieve set the stage for the creation of CCSS—a single set of K–12 vision for 'standards unity' across the United States" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1613–1615). The National Governors Association (NGA), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve's 2008 publication, "Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education," clearly set out to justify one set of standards for K-12, for all US states and territories (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1634–1636). Here, "benchmarking" refers to "comparing standards to those of competitors—in this case, to the standards of other states and countries—and to the bottom line of assessment results" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 661–667). Achieve was careful to note that this "common" standards effort need not involve the federal government and could, in fact, be led by the states. However, also noted was that "…getting the governors of 50 states plus a number of U.S. territories…to agree on… a "common core of standards" would prove quite a feat" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 661–667).

Other Business-Oriented Parties Join the Push for the Common Core

Student Achievement Partners (SAP)

SAP was founded in 2007 by David Coleman and Jason Zimba. Coleman had started SAP "…with an eye on writing national-level standards" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 2392–2393). Coleman, having no background in classroom teaching or in writing educational standards, became recognized as the "architect" of CCSS (Schneider, 2015). He was introduced at a 2011 meeting as

> a man who has been involved in virtually every step of setting the national standards, and he doesn't have a single credential for it. He's never taught

> in an elementary school…He's never edited a scholarly journal, but I think he has written scholarly papers. And a variety of other things that have, you know, everybody here has done some of, he hasn't done. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 2433–2437)

Enter Bill Gates

It soon became obvious that the establishment and implementation of a national CCSS would cost millions, if not billions (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1613–1615). In the summer of 2008, the President of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), Gene Wilhoit, and the national-standards-writing-company-turned-nonprofit Student Achievement Partners (SAP) founder and CEO, David Coleman, asked billionaire Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda, if they would foot the bill (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1616–1623). Notably, the above-mentioned report, "Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education" was used as the "sales brochure" for getting Gates to invest in the CCSS (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Location 1638).

The report detailed a *standards-dependent* package of reforms in the form of five "action steps":

> 1. have states adopt "the assumed upgrade," i.e., the "as yet-unwritten CCSS" 2. bring all textbooks, digital media, *curricula, and assessments* [italics mine] in line with CCSS. 3. revise state policies" regarding teacher and administrator recruitment and preparation to reflect the human capital practices of top-performing nations and states around the world. 4. hold schools and systems accountable… to ensure consistently high performance—presumably on standardized tests. 5. use international standardized tests to "ensure" U.S. superiority to compete in the 21st century economy. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Location 1638)

Thus in agreeing to fund this standards-dependent, 5 pack of reforms, Gates was, in effect, advocating for a common core of state standards.

THE COMMON CORE OF STATE STANDARDS APPEARS

The official push for a set of common standards came at a Chicago summit of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State

School Officers in 2009 (Gewertz, 2015). The 1990s educational reform initiatives—America 2000, Goals 2000, and No Child Left Behind—had reputedly failed to produce any significant improvement in student achievement on standardized tests (Gewertz, 2015). Studies demonstrating that "1 in 5 college students [had] skills too weak for credit-bearing coursework" were considered by state leaders as evidence that "the K-12 system was falling short in preparing young people for the post-secondary work that leads to good jobs" (Gewertz, 2015). Employer surveys revealed "…widespread dissatisfaction with the literacy and math skills of young job applicants" (Gewertz, 2015). Anticipating the federal government's response to this situation, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) volunteered to compose national standards in November 2007 (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Location 559–560).

The 2009 meeting of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers created "work groups," composed of university professors, leaders of education advocacy groups, and "experts" from testing companies, tasked with creating a set of common standards for K-12 aged children. Teachers of K-12 were added only as an afterthought and only in response to pressure from the teachers' unions (Gewertz, 2015). That is to say, those who worked most closely with the students for whom the standards were written were given a last minute, negligible role in deciding the criteria according to which curriculum and assessment for these students would be devised. These work groups' drafts for a set of common standards were then shared with state departments of education and other evaluation panels for review and feedback (Gewertz, 2015).

The Common Core State Standards

The end product, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), describes skills students are expected to have in English/language arts and math, at each grade level, by the time they finish high school. The standards do not outline detailed, day-to-day curriculum; rather, the CCSS provide "a broad outline of learning expectations from which teachers or district leaders craft a curriculum" (Gewertz, 2015). The English-language arts component of the CCSS emphasizes

> students' ability to read complex literary and informational texts, and cite evidence from them in constructing arguments and interpretations. It also

> envisions a new, distributed responsibility for teaching literacy, asking teachers of all subjects to teach literacy skills that are unique to those disciplines. (Gewertz, 2015)

For example, it sets out the expectation that by the end of 2nd grade, students should be able to explain how images in an informational text contribute to its meaning. By the end of 6th grade, they should be able to build a coherent analysis of a text, citing evidence to back up their arguments (Gewertz, 2015).

Existent research contended that US math curricula were "a mile wide and an inch deep"; accordingly, the (93-page long) math standards aspired toward "a deeper focus on fewer topics" (Gewertz, 2015), and on "build(ing) a coherent sequence of topics and concepts across grades." Students are expected to develop "procedural skill and fluency," as well as "mastery in applying math skills and in understanding math concepts" (Gewertz, 2015).

The official Web site for the Common Core explains the standards as follows:

> Building on the best of existing state standards, the Common Core State Standards provide clear and consistent learning goals to help prepare students for college, career, and life. The standards clearly demonstrate what students are expected to learn at each grade level, so that every parent and teacher can understand and support their learning. http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/

As Porter, McMaken, Hwang, and Yang (2011) summarize,

> The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) of 2010 represent a new chapter in the 25-year history of standards-based reforms (SBR)… attempt(ing) to bring the system back to the principles of its founding—more rigorous, focused, academic content and performance expectations collectively embraced by the nation. (as quoted in Massell & Perrault, 2014, p. 197)

And

> The new standards depart significantly from existing practice, especially in their high level of cognitive demand, topical range, and curricular sequencing…their focus on depth of content over breadth…their cognitively

> demanding content (and) …their emphasis on higher-level cognitive skills such as demonstrating understanding and analysis. (Porter et al., 2011 as quoted in Massell and Perrault, 2014, p. 197)

The Common Core's official Web site maintains the standards are:

1. Research and evidence-based,
2. Clear, understandable, and consistent,
3. Aligned with college and career expectations,
4. Based on rigorous content and the application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills,
5. Built upon the strengths and lessons of current state standards,
6. Informed by other top-performing countries to prepare all students for success in our global economy and society. http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/.

The Web site further assures us:

> The standards draw on the most important international models, as well as research and input from numerous sources, including educators from kindergarten through college, state departments of education, scholars, assessment developers, professional organizations, parents and students, and members of the public. http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/

And,

> Because their design and content have been refined through successive drafts and numerous rounds of state feedback, the standards represent a synthesis of the best elements of standards-related work in all states and other countries to date….http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/

Finally,

> …the mastery of each standard is essential for success in college, career, and life in today's global economy. http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/

In the Spring of 2009, fifty-one states and US territories signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU), committing them to the development and adoption of a common core of "internationally benchmarked"

state standards in English-language arts and mathematics for grades K-12 (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1686–1693).

