

Happy Living in a Standards-Based World

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I have to say that one positive thing about teaching in an urban high school for over twenty years is that there was rarely a dull moment. Periodically school change was thrust upon us. On the flip side, those lively times were stress-filled, anxiety producing and created tensions among fellow teachers. Yet through all the discussion, dissension, and striving we teachers all learned and grew. And despite the challenges we were all basically committed to our students' learning. But tensions arose from the different ways in which teachers taught, and what we taught. The students were the victims in the sense that even teachers teaching the same courses taught not only in quite different ways but also taught different content.

The fact that I remained in this teaching position as long as I did was pretty much inertia. My school was conveniently right across the street from our son's fine private Quaker School, with its small classes, where the teachers were saints and spent the time and showed the respect with children to help them grow into ethical, intelligent, knowledgeable, good people; these students became successful go-getters. The special teachers who pushed students while being infinitely patient, fun, supportive, model adults was well worth the percentage of my teaching salary it cost us. Each child was treated well. These students went on to elite colleges.

Across the street at Hope High School, things were different. I had students recently arrived from Liberia and a multitude of other countries who spoke little English; reading for them was impossible so they faked it, copying their writing directly from text. In speaking, they simply picked up the words they heard from other students, improvising communication, often using street language. I had gifted white students who were teased by classmates; brilliant, articulate Hispanic girls who were leaders just by virtue of who they were and students of color passionate about ideas. We also had students who today might well be assessed as ADHD --

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders. These students were not well served in a large urban school at that time. Our large numbers of students now termed “English Language Learners” – the euphemism for marginal English language skills – often expressed their frustration by acting out.

Even with students who had been in our large school system over their school years, learning was variable. This was certainly so for students who moved in from another district, another state, often the transient low income students. Within our own school and departments learning varied. There was no commonality within a grade level or over the grades. It’s no wonder that achievement was less than proficient. Demographics largely determined what students knew, or didn’t know. Some could read and write when they came into our classes; others couldn’t.



Hope High School, a “good” school

My department head told me I should just speak to them in middle class “proper” English, so they would learn standard language.

I was afraid to meet that class we called the “lower level.” I imagined a “Blackboard Jungle” with unruly students. It turned out these students were very sweet in this small class, and when encouraged, had a lot to say that was interesting. The African-American student who wore dark glasses – quite sinister, Black Pantherish looking -- I later learned did so because he

Hope High School wasn’t always like this.

When I first started teaching right out of Brown University, there were three set tracks to which students were assigned. I was informed by my department head that the top track was to learn literary analysis terms; the classic texts were reserved for this level. The middle track had a “teacher proof” anthology – just go through the book page by page, ask the questions at the end of the passage. The “bottom track” students just needed to hear “correct” English usage.

had an eye defect. He was a very nice young man. These students not only understood our readings, they had strong opinions on the ideas of the text, which they articulated well. They spoke English just fine.

Decades later I can still see their faces. These became the lost students. It was the top track students who were being prepared for, and attended, the Ivy League colleges. I talk with people today who bemoan when Hope was a “good” school. That is, it was good for them. However, with high numbers of students of color attending the school, few of these students graduated.

At this time we had the children of the local University professors at our school. The East Side community liked the strict discipline in which I saw students “counseled out,” and expelled. The tracking system served the middle class white students just fine. The lovely row of cherry trees across the front lawn of the huge building had been planted there by the involved East Side parents. Today that row of bright, hopeful blossoming trees is still there, but that East Side community doesn’t send their students to the school; families move to the suburbs, or send their children to the private schools. If finances are tighter, students attend the public exam school.

When I began teaching at Hope, school wasn’t serving all kids. Then Hope High School exploded.

My students, clearly alarmed, informed me before school that spring day that the African-American students had come to school with weapons. Acculturated by my veteran colleagues, I heard but disregarded what they were telling me. I urged the students to go to their classes. Just another rumor. Then we heard it. Safely in my classroom on the third floor it sounded like the first floor blew up. Students charged down the first floor corridor with long poles, smashing the corridor lights. A rumor went around that one teacher was injured; later the story was only that she was pushed. Another rumor was that someone heard a gunshot. We shivered. Not true. The back door of my classroom was quickly opened and a teacher pushed in her students who had been in the library with its open doors. My classroom doors were

locked from the outside. No one said anything. No one knew anything. We didn't understand what was happening. We were stunned, clueless.