The Common Core Phase II: Development of Assessment Tools

The second phase of the Common Core involved the design of assessments aligned to the standards that would be used to determine whether students and schools were meeting the Common Core Standards. This would be followed by the design of curriculum aligned to the assessments. And hence emerged the intent to standardize curriculum (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Location 1717–1724).

In 2010, the Department of Education awarded contracts totaling $360 million to two groups—the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). In November 2010, forty-five states and the District of Columbia consented to use the assessment tools that either SBAC or PARCC were slated to design. Moreover, PARCC and SBAC expressed an intent to make the scoring systems for their assessment tools comparable, making nationwide comparisons of students' performances by state possible (Gewertz, 2015).

STATES' RESPONSE TO THE COMMON CORE

As Gewertz (2015) notes, the Departments of Education's contracting exclusively with PARCC and SBAC amounted to a "locking in of shared standards with only two, federally funded tests nationwide." This move "….deepened the perception that the 'feds' were dictating what students should learn." Opposition to this kicked in when PARCC's and SBAC's assessment tool was field-tested in 2014. Parents, teachers, and students, as well as policymakers, expressed exasperation over the realization that the tests took 7.5–9 hours, not to mention the hours of "teaching to the test" that seemed necessary to prepare student to do even moderately well. These hours, it was believed, could have been more profitably utilized to engage students in more meaningful learning.

Ultimately, when the PARCC and SBAC tests debuted in 2015, despite 45 states' having initially agreed to use them, only half of the states actually did. The rest of the states had designed their own tests or had bought off-the-shelf exams (Gewertz, 2015). Additionally, in the spring of 2015,

an "opt-out" movement emerged, in which tens of thousands of students boycotted the first administration of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests (Gewertz, 2015).

PROBLEMS WITH THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Educators, educational researchers, and policymakers have taken issue with a number of aspects of the Common Core State Standards. These include, but are not limited to the following:

> Flying in the face of Porter et al.'s (2011) previously cited assertion that the CCSS comprise "cognitively demanding content" and an "emphasis on higher-level cognitive skills such as demonstrating understanding and analysis, Massell and Perrault (2014) argue that the CCSS has generated instructional programs and teaching strategies that comprise anything but "more challenging academic content" and that do not encourage higher-level cognitive skills" (p. 198). Massell and Perrault (2014) maintain that this is an "artifact of the procedures states routinely use for aligning assessments with standards, and teaching strategies to instructional programs" (p. 198). Their procedures "…do not necessarily lead to a coherent sequencing of ideas" and "elude higher-level cognitive skills and academic content with both breadth and depth" (Massell & Perrault, 2014, p. 198). What they have produced instead are "… long, isolated lists of facts to be covered"; moreover, they have missed the connections between these. The result: a "mile-wide and inch-deep curriculum that standards-based reform (SBR) has struggled against since its inception" (Daro, 2011).

A second problem with the Common Core was generated by the unprecedented avalanche of curriculum and assessment resources derived from the CCSS, enabled by "new technologies that enable open-source development" (Massell & Perrault, 2014, p. 198). As O'Day (2002) explains, this created a situation in which "teachers and schools move chaotically from one demand or source of information to another, with insufficient focus and time to learn" (pp. 300–301).

A third set of problems for the Common Core stems from that fact that individuals and organizations that have no meaningful experience with education and its concomitant, historically recurrent problematic issues have managed to seize far too much power and control over the design of the Common Core. As Schneider (2015) proffers, one need

> consider the degree to which a group of predominately middle-aged, almost exclusively White male leaders (such as those who participated in the two summits responsible for initiating the CCSS)…is able to provide informed leadership regarding systems dynamics (such as those that affect minority members of society) that might complicate a seemingly clear connection between standards and assessments. (Kindle Locations 706–712)

Moreover, in 2014, the Achieve board of directors continued to consist solely of white, male members, excepting one Black member. There were no women (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 706–712).

Gates, Pearson, the CCSSO, and the Common Core

As alluded to previously, a second group—businesspeople who were interested primarily in turning a profit, not in students' learning and well-being—has enjoyed a heavy hand in the design and implementation of educational reforms in the United States in recent decades.

Speaking to the CCSSO in November 2010, Bill Gates expressed his unqualified support and obvious investment in the Common Core. He announced:

> The Common Core builds a foundation for defining and measuring excellence—and that will give traction to many reforms that follow. Others have asserted standards before, but yours are better. They are more relevant—because they're based on the knowledge and skills people need. They're clearer—so you can test whether a student knows them. And they're consistent across the states that adopt them, so educators can work together to improve our schools…. Aligning teaching with the common core—and building common data standards—will help us define excellence, measure progress, test new methods, and compare results…we will apply the tools of science to school reform…. It's implementing common core standards that will let us measure student achievement, identify great teaching, and rebuild the budget based on excellence. You can lead this change, but you can't be expected to do it alone. You'll need friends in business and philanthropy to stand with you. You can count on me. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 3259–3265)

In February 2011, Gates paid the National Governors Association $1.3 million, directly naming CCSS in the grant explanation:

> to work with state policymakers on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, with special attention to effective resource allocation to ensure complete execution, as well as rethinking state policies on teacher effectiveness.

Then in June 2011, Gates paid the CCSSO $9.4 million "to support the Common Core standards work." In July 2013, Gates added another $4 million "to develop high quality assessments to measure the Common Core State Standards" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 3259–3265).

In June 2012, CCSS were integrated into the Gates Foundation's funding for the American Federation of Teacher's (AFT) Innovation Fund (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 3179–3184). Gates' funding information specifically stated: American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation, Date: June 2012, Purpose: to support the AFT Innovation Fund and work on teacher development and Common Core State Standards, and Amount: $4,400,0004 (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 3184–3214).

Nonetheless, when Washington Post Reporter Lindsay Layton asked Gates in a June 2014 interview:

> How about the…notion that because you're funding so much of the … Common Core, and charter schools, and, and the teacher evaluation… that you have become…a very powerful figure in K–12 education right now, but you're unelected. Some people say that's undemocratic. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 3215–3218),

Gates' response was:

> We are not a factor in…those races or speaking out in those races. They'll pick … what they choose to do…Our voice is not there when the final choice is made… that's a governor, a superintendent, a school board, who decides all of that. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 3220–3221)

Gates said this to Layton the day after he dined with 80 senators and other legislators. As Schneider notes, "It seems that he believes his dinnertime interactions with elected officials could not possibly influence their decisions on state and national education issues" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 3221–3228).