When the dust settled, our school was closed for two weeks. Our entire faculty and administration met in another building. We talked as a group and tried to make sense of what was from legendarily then on called "the riot." Slowly the pieces came together. Unlike today's random school attacks by disturbed individuals, this disruption was political in nature. Students charged that the system and some teachers were racist.

As a new young teacher at the time I listened to hear what was being reported to us as grievances that our students of color had. I heard the denials on our staff, and I tried to understand. For the next months and years we were provided "sensitivity sessions," with presentations and meeting in small groups. Some of us white teachers dismissed the event, or charged it was instigated by "outsiders," not our students. Others tried to address the charges.

Our English department rose to the occasion. We met, often. We threw out our old leveled curriculum and developed "mini-courses," a quarterly course change in which we could create our own courses on any topic. A student could choose any course. There was no leveling of courses. This was an attempt to respond to the charges against tracking students, clearly discriminatory. Little had been expected of or provided to our minority students. High level district and school administrators, to their credit, had listened to the charge of discrimination.

Our new mini-courses were untracked, leveled by student interest, intended to break up the tracking system and to relate better to all students. Our heroic, gray-haired distinguished department chair held open discussions with our English department. He was infinitely patient. He listened to us, and led. It takes a respected school leader to promote change from within. We met often, at times at a teacher's home. This was different from the virtual lack of real communication earlier. We changed our teaching and what we taught in an attempt to speak to students. This was stressful, fun and a lot of work, creating many new courses. We all were engaged, that was for sure. Veteran teachers put aside treasured classic texts - the formerly required Silas Marner's -- to try to fit this new world. But over time, standards

slipped. This major change was especially unsettling to our veteran teachers. Their world was shaken, belief systems challenged.

Times changed, again. The “back to basics” movement arrived. Our quarterly courses were eliminated. The rotating schedule, which gave each class a chance to meet at a better time of day, was dropped. A standard, boring same schedule of teaching five classes a day promoted ennui, not enthusiasm. Helping individuals was not in the program.

School became boring for me, so imagine what it was for our students. There had to be something else. Veteran teachers were happy. “The pendulum has swung back,” one delightedly announced in the faculty lunch room. We reverted to the old school “factory model” which leveled students, short-changing struggling students. Even with the dramatic impact of revolt we had had from students and their supporters, school easily reverts back to the old way without continued leadership.

We had no data to show if any of our changes had worked for students or not, only opinion. This was the pre-data era. We returned to the old stratified classes that had “worked” earlier. It had worked in people’s minds. The strong pull back to the old system was dictated by the beleaguered upper level administrators. Administrators were of the older generation, and this was the traditional way that they knew. Ostensibly this return to the old system was a better, more stable environment. But school lacked focus other than management. With our upper echelon of students now long gone with the white flight from the earlier disruption, the old system was restored. But school didn’t work in the sense of learning. Again, demographics determined achievement, determined destiny. And now demographics were 85% low income, children of color, English language learners and special needs students. Other students left our East Side school for the suburbs, private schools, or the city exam school. We were in a downward spiral; discipline issues increased.

Then came Ted Sizer, Ivy Leaguer, “Boy Dean” of the Harvard Graduate School of Education in his 30’s, former headmaster of Phillips Academy. Sizer became Chairman of the nearby Brown University Education Department, just a few blocks down the street from our school.

Sizer knew the school research. Jeannie Oakes of UC Berkeley had studied schools and found that only the top track students were getting the privileged information that prepared students for college. Primarily it was only those students in the top level courses who acquired the study habits, strong writing and reading skills, academic learning, terminology and behaviors that would serve them well in college and the workplace, the privileged class.

Sizer brought education researcher James Coleman to speak at Brown. Coleman's large-scale quantitative study showed that of all the "in-puts" -- teacher degrees, teacher salaries, media resources, class size, per pupil expenditure -- the one data piece that correlated with high achievement was demographics. By organization and structure schools weren't working to change student achievement. The school organization remained that had served well the factory workers versus the elite who were to attend college. Schools were designed to serve well only the top students. Sizer -- a product himself of private boarding schools -- popularized this understanding. He made it real to school people. As a teacher, it took me a long time to understand Sizer's common public statement, "Tell me a student's family income and I'll tell you his SAT score;" demographics determines a student's school success, not schools. Sizer bravely confronted the common disservice. Public schools for the most part weren't making a difference. Not everyone wanted to hear this.

Magically, and as profound a change as our "riot" that turned our school and our world upside down, our new younger Principal had befriended Ted Sizer, who spoke to our faculty. To my surprise, our faculty voted by an 85% vote to have a program in our school that would be different. I had been on a leave that year, ready to resign from a sense of lack of accomplishment in my teaching, but I heard about this change. Returning to Hope, I was asked to pick up the first full year of ninth grade students. I would be co-teaching in one large space with a social studies teacher. No longer isolated in my own classroom, we conferred on our cross-discipline courses and on our students. Talking with a colleague helped immensely. But long separated from talking with other teachers in our former "sink or swim" world of earlier years when there was no teacher collaboration, as a teacher group in this program we found collaboration hard. Today, in one of Sizer's great legacies which he termed "the conversation," teachers talk. Now we've moved from the conversation to regulation. Collaboration helps.

Students changed in our new program. Our teaching schedule carved out for us teaching just two long block classes that alternated day to day, then lunch, a team meeting period, and a private “prep” period. This was a dream schedule. Tracking was eliminated. I taught just ninth grade English, the same course for all, modifying as needed for the particular students. Struggling students became engaged, no longer separated off with other students who just didn’t get it. In mixed achievement level classes, more struggling students learned from the higher achieving students. With only one course preparation, I had time to think about my course. We got to know the students well. We still had the same number of students, so this was not more costly, but the teaching schedule burden of five classes a day with different courses was lifted, dramatically changing our work. I was teaching the same ninth grade English course to each group, varying as I chose. We would discuss literature, the students would have a break; they returned to class and wrote wonderful essays on their ideas. It was magic. It was real school. For everyone.

Students formed their own study groups, on their own, out of need. These were the urban students formerly short-changed or dismissed, the “discipline” problems. But newly motivated in our team-based program, many of our students took two early morning city busses across town in the early morning dark to meet in the library before school to process information, to compare homework, to discuss and help each other learn. Students who predictably normally would have dropped out of school told me they were going to graduate and go to college to become a history teacher like my teaching partner. John had attended private boarding schools and only knew how to show respect and support for each student. It was how he had been taught. John engaged students in thinking and ideas. Now inspired by school, a student told me she had arranged to spend an extra year in high school so she could attend our state college. One African-American student told me she was going to learn “computers,” as she said, “To break out of all this.” I understood “all this,” the poverty cycle. I marveled at the students. School was serving them.

CLASS ACTION

"Oh, he does his assignments for me," counters Jim Corrigan.

"He's a bright young man," says Marie Anderson, a math teacher, "but he's just undisciplined."

"I think he's borderline genius," Scheidler says.

"Okay," Anderson says, "this young lady doesn't have anything listed for second-year social studies. Unless she's taking it now, she doesn't have her history requirement."

Later, Scheidler says, "These meetings are great, because you're able to find out problems the students have that you wouldn't normally find out about."

"I remember when this group was in ninth grade, and we had one girl who changed her whole personality — suddenly she couldn't concentrate on her work. Then I found out from talking about it with the other teachers that she was pregnant. So we were able to pay more attention to her."

"Last year," Scheidler continues, "I mentioned during one of these sessions that I was covering literature on nuclear energy in my English class. And the chemistry teacher, Miam Toloudis, heard that and said, 'Oh, I could cover that at the same time in my class.' So we really planned it all together."

Jim Charleson, a history teacher, thinks the planning sessions also serve as a support system for teachers. He says that because teachers are often alone with students the entire day, they never get to see their peers and so have no way of sharing information.

"This develops certain insecurities in teachers," he says. "You're always threatened by your peers, because you never see their problems. And so you're reluctant to expose yourself and let on that you might be having problems. But now, with the planning sessions, I know I'm not so different from my peers. If I have a problem, I can go next door — if the kids are off the wall today, I can tell somebody."

Nancy Topalian agrees. And she adds, "If teachers are feeling better about themselves



Team teaching: History teacher John Zillboorg and English teacher Kay Scheidler coordinate their subjects and, as shown above and at left, frequently conduct a joint class.

and aren't isolated, it seems natural that by osmosis that good feeling is going to filter down to the kids."

In John Zillboorg's eyes, the Essential School class size is a major factor: "The real key to the success of the Essential School is that each teacher sees only 80 students. It's much easier to control. We don't have the fights they do downstairs. I know where my students are all the time. I knew when one was pregnant, because we have double classes and there was enough time for me to notice that she was acting funny, and so I asked what was the matter."