Pearson Enters the Scene

Pearson, a for-profit group with business interests in education and international media, despite its impressive history of blunders in all aspects of testing (Kindle Locations 3997–3999)—was given a primary role in the implementation and administration of the CCSS (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1720–1722). Incorporated in 1897, Pearson operates in over 70 countries, and its services include test creation, administration, and processing, as well a teacher development and school software (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 3993–3999).

In 2009, Pearson's nonprofit branch, the Pearson Charitable Foundation (PCF) which also happens to be funded by the Gates Foundation, awarded the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), co-license holder, along with the National Governor's Association (NGA) of the Common Core of State Standards a $100,000 "grant" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 4005–4011) PCF awarded CCSSO two additional "grants" in 2010 ($340,000) and 2011 ($100,000). That is to say, by way of its nonprofit, PCF—which is primarily funded by Pearson's "for-profit" branch—and which Gates also funds—Pearson paid over half a million dollars to the CCSSO—one of the two organizations that holds the license for CCSS (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 4005–4011). The upshot: Pearson gained an unearned role and disproportionate power, not only in the assessment procedures for the Common Core of State Standards, but ultimately, in the design of a curriculum that "fits" the assessments that have been designed to measure the CCSS. And hence, another business—rather than education-oriented and qualified player—gets sentinel control over the design of Common Core Standards, tools to assess the standards, and curriculum to fit the assessments. And as Schneider (2015) laments, "The more desperate the district is for high test scores, the more likely that district will "find" the money to purchase Pearson curriculum to accompany Pearson-developed tests" (Kindle Locations 4155–4160).

Again, this power was bestowed upon Pearson despite its impressive history of blunders in all aspects of testing: design, administration, and scoring. For example, in September 2013, FairTest enumerated some of Pearson's questionable practices, testing errors, and resultant subsequent lawsuits and fines. Schaeffer documented 38 incidents, among them,

> 2000 Minnesota—45,739 misgraded graduation tests leads to lawsuit with $11 million settlement—judge found "years of quality control problems" and

> a "culture emphasizing profitability and cost-cutting"; 2012 New York—More than 7,000 New York City elementary and middle school students wrongly blocked from graduation by inaccurate "preliminary scores" on Pearson tests; 2013 New York—Pearson makes three test scoring mistakes blocking nearly 5,000 students from gifted-and-talented program eligibility. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 4027–4044)

Moreover, Pearson offered to "help" states in determining how they would set "cut scores," that is, the scores according to which schools and students are determined to have passed or failed to meet the CCSS. In doing so, Pearson seized power in determining state passing rates—or failure rates. As Schneider (2015) points out,

> Assisting states in reducing the number of "failing" students creates yet another market for Pearson to exploit. So what if Pearson has an established record for botching the assessment process and negatively impacting the lives of thousands of students? (Kindle Locations 4155–4161)

Revealing Pearson's naked and blatant money-making orientation toward its role in educational reform via the Common Core, Freestone, one of its executives stated:

> The important point is that once we get through (the initial) period of investment … incremental revenue per student then becomes very profitable. And these are long-term contracts with high renewal rates…. As we transition from print to digital, we move from a license to a subscription selling, with revenues spread over multiple years. This reduces revenue and margin short term, but it gives us a more visible business and greater market opportunity in the long term. And as we reach scale, the benefits again are very significant indeed. (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 4226–4232)

Returning to the list of problems with the Common Core of State Standards, a fourth set of problems stem from the Common Core's involving a heavy component of "benchmarking," that is, "money-centered practice…about profits versus costs, and assets, and net worth…about assets minus liabilities" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 773–776). As Schneider (2015) points out, this practice likely construes teachers and student as "assets or liabilities—to the school's profit venture" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 773–776), not as living, breathing human beings.

A fifth problem centers on questions over whether national standards are even realistic, desirable, or feasible, for example: Is a set of standards that portends to accommodate every bit of the diversity within individuals, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, within 50 United States, desirable or even possible? (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 702–703). Local educational agencies (LEAs) and state educational agencies (SEAs) have the most "accurate," up-to-the-moment, on-the-ground information about what individual schools and districts need in order to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of the children in those schools and districts. Thus, it is LEAs and SEAs who are best positioned to make decisions about educational reform—about how efforts and monies can best be allocated for their children, teachers, and administrators.

A final concern with the Common Core, which emerges from the above is as follows: What do standardized tests which claim to assess students' meeting of "national standards," of mastery of a universalized, "one size fits all," thus necessarily watered down, homogenized, devoid of local color and culture, curriculum, actually measure? Do they authentically measure whether students have "mastered knowledge they can translate into real-world situation?" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 866–868).

RACE TO THE TOP: An Extra Push for the Common Core

As mentioned previously, in the Spring of 2009, fifty-one states and US territories signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU), committing themselves to the development and adoption of a common core of "internationally benchmarked" state standards in English-language arts and mathematics for grades K-12 (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1686–1693). As Schneider (2015) notes, the CCSS Memorandum of Understanding (CSSO MOU)

> provided the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) with a convenient document to include as part of its upcoming Race to the Top (RTTT) funding competition—one in which states were expected to show evidence of "common standards" and associated, consortium-developed assessments in vying for possible millions in federal education dollars. (Kindle locations 1696–1703)

In fact, "the Obama administration specifically named the CCSS MOU as an acceptable verification of a state's commitment to needed reform" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1696–1703).

Race to the Top appeared as a response to the realization that the precedent educational reform initiative, No Child Left Behind, had been overly reliant on achievement-based assessments and had been holding schools responsible for what happens to students, even when they were not in the classroom (Downey, Von Hippel, & Hughes, 2008 as quoted in Childs & Russell, 2017, p. 237). Moreover, NCLB's approaches for evaluating school performance, for measuring student learning, and mechanisms for improving schooling outcomes had been found to be impractical (Manna, 2010 as quoted in Childs & Russell, 2017, p. 240). Worse, NCLB had been held responsible for creating a scenario which encouraged if not obliged states and local schools to lower standards for student performance in order to achieve "Adequate Yearly Progress," (Childs & Russell, 2017, p. 240).

Race to the Top intended to simultaneously retain certain aspects of NCLB, for example, a focus on (1) achievement gaps related to race, (2) accountability, and (3) standards (Au, 2009) and in the meantime, put an end to the NCLB practices of

> 1. punishing schools with low test scores and 2. forcing certain subjects that are not tested, e.g. the arts, out of school curricula, and 3. forcing teachers to "teach to a test". (Hourigan, 2011, p. 60)

The funding for Race to the Top appeared in February of 2009, when Congress signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) into law. ARRA allocated $787 billion in tax cuts and economic stimulus spending, $4.35 billion of which was earmarked for a competitive grant system (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017, pp. 502–505).

Race to the Top is structured as "a grant competition in which states and local school districts (depending on the particular grant program) are rewarded based on their reform efforts" (Hourigan, 2011, p. 61). Four areas of reform were taken up by RTTT—teacher quality, student performance, college readiness, and charter schools (Hourigan, 2011, p. 61). The plan moreover calls for increases in funds for preparation, recruitment, rewards, and retention for America's teaching force (Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2009). The announcement for the Race to the Top competition was as follows:

> **Funding Opportunity Description Purpose of Program:** The purpose of the Race to the Top Fund is…to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; and **implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas**:
>
> (a) Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace,
>
> (b) Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals in how they can improve their practices,
>
> (c) Increasing teacher effectiveness and achieving equity in teacher distribution,
>
> (d) Turning around our lowest achieving schools" (Overview Information: Race to the Top Fund; Notice Inviting Applications for New Awards for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, p. 74).

Forty-six states and the District of Columbia competed against one another in two rounds for a limited number of large one-time grants, with 12 in total winning millions of dollars for their education reform agendas (Kolbe & Rice, 2012). There were three phases of the Race to the Top competition.

As Howell (2015) explains:

> Both Phase 1 and Phase 2 included specific education-policy priorities on which each applicant would be evaluated. States were asked to describe their current status and outline their future goals in meeting the criteria in each of these categories. (p. 59)

The Department of Education offered states technical assistance workshops, webinars, and training materials, to help them in writing their RTTT applications. In addition, "nonprofit organizations such as the National Council on Teacher Quality published reports intended to help states maximize their likelihood of winning an award" (Howell, 2015, p. 16). However, it was far from clear to states how, precisely, applications would be evaluated (Howell, 2015, p. 61).

Howell, (2015) notes,

> Forty states and the District of Columbia submitted applications to Phase 1 of the competition. Phase 1 winners Tennessee and Delaware were awarded

> roughly $500 million and $120 million, respectively, (which amounted to 10 percent and 5.7 percent of the two respective states' budgets for K-12 education for a single year). (p. 60)

> In June 2010, thirty-five states and the District of Columbia submitted applications to Phase 2 of the competition. Ten winners were awarded prizes between $75 million and $700 million. (Howell, 2015, p. 61)

In 2011, Congress allotted funds for a third phase, in which only losing finalists from Phase 2 could participate. A higher percentage of applying states won in this round, but the amounts of the grants were considerably smaller, ranging from $17 million to $43 million (Howell, 2015, p. 61).

States that won Race to the Top grants were obliged to undergo rigorous monitoring, including annual performance reports, site visits, and accountability protocols. Drawing down of funds was contingent upon a state's demonstration of its ability to meet the timelines and goals it had outlined for itself (Howell, 2015).

PROBLEMS WITH RACE TO THE TOP

Howell and Magazinnik (2017) characterize Race to the Top as "one of the most ambitious and creative enterprises in the modern history of U.S. federalism" (p. 502), where "federalism" is defined as "the strategic exercise of executive powers to promote major changes in state policies" (Gais & Fossett, 2005, as cited in Howell & Magazinnik, 2017, p. 507). This characterization emerges from the fact that state education agencies (SEAs), not the federal government, have historically been organized to fulfill two primary responsibilities: (a) effectively funnel state and federal funds to local districts and schools (Turnbull & Anderson, 2012) and (b) ensure local compliance with federal education policy (Hanna, 2014, cited in Childs & Russell, 2017, p. 240).

However, during the era of No Child Left Behind, state educational agencies "sought to transition from being organized as compliance monitors to occupying roles as intermediaries and implementers of education reforms" (Reville, 2007). Race to the Top fueled this fire, in that it required states that won grants to devote a least 50% of their funds to local education agencies (LEAs) for advancing school improvement efforts. These were to include

> 1. providing direct support to schools and districts; 2. addressing the teacher and school leader labor market; 3. strengthening connections between early childhood, K-12, and higher education; and 4. creating pipelines that would lead students into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers. (USDOE, 2013)

Failure to Demonstrate Improvement in Student Achievement

Hess reported that despite Race to the Top's efforts to spark improvements in student achievement, "Every one of the dozen states has come up short on its promises" (Hess & Weiss, 2015, p. 53). And, "As early as June 2011, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that the dozen Race to the Top winners had already changed their plans 25 times" (Hess & Weiss, 2015, p. 53). Moreover, as of 2015, nearly 15,000 schools were still identified as "low-achieving" (Council of the Great City Schools, 2015). Interestingly, almost 67.9% of these schools were located in urban areas (Hurlburt, Carlson Le Floch, Bowles Therriault, Cole, & Wei, 2011) that disproportionately serve students of color (Wallace & Chhuon, 2014).

Race to the Top Opens the Door for Federal Interference at the Local Level

Although RTTT portended to support state governments' independent efforts to address problems within their educational systems, in fact, RTTT grants were mostly awarded to states whose RTTT applications demonstrated a willingness to adopt specific policies for which the Department of Education and the president were advocating (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017). For example, the Department of Education maintained that ensuring schools a sufficient number of "highly effective teachers"—that is, ones whose students achieve at high rates—was key to improving student performance. Importantly, this assertion implies a presumption that teacher effectiveness can be "accurately" evaluated on the basis of "student growth" measurements, i.e., scores on standardized tests. Thus, RTTT applicants did well to include an evident espousal of the presumption that teachers' effectiveness could be "accurately" measured by their students' performance on standardized tests (Hourigan, 2011, p. 61). The ultimate consequence for states who did this was an automatic commitment and

obligation to continue the use of standardized testing, rather than their being at liberty to utilize other, more authentic means of assessment of student growth. As Howell and Magazinnik (2017) point out, by engaging in such moves "Obama and the federal Department of Education situated themselves… in a domain that historically had been the subjects of state and local control…" In so doing, they placed themselves "…in the center of [educational] legislative and administrative policymaking processes" (p. 528).

Thus, although RTTT supposedly encouraged independence at the state and local level where the design and implementation of new policy were concerned, in fact, the specific terms of the reforms were, ultimately, largely dictated by the federal government via the Department of Education. Moreover, as Haynes (2009) contends, the federal government wielded additional control over states' RTTT initiatives when it failed to award states the financial resources to build the human capital they needed to implement their RTTT goals (Center on Education Policy, 2007; Childs & Russell, 2017, p. 241; Haynes, 2009).

Another problematic issue raised by Raise to the Top centered on the following: In awarding RTTT grants based on state proposals' compliance with national standards (the Common Core), the federal government created a situation in which states are not really encouraged or frankly, not allowed, to conduct in-depth analysis of the problems within their specific states, within their specific contexts, on the micro-level of the cities, towns, and villages within which individual schools with their individual cultures, students, teachers, and administrators function. This is a set-up for failure—one cannot feasibly and effectively address issues within specific schools, within their specific contexts, without understanding the all-important structural features and details of those contexts. Firsthand knowledge of the day-to-day experiences of the students, teachers, and administrators in schools is key here. Establishment of standards for learning needs to be, to a large extent, the work of local educational agencies (LEAs), of the people who observe and participate in the day-to-day, ground level lives of the children in schools. Individuals and organizations that function on a distant, grand scale level, far and away from the schools for which they presume to create policy are in no position to do this work.