"You know the kids better," Charleson sums up. "You get into them as personalities. They're real people, not just 'the kid with the red hat.'"

Charleson elaborates on Sizer's principle that teachers act as coaches: "Instead of teaching a student how to read history, I teach them how to do history — I get the students to ask their own questions. It has totally changed what happens in the classroom. You might say I use his-

tory as a vehicle to teach them to think."

The approach differs starkly from Charleson's own schooling: "I don't remember everything every teacher told me. So details aren't important; what you do with them is what counts. In school I had to memorize every Roman emperor — in order. No one has ever asked me that during the rest of my life. I could have survived without knowing that."

"Ask any lawyer if he knows every case he's ever read. The key is not to have an arsenal — it's to know where the storehouse is and how to use the key to open it."

Charleson says of the Essential School's impact, "I see the growth in the students from week to week. Ask any other teacher if they see growth, even from year to year — they may see change, but I see maturity. It's exciting. I know. I taught the other way."

THE HALLS outside the dark-wood-paneled classroom are silent. This winter sunlight filters through a window into the room and sets

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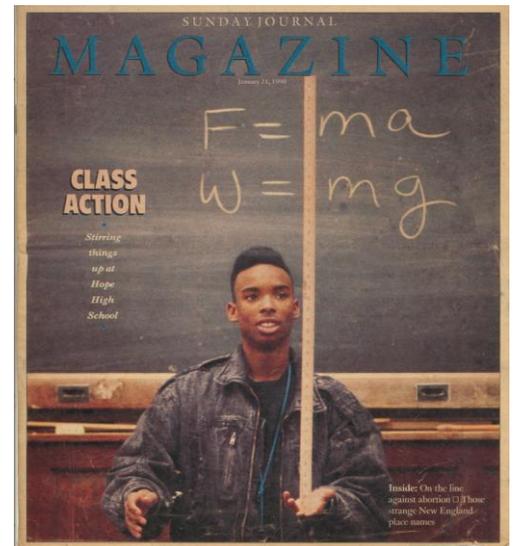
A teaching team brought common learning to students. With no data, the program was eliminated.

Sizer's program became a national Coalition of Essential Schools program. Our program was, improbably, called Hope Essential. A central concept of Sizer's program was that all students would learn the same things, in ways appropriate for them. This was radically different. It was also the beginnings of thinking on common state and national standards, to assess the same learning of all students. Sizer was, not surprisingly, ahead of his time. If we had been handed certain learning standards for all our students to understand, would we have knocked ourselves out to ensure our students mastered them? You bet. Out of personal and professional pride.

With this new team program, we saw the change in student attitudes, motivation and performance. Our students were in a close group within the larger school that formed its own common expectations; hence learning. We were turning these urban kids — those earlier lost — into students, providing them with the learning that could lead to greater successes. But we had

no hard data, no achievement data, not even attendance data, to prove students were learning more.

Again, as administrations changed, so did the school change. We had no facts or data on achievement to support our program. With Sizer's program working, our program was eliminated. The plan was to create different smaller "houses" in the whole building. The school quickly fell into the lowest school accountability level of Restructuring status under the federal *No Child Left Behind* regulations. Ironically, the program that wasn't leaving students behind was eliminated. I hear reports now, things work better. However, nothing comes close to the dramatic successes of turning students around that we had attained earlier. But we had nothing to show others that our program worked for students. We had no hard data.



A special needs student in a physics class, Hope Essential

For these and other reasons, I salute national learning standards and tests. Successes are reported and needs revealed and supported.

With Common Core national standards, assessments, and public reporting, classroom achievement – of all students -- is brought to the attention of administrators and the public. The national tests provide us with data on learning. Are test scores a perfect measure? No. But they're what we have to work with. Information is provided on what will be tested. Teachers work to help each student learn these key areas.

Today's test results get to the heart of our work in schools, which is student learning. They provide us with standards that guide learning from year to year. Under federal guidelines students are now measured on their growth over a year, not on whether they make the jump to Proficient on the tests. Attaining Proficient is a huge leap for many with disabilities that interfere with learning, ELL students, and students from low income homes and neighborhoods in which survival, not education, is primary. For this program of common standards and

assessments for all, we thank those at the top – the governors, state school commissioners and administrators, and federal officials. Left to our own devices to make curriculum decisions on what should be taught and when, we'd still be debating this in the schools.