Further complicating the situation, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act had offered states monies for grant writing assistance. As Hess (2015) explains,

> The demands were so onerous that the Gates Foundation offered $250,000 grants to 16 favored states to help hire consultants to pen their grant applications. Racing to meet program deadlines, states slapped together proposals with empty promises. States promised to adopt "scalable and sustained strategies for turning around clusters of low-performing schools and clear, content-rich, sequenced, spiraled, detailed curricular frameworks." Applications ran to hundreds of jargon-laden pages, including appendices replete with missing pages, duplicate pages, and everything from Maya Angelou's poetry to letters of support for anyone who might sign a paper pledge…. As one reviewer said, "We knew the states were lying. The trick was figuring out who was lying the least. (p. 53)

Moreover, in pushing states to adopt evaluation systems that used test results to gauge teachers and to do so rapidly, Race to the Top "…ensured that many not-ready-for-primetime systems would be hurriedly rolled out" and that many policies would be poorly executed (Hess & Weiss, 2015).

Finally, chaos was created when some of these less-than-well-thought-out RTTT evaluation systems were rolled out at the same time as the Common Core and the standardized tests associated with it. The chaos resulted in backlash, including an "opt-out" movement in New York, whereby parents refused to have their children subjected to standardized testing (Hess & Weiss, 2015).

THE PLUSSES OF RACE TO THE TOP

Weiss contends that on the positive side, as a result of Race to the Top, "Forty-three states and the District of Columbia have new, higher standards pegged to college career readiness" (Hess & Weiss, 2015, p. 52). As states began to aim for higher targets, there was a simultaneous ratcheting up of proficiency bars. Weiss (2015) explains, "Virtually all (states) are replacing their old fill-in-the-bubble test of basic skills, tests that contribute to low expectations for student learning and bad teaching practices, with significantly stronger assessments" (p. 52). And

> A January 13 (2015) report from the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing confirms that the majority of questions funded by Race to the Top gauge such higher order thinking skills as abstract thinking and communication…. (Hess & Weiss, 2015, p. 52)

Moreover, "Thirty-eight states revised their evaluation of teacher effectiveness to include multiple factors, not just student test scores" (Hess & Weiss, 2015, p. 53). Weiss maintains that states that did not win Race to the Top grants, even though they applied, "…could easily have reverted to their previous educational policies…." but "…overwhelmingly chose not to" (Hess & Weiss, 2015, p. 52).

Howell and Magazinnik (2017) add,

> In the aftermath of RTTT, states aggressively enacted policies that were explicitly rewarded under the competitions….winning states adopted RTTT policies at significantly higher rates than both losing and non-applying states. And both winning and losing states were especially likely to adopt policies on which they made explicit promises in their RTTT applications. (p. 527)

In fact, "…in the five years following the RTTT competitions, states accomplished what would have taken several decades to accomplish, had they proceeded at previously established rates" (Howell, 2015, p. 62).

Howell and his research team noted that although states on average enacted about 10% of reform policies between 2001 and 2008, from 2009 to 2014 states enacted 68% of such policies (Howell, 2015). Educational reform policy adoption rates additionally increased each year between 2009 and 2014.

Weiss contends,

> RTTT helped fund a new generation of high quality, online assessment designed by states and educators to evaluate students' progress toward college and career readiness. And it helped states fund strong new curricula, instructional materials, and professional development resources tied to these new standards, all now freely available to educators across the country. (Hess & Weiss, 2015, p. 56)

And finally, as Howell and Magazinnik (2017) point out

> the policy activity spurred by RTTT constitutes a major accomplishment for the Obama administration. With a relatively small amount of money, lacking formal constitutional authority in education, and without the power to unilaterally impose his will upon state governments, Obama managed to jumpstart policy processes that had languished for years in state governments around the country. (p. 528)

THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA)

Faced with a tidal wave of criticism and pressure to rid the country of No Child Left Behind, in December 2015, the 1061-page Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law (Bellamy, 2016). Designed to go into effect in the 2017–2018 school year, the plan is portrayed as giving states "significant leeway in a wide range of areas" and scaling back the federal role in accountability and school improvement (Klein, 2016).

Although ESSA has been characterized as "a U-turn from No Child Left Behind (NCLB)" (*Education Week*, January 4, 2016), this might well be an exaggeration. States are still obliged to submit their plans for accountability to the Department of Education. Although states are now, in principle, free to define both their long-term goals and smaller, interim goals, ESSA still requires them to include (1) proficiency on tests, (2) English-language proficiency, and (3) graduation rates within these. The goals must moreover "set an expectation that all groups that are furthest behind close gaps in achievement and graduation rates." Although "Up to seven states can apply to try out local tests for a limited time, with the permission of the U.S. Department of Education," states must still test students in reading and math in grades 3 through 8. Although ESSA allows states to create their own testing opt-out laws, and states decide what should happen for schools that miss targets, the law maintains the federal requirement for 95% participation in tests. Such features clearly prevent ESSA from qualifying as "a U-turn from NCLB."

There are, however, several features that appear innovative and just might pave the way for fruitful change. For example, states must now feature "at least one additional indicator of a very different kind." Possibilities for such indicators include school climate/safety, educator engagement, student engagement, access to and completion of advanced coursework. Moreover, data on these indicators are to be included on school report cards, where they can be easily accessible to parents (Klein, 2016).

Although it is up to the states to decide how much each indicator will count, "academic factors" such as graduation rates and tests "… will have to count 'much' more as a group than the indicators that get at students' opportunity to learn and post-secondary readiness." Again, characterization of ESSA as a U-turn from NCLB is challenged. Moreover, "While districts and schools aren't required to use the information to figure out how to fix persistent problems….many will want to" (Klein, 2016).

Other persistent NCLB features include state and district responsibility for identifying "subgroups" of students, for example, English-language learners are struggling. But states must now for the first time provide test scores for certain "vulnerable" groups, including homeless children, children in foster care, and students from military families (Klein, 2016). If one of the vulnerable groups, including minority students and special education is falling behind the district must come up with an "evidence-based" plan for addressing this, to be monitored by the state.

Similarly, for schools scoring in the bottom 5% according to accountability measures, districts have to work with teachers and school staff to come up with an "evidence-based plan." These "turnaround" efforts will be monitored by the state. In schools that continue to do poorly for four years, the state will intervene with a plan of its own for improvement. The state can also take over a persistently failing school. It can fire a principal or turn the school into a charter. Districts can also provide parents with public school choice for schools that are seriously low-performing (Klein, 2016).

While states are expected to adopt "challenging" academic standards, this does not have to be the Common Core State Standards. Interestingly, "The U.S. Secretary of Education is expressly prohibited from forcing or even encouraging states to pick a particular set of standards (including the Common Core)" (Klein, 2016). This represents potential progress in granting those who work closest with individual groups of students in particular cultural contexts, those who are familiar with what the students in their schools need, with some agency in making decisions about what their students will learn. Nonetheless, as Bellamy (2016) points out, the ESSA has left control of the Common Core State Standards and hence the standardized tests "primarily in private hands: the Council of Chief State Officials, the National Governors' Association, educational service companies such as Pearson and McGraw-Hill, and the big venture capitalist foundations that provide funding and direction" (p. 6). Thus, states who do decide to continue to use the Common Core as the basis for their academic standards will, by default, continue to be subject to and feed into the inappropriate and disproportionate control that big businesses have wielded where US educational policy is concerned.

Other ideological and logistical problems persist: For example, states can include the test scores of English-language learners (ELLs) after they have been in the United States for only one year. This fails to take into consideration important factors like the child's age at immigration. As anyone

vaguely familiar with the research literature on—or with practical experience with—ELLs knows, children who immigrate at a very young age and experience second language immersion at school tend to become proficient in the second language much more quickly than do children who immigrate when they are older. Thus, a child who immigrates at, say, the age of 11 is much less likely to become English proficient within a year than would a child who immigrates at the age of 6 or 7. Hence, the requirement that the 11-year-old's test scores count toward the school's rating after a single year appears problematic. Yet another problem with test score reporting emerges in the requirement that only 1% of students can be given alternative tests. This percentage only accounts for about 10% of students in special education.

On a positive note, "the ESSA enshrines the Preschool Development Grant program in law," focusing it upon "program coordination, quality, and broadening access to early-childhood education" (Klein, 2016). Another high note is that funds are reserved for arts education and notably. But perhaps most notable, states will no longer be required to conduct teacher evaluations using student outcomes: NCLB law's "highly qualified teacher" requirement is, happily, no longer.

Universal Design for Learning

A particularly promising feature of ESSA is its advocacy for the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). References to UDL, "an instructional strategy that supporters think has enormous potential for reaching learners with diverse needs" (Samuels, 2016), are sprinkled throughout the ESSA. Samuels (2016) explains, "….the strategy encompasses a wide set of teaching techniques, allowing multiple ways for teachers to present information and for students to engage in lessons and demonstrate what they know." And, although

> Universal design for learning is for any student…it is seen as particularly important for students with disabilities, English-language learners, and others who might struggle with more traditional methods of teaching and testing. (Samuels, 2016)

Interestingly, "…UDL has been a defined practice since the 1990s" yet, "many people still don't have a deep understanding of the approach and

how it can work in their classrooms" (Samuels, 2016). UDL is not a pre-packaged curriculum; however, curriculum developers are using it to find new ways of presenting information. Rather, UDL is "an educational process that weaves itself throughout a school" (Samuels, 2016).

UDL encourages teachers to, for example, let students.

- Complete assignments that are alternatives to traditional essays and tests, such as illustrations, songs, or PowerPoint presentations.
- Develop their own goals for learning, broken down with teacher support into short-term objectives.
- Use assistive technology such as spellcheckers, text-to-speech software, or calculators.
- Take part in self-assessment strategies such as role-playing, video reviews, and peer feedback. (Samuels, 2016)

One school official noted

> Teachers are excited about those kinds of things because they are different. They're not reading 100 essays…I've heard submission of assignments has increased as an result….teachers are learning more about their students this way… They get to see where students would prefer to put their energy. (Samuels, 2016)

In sum, the ESSA represents much less than "U-turn in the No Child Left Behind Act," hanging onto key NCLB features like the requirement for standardized math and literacy testing for grades 3 through 8, 95% school participation rates for test-taking and pre-emptory testing of English-language learners. Nevertheless, there are features which allow one to hold out hope: Key among these are the efforts to return at least some of the control over "what happens in schools" to the local and state levels. As argued previously, decisions about curriculum, assessment, and accountability for any given school or district are decisions best made by local educational agencies (LEAs), by the people who work with and observe the children in specific schools and districts on a ground level, day-to-day basis.

Also key among ESSA's promising features is its advocacy for the use of Universal Design for Learning. This move appears an acknowledgment of the importance—previously, categorically ignored by NCLB—of taking into consideration children's individual learning styles. Recognizing that no two children are alike with reference to learning styles appears a possible

first move toward having children's individuality recognized by large-scale policymakers and the policies they create. Optimistically, this might lead to children's being recognized as the social and emotional beings they are. Such recognitions could open possibilities for meaningful experiences and progress in children's schooling and achievement.

Conclusions

American initiatives for educational reforms of the past few decades have been premised on an overly general, importantly fallacious assumption. This centers on a belief that if the qualities and abilities that enable students in other countries to perform better than US students on international tests can be identified, then educational standards that can get American students to emulate these qualities and abilities can be established. Getting American students to meet these standards, it is assumed, will position them to outscore students in other nations on international tests. And this, it is assumed, will establish American superiority, in turn establishing "international economic security" for the United States (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 1678–1683).

As Schneider (2015) has summarized, the "grand flaw" of the push for a set of common educational standards for all children in all US states—and I would add, to other standards-based reforms in recent decades—centers on an "…overarching goal of directing education into the narrow, business-serving direction of knowledge and skills most demanded by higher education and employers." This has made for a situation in which "…learning for the sheer joy of learning—learning for learning's sake—" has been "…scrapped in favor of a market-serving perspective" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 900–901). Tying educational goals for children to business interests "…creates a twisted, corporate-feeding distortion" in that it sends the message that "…education is ultimately valuable only if it receives the nod of approval from business." Moreover, "Creativity, innovation, invention, risk, self-expression…are life-enriching qualities that prove difficult to benchmark—and much more difficult to measure on standardized tests" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 900–901).

Such assumptions make all too apparent, a profound lack of understanding, if not wholesale obfuscation of what meaningful, useful education involves—of what "mastering knowledge that can translate into real-world situations" (Schneider, 2015, Kindle Locations 866–868) entails.

And if students aren't being educated in a way that enables them to master knowledge and to translate that knowledge into real-world situations, then it is roundly unrealistic to expect students to become the academically proficient, imaginative, productive, idea-generating, but also emotionally competent, self-regulating individuals a nation requires in order to function effectively economically—let alone to move an economy to a new and innovative phase.

Thin, Non-substantive, Curricula

This essential belief in a more rigorous standards as the rightful source and director of educational instructional approaches has moreover led to the development and promotion of "mile wide and inch deep curriculum" (Massell & Perrault, 2014, p. 196) by Standards-Based Reformists (SBR) like Achieve, State Achievement Partners, Gates, and other advocates and architects of No Child Left Behind, the Common Core, and Race to the Top. As Tanner (2013) elaborates,

> The narrow focus of the school curriculum on academic basics at times of economic crisis is an appealing route to school reform; it is simple minded, inexpensive and perfectly suited to electronic multiple-choice testing for accountability, economy and efficiency. But aside from the modern computer technology, the retrenchment to basic academic skills is a throwback to the skill–drill–kill curriculum of the nineteenth century. (p. 5)

As Condron (2011) points out, where teachers formerly aligned tests to the curriculum, there has been an "about face": Now the standards determine the tests, and the tests, in turn, determine the curriculum. And teaching to the test becomes inevitable.