Most of the national Common Core Standards are what we teach anyway – or should be teaching, in such a way that students retain the knowledge, and for all students. The national standards are fundamentals of reading, writing and math. But teachers need the big picture understandings, support and resources to be able to do this major shift to serve all students well. It doesn't just happen.

The state math tests in many states and in the Common Core standards ask students to explain a math problem and answer in writing how the problem is solved. Students must show math understanding, not memorization of algorithms. Grade level mastery Standards build from year to year, moving on the previous year's learning.

On literacy tests, students have to write about a central idea in a passage they're given, answer questions on close reading and inference, and write in different ways for different purposes. Students must learn to use contexts clues for vocabulary understanding. What was once high level literary analysis reserved only for some students – how word choice affects point of view and tone, read complex text proficiently – is now expected of each student. We can select text close to our students to help them learn these process standards well. The Writing Standards of research and assessing sources in today's information-rich world is required for all.

I marvel that critics charge these tests unfair. Unfair is not having common standards for every child, those privileged and also those lacking the privileges of relative family wealth, parent level of education, and stable and safe home lives.

These standards are good guides for teachers and good skills for students to learn. Many teachers now take pride in seeing their students' scores increase after teaching the specific learning needed and tested. Teachers still have freedom in *how* to teach. Research tells us that students do best on the state tests when the curriculum isn't narrowed to teach only to the test.

Most teachers don't just teach for test questions; they integrate the standards into their teaching. When teachers team up and integrate standards, their test scores soar, verifying learning. Great teachers can still be great teachers. The test scores correlate with teaching effectiveness. Ineffective teachers, or those who ignore the standards, show up in test score results over a period of time. Is this unfair? Cheating our students of important learning is unfair.

When teachers can team up, we can boost one another's spirits, help one another through the tough issues, celebrate successes, bring common purpose, and working together acclimate students to our teaching and learning modes. Preparing students for standards learning is hard to do alone.

Students whom we might have thought would never be able to work in a certain way on a focused topic can learn to do this well. We can change students. I saw this in our brief bright period of a transformed public school program under Sizer's ideas, which carved out a grand experiment. Teaching common standards means students learn better, all students. We needn't cheat the top achieving students; they still can and must be challenged.

Bright students are limited by standards, critics say. But if some students know the standards, they can do higher level work. This is how high demographic schools work. Standards restrict teachers' freedom is the other argument. But teachers have the freedom to be inventive in how they teach. This is explicitly stated in the standards documents.

Teaching no longer is private practice. We can't afford it. Most compelling is the growing gap between those students who succeed and those who will go unprepared out into a world where lower level jobs are disappearing, replaced by jobs requiring higher level technical skills. The rapid technology infusion removing old jobs leave poorly educated students behind in the dust. One must know how to read, write, reason, research areas, and understand math well. Our students' lives depend on this. It's well worth the hard work it takes us.

I guess one has to have been through what I've been through as a teacher, seeing students transformed, and as school system administrator—in the view from the balcony -- to really

understand why these learning standards and tests are good. Without outside test scores based on information that we're provided well in advance, we have no strong measure of our students' learning. Now learning – for all students – is at the heart of school.

The test isn't the end all and be all. But it is an indicator to us of learning. Learning must be the center of the work. Assessments are an important measure of achievement. Qualitative observations are important. But we have to also have hard data to see if students really are learning, if teachers are teaching in such a way that students learn, and are following a reasonable framework of study, rather than the earlier period of curriculum anarchy.

If students do quickly learn and know the standards understandings, that's superb. Teachers are then free to support higher level learning. Common Core Standards are not a limitation but minimal competency.

Developing common Standards learning isn't easy, it's not without stress and anxiety, but teaching never is. Having evidence in outside test score data is something small in the varied interactions and activity of school. State testing is viewed by many school people as disruptive to a school. State tests to provide outside objective assessments are criticized as taking time away from learning.

But the results are what we can learn from, and what we can show others – parents, administrators, the community, and colleagues -- as one piece of evidence that our students have learned. Test results are open to public scrutiny, as they should be.

We have the privilege and responsibility to help all students. We can exalt in our successes. Success should be recognized, saluted; needs noted.

With common core standards at each grade level nationally, more struggling students, and all students, have a fairer playing field when the same standards are taught, beginning in the early grades. National standards bring national resources to help with the standards learning.

Seeing outside test results on national standards is a point of personal and professional pride that shows that, as a teacher, one has served students -- all students - well.