This scenario, incidentally, harkens back to a moment in 1940s America, specifically to Ralph Tyler's enthrallment with "scientific" approaches to education, derived from the notion that "knowledge" could be broken into "discrete parts"; that "standardized materials" for teaching these discretely parceled bits of knowledge could then be devised. The next step was seen to be devising standardized assessments for evaluating how well children had digested the parceled bits of knowledge (Wilgus, 2013). And hence the birth of the notion that children's intellectual and academic abilities could be (literally) chalked up to a tidy little numerical value—namely their

scores on standardized tests. And hence, in turn, the beginnings of the phenomenon of what Taubman (2017) refers to as "Death by Numbers."

Nonetheless, as Tanner (2013) points out,

> Academic success is based on multiple factors, not the least of which is the motivation of the learner to develop the powers of sustained inquiry and application. Such learning cannot be captured by the convergent thinking style of the multiple choice test, but is idea-oriented and requires hypothetical thinking, time and patience. (p. 6)

Few elements could steer learners further away from thoughtful learning that generates problem-solving and hypothetical thinking than "mile wide and inch deep" curriculum which demands a "skill-drill-kill" pedagogical approach. And the current US educational system's large-scale resignation in this regard has produced a scenario in which "the power of the learner to deal intelligently with emergent problems is diminished" (Tanner, 2013 p. 5). Although possibilities for designing tests that encourage and evaluate "emergent learning and growth in critical thinking" (Tanner, p. 5) have been established, creating a climate in which such tests may prevail to any significant degree first requires a "…radical change in the mindset of the test makers and marketers in an entrenched and influential industry addicted to the multiple-choice structure" (Tanner, 2013, p. 5).

In fact, possibilities for assessment protocols of this nature have already been described. Marzano, Pickering, and McTighe (1993) outline one such protocol in their 1993 Assessing Student Outcomes: Performance Assessment Using the Dimensions of Learning Model. Marzano et al. (1993) begin by referencing the "academic and nonacademic competencies" identified in a 1991 Department of Labor report as "necessary for the modern workplace" (p. 9). These include creative thinking; decision making; problem-solving; learning how to learn; collaboration; and self-management. They go on to describe an assessment protocol based on the "five dimensions of learning," namely (1) positive attitudes and perceptions about learning, (2) acquiring and integrating knowledge, (3) extending and refining knowledge, (4) using knowledge meaningfully, and (5) productive habits of mind (Marzano et al., 1993, pp. 1–3). As is evident from the terminology used to name the dimensions, this protocol advocates for the assessment of student abilities, qualities, and skills that sharply diverge from those assessed by standardized literacy and math tests. These dimensions moreover refer to abilities, dispositions, and habitus for learning which, if

cultivated, are likely to result in substantive, lasting, and meaningful learning—as well as an ability to continue to learn. It is doubtful the same can be said of the abilities, dispositions, and habitus for learning promoted by the use of standardized tests to assess student learning.

Standard-Based Reform's Neglected Factors: "Non-academic Attributes," Families, Socioeconomics, School Climate, and Children's Socio-Emotional Well-Being

Although academic test scores are widely considered to be a reliable predictor of children's eventual occupations, incomes, and health status (Moore, Lippman, & Ryberg, 2015), a significant amount of research likewise recognizes the pivotal effects of certain "non-academic attributes." These include "…personal attributes not thought to be measured by IQ tests or achievement tests" (p. 10) that can either undermine or positively contribute to educational achievement. In adulthood, personal attributes, in turn, can either ultimately undermine or positively contribute to an individual's potential for success in the labor market (Almlund, Duckworth, Heckman, & Kautz, 2011; Lippman et al., 2014).

Moore et al. (2015) have identified several non-academic attributes considered critical to success. These include "social skills, social competence; positive relationships with family and peers…emotional well-being," as well as "physical health and special health care needs; activities, such as sports, art, and music;…environmental stewardship" (Moore et al., 2015, p. 1). Ashdown and Bernard (2012) additionally found that children considered to be "at-risk" for academic difficulties displayed significantly lower levels of competence in the areas of confidence, persistence, and organization. And interestingly, Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1993) found that "affective…-factors had greater influence on school learning than school culture and classroom instructional methods" (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012, p. 398).

In a related vein, Cohen, McCab, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) have pointed to the significant body of empirical research that demonstrates how a "safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climate fosters greater attachment to school and provides the optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002) and is associated with…school success" (p. 181). Moreover, "One of the fundamentally important dimensions of school climate is relational and involves how 'connected' people feel to one another in school" (Cohen et al., 2009,

p. 185). Accordingly, recent research has focused increasingly on the importance of children's attachment to "at least one caring and responsible adult" (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 185) at school.

Guhn, Gadermann, Almas, Schonert-Reichl, and Hertzman (2016) add that "Children who enter school with greater levels of adaptive behaviors such as being cooperative and helpful to others" are more likely to "develop positive attitudes toward school, adjust more successfully to school, attain higher achievement, and be more academically engaged" (Guhn et al., 2016).

Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, and Thornburg (2009) point to the ultimate significance of the above, namely that

> Effective teaching in early childhood education requires skillful combinations of explicit instruction, sensitive and warm interactions, responsive feedback, and verbal engagement or stimulation intentionally directed to ensure children's learning while embedding these interactions in a classroom environment that is not overly structured or regimented. (p. 398)

The recent educational reform initiatives in the United States have demonstrated a wholesale neglect of the crucial role of such factors in children's academic trajectories.

REROUTING EFFORTS AND MONEY: Transforming the Obsession with Standardized Tests and High Stakes Accountability to a Focus on the General Well-Being of Young Children and Their Families

What emerges in crystal lucidity from the above is as follows: Inordinate amounts of time, energy, and dollars have been squandered on a misguided and driven obsession with pinpointing a set of national educational standards for all children in all school in the United States, regardless of the local contexts in which they and their families live their day-to-day lives. This obsession is immediately succeeded by one focused on identifying assessment tools can be "perfectly" aligned to these standards. From these assessments, it is assumed, curriculum that will assure the successful performance on the assessments, of all students, in all the nooks and crannies of the United States, can be derived. As Tanner (2013) has neatly summarized,

> The narrow focus of the school curriculum on academic basics at times of economic crisis is an appealing route to school reform; it is simple minded, inexpensive, and perfectly suited to electronic multiple-choice testing for accountability. (p. 5)

What I wish to argue here is that the architects of the above-discussed educational reform initiatives have, for decades, been barking up the wrong tree. It is not only crucial but urgent that their fixation on locating a set of ideal standards with "perfectly aligned" assessments and, in turn, "perfectly aligned" curriculum, be redirected to intense focus on research that addresses issues of children's general well-being. Particular focus needs to be devoted to research on the relationship between children's social-emotional well-being and their experiences and performance at school. The above-cited studies—Ashdown and Bernard (2012), Cohen et al. (2009), DiPerna and Elliot (2002), Heckman and Kautz (2013), Moore et al. (2015), Pianta et al. (2009), and Wang et al. (1993)—open a promising door for beginning this project. Exploration of the findings herein is likely to uncover productive and functional inroads for addressing the obstacles young children and their families encounter in their attempts to access substantive and pertinent educational experiences in schools—experiences that will encourage and position them to, in Tanner's (2013) words, "develop the powers of sustained inquiry and application," and "growth in critical thinking," to become "productive, idea-generating" individuals, as described previously. Such a move just might yield educational reform initiatives that justify the expenditure of the billions of dollars, not to mention the considerable amount of time and labor that nationally initiated educational reforms have typically, historically demanded.

As an additional step in this direction, it might be profitable to continue the efforts of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), taking a more in-depth look at "non-academic attributes," giving non-academic attributes their due weigh, and continuing to collect data on the relationship between non-academic attributes and children's educational experiences and performance. The NCES has already included several non-academic attributes—including social and emotional behaviors—in educational surveys (Moore et al., 2015). Nonetheless, as Moore et al. (2015) have pointed out, "the importance of children's relationship quality is often overlooked in national surveys" (p. 4). And as Tanner (2013) reminds us, "No education reform can succeed if the curriculum ignores or violates the psychosocial nature of the learner…" (p. 9).

Focus might likewise be profitably drawn to addressing large-scale issues of socioeconomic inequities, specifically in access to (1) quality health care for young children and their families, (2) food and housing security, (3) resources for disability within families, (4) neighborhood safety, and (5) sanitation and other elements that determine children's well-being, and their consequent ability to effectively profit from the educational experiences offered them. Additionally, as Cooper et al. (2012) point out, workplace policies in the United States are "ossified and inflexible, making it difficult for modern parents to be with their children when their children need them most" (p. 5). All of these "outside school" elements largely determine children's ability to become educationally engaged, to develop academic self-efficacy, as well as their ability to develop social skills, social competence, and positive relationships with family and peers (Moore et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, as Abernathy (2007) points out, "…the US has a very unequal and class-stratified society" (19). And "However ambitious, [educational reform initiatives] have done nothing to address…long-standing resource inequalities in the US and its educational system" (Abernathy, 2007, pp. 19–20). I would argue that such "resources" and their unequal distribution include "out of school" elements, like those named above—access to quality health care, food and housing security.

Appearing to address these issues, at least tangentially, George H. W. Bush proclaimed as his first national goal for America 2000: "By the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn" (Tanner, 2013, p. 13). As Tanner (2013) notes,

> Common sense would tell us that this goal would require that no child would be living in poverty and suffering from inadequate nutrition and poor health, inadequate housing and other forms of neglect, and that all children would be growing up in a safe and nurturing environment. (p. 13)

But as Tanner (2013) further notes, "Unfortunately, the president's first national goal was never matched by the necessary programmatic plan and federal funding" (p. 13).

In fact, a 2012 report funded by the Center for American Progress entitled "The Competition that Really Matters: Comparing U.S., Chinese, and Indian Investments in the Next-Generation Workforce" found that

> More than a quarter of U.S. children have a chronic health condition, such as obesity or asthma, threatening their capacity to learn. 2. More than 22 percent of U.S. children lived in poverty in 2010, up from about 17 percent in 2007. 3. Only 11 percent of workers in the U.S. have paid family leave, making it increasingly difficult for dual-earner and single-family households properly care for children. (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 6)

Moreover, "Children whose parents were classroom volunteers and created enriching home environments were more likely to score well on aptitude tests, get a college degree, find work, and earn more money" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 9). In the meantime, China, India, and major European countries are making significant investments in children and families while simultaneously reforming their education systems (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 9). They provide "more generous social and pro-family policies including paid maternity and paternity leave, paid child care and other government directed cash payments, and tax breaks for families with children" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 9).

We might, for example, gainfully take note of how in the UK, universal free preschool, combined with one of the most innovative family support models in the world, has led to integrated family services and early intervention in community-based "children's centers." Begun in the late 1990s, "…these investments in early childhood and pro-family services have improved child social behavior, boosted learning skills, and promoted home settings more conducive to learning" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 11).

The United States might moreover powerfully benefit from international models of educational programs specifically geared toward directly addressing children's socio-emotional development, growth, and health. For example, children participating in a program in schools throughout Australia, called "You Can Do It!" (YCDI), demonstrated "greater gains in their levels of reading achievement than the students in classes that did not experience the formal curriculum focused on social emotional competencies" (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012, p. 404). This curriculum additionally demonstrated notable effectiveness with children from diverse cultural backgrounds (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012).

Concluding Remarks and Implications

If educational reformists could see their way clear to questioning the appropriateness of awarding priority to the construction of a set of national standards, assessment tools "perfectly aligned" to these, and curriculum whose primary focus is to assure children's success on the assessment tools, then the existent scenario in which children are first subjected to "mile wide inch deep curricula," taught by "skill-drill-kill" pedagogies, then to standardized tests which cause them disturbing levels of emotional and physical distress just might be successfully interrupted. And as Holt (1964) has recognized, "Most children in school fail…because they are bored… because the things they are given and told to do in school are so trivial, so dull and make limited and narrow demands on the wide spectrum of their intelligence, capabilities and talents" (p. 174).

But as Cooper et al. (2012) have pointed out with brutal accuracy, "…the problems in the U.S. are not due to a lack of understanding of how to improve and focus our school system. The problems are related to the political will to do it" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 11). More precisely, as Apple (2007) contends, currently in the United States "…any money spent on schools that is not directly related to…economic goals is suspect" (p. 196). From a neoliberal viewpoint, "As black holes, schools and other public services as they are currently organized and controlled waste economic resources that should go into private enterprise" (Apple, 2007, p. 196).

Finally, as Kozol (1985) pointed out, oh so long ago, "…the primary answers to the issues raised in "A Nation at Risk" will not come from Washington. They will be provided in our communities and neighborhoods. The enemy remains our own shortsighted sense of class advantage at the cost of national well-being…" (p. 74). This presents a clear argument for making local educational agencies (LEAs) the primary voice and ultimate decision makers, when it comes to determining what reforms and initiatives will best benefit the administrators, teachers, and children in specific schools in their districts. This is far from a new argument; nonetheless, what children have experienced in schools in recent decades as the result of the latest educational reform initiatives demands its re-iteration—loud and clear.

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