

Reinventing America's Schools

Mr. Wagner presents evidence that the theory that high-stakes testing will improve performance is fatally flawed. To create better accountability systems, he argues that we need policy makers who truly understand the realities of schools and can work more collaboratively with educators. He also cites some important lessons from another country, where education systems have been reinvented through such a collaborative process.

By Tony Wagner

SINCE THE PASSAGE of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and now that many new state tests have been put in place, a great deal -- and nothing at all -- has changed in the universe of public education. What has changed is the frequency of standardized testing in schools and the consequences for educators and students of not performing well on these tests. What has not changed is the daily reality of teaching and learning for the overwhelming majority of students in America. To better understand how these two realities coexist side by side, let's visit two representative school districts -- Boston and a "good suburban" school district in New York State.

In Massachusetts today, passing the new state test is now a requirement for earning a high school diploma -- as it is, or soon will be, in most states. No longer can a district simply grant a student a diploma for showing up, going to class, and earning passing grades. In order to graduate, all students must pass the same standardized exam, which is given in 10th grade. Those who don't pass the first time will have several opportunities to take the test again.

But what is the students' reality? For the purposes of this article, I would like to leave aside serious questions about both the value and validity of the test itself and focus on the immediate consequences of this new policy. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test has been severely criticized on a number of grounds by Anne Wheelock, Walter Haney, and other researchers. FairTest and the Massachusetts Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education have also put forward proposals for better assessment systems (see <http://www.fairtest.org/>).

Four years ago, about 4,900 ninth-graders began their high school careers in the Boston public schools. Today, as I write, there are approximately 3,400 12th-graders. Nearly one-third -- 1,500 students -- have dropped out of the class in three years. Among those who remain, 1,648 students -- almost half the group that hopes to graduate this spring -- have not passed the MCAS test despite having taken it numerous times. Unless something changes suddenly, only about one-third of the students who started out together four years ago will cross the stage in their caps and gowns. The statistics are similar in most urban American school districts.

Isn't this just an urban problem? Not at all. Let me take you to a "good" suburban district in New York State, one that has long been considered a "lighthouse" district known for its innovative practices. When I recently began consulting in this district, I asked what the dropout rate was. No one knew for sure, but everyone thought it was very low. So we began to look at the data together.

We discovered that only eight out of 10 students who start out in ninth grade end up with a diploma four years later -- ever after accounting for transfers. But a problem looms that is more serious still. Right now in New York State, all districts are allowed to grant two different kinds of high school diplomas: a so-called local diploma and a Regents diploma, which requires that students pass state exams and take a much more academically rigorous course of study. Beginning with the class of 2005, all students will be required to pass Regents Examinations and meet more rigorous standards in order to receive a high school diploma. There will be no more local diplomas. In this "good" suburban district, of the students who graduated last year, only about 60% received a Regents diploma. The rest got a local diploma, which will not be an option under the new state requirements.

So the real scorecard for this district looks like this at the moment: of the 500 or so ninth-graders who started out together, 100 will have dropped out before graduation. Of the remaining 400, only 240 will receive a Regents diploma. In other words, more than half the students who start out in ninth grade do not meet the state standards for a high school diploma that are to become effective in just two years. To the great credit of the leadership in this district, as I write, this new challenge is being widely discussed among teachers, parents, and community members, and, with strong support from the local corporate community, solutions are being sought. No longer is the district resting on its reputation. There are stirrings of a deep urgency for change.

Let me give you one glimpse of another -- and more frightening -- juxtaposition of new and old reality. I was recently asked to lead a retreat for a large group of Midwestern suburban public school superintendents. During the meals and in between the sessions, there was much discussion of what one superintendent called the "Sovietization" of American public education. These superintendents, like virtually all others with whom I've spoken in the last year, were deeply concerned about the implications of NCLB, passed more than a year ago with strong bipartisan support. That law requires that all schools improve student achievement (as measured on annual standardized tests in grades 1 through 8) by at least 5% every year -- or suffer serious penalties. Many superintendents are concerned

that the law will encourage districts to set their initial "benchmarks" very low, so that they can easily show progress -- a trick many factories and communes used in the Soviet Union in order to meet production quotas. Many also doubt that the law is enforceable or that it will result in improved student learning. Nevertheless, it's the new reality for these superintendents, and they know it.

Now let me describe what has not changed for them. I showed the group of superintendents an excerpt of a tape featuring an English teacher in a suburban district teaching a 10th-grade class. The teacher reviewed the moral "problem" faced by the protagonist in a short story that the students had read. He talked about an imaginary problem that a boy might face if he wanted to ask a girl out on a date but had no money -- a topic that caused some amusement and much nervous laughter -- and then he asked students to begin to write a story of their own with a central problem, compose just the first paragraph, and then pass it on to the next author, who would write another paragraph and pass it on, and so on until the story was completed. In other words, the students were to undertake a group writing project.

I asked the superintendents to discuss whether they thought this was effective teaching and what their criteria were for judging. The overwhelming majority said that it was effective because they observed that students were engaged. The students appeared to be paying attention, and there were no discipline problems.

True enough. But there wasn't much thinking going on, either. The students were asked factual-recall questions only and then given a writing assignment that was more suited to an elementary school class, in my opinion. They were not asked for their interpretations of the story. They were not asked to discuss a real moral dilemma in their lives and compare it with the one in the story. And they were not asked to write an essay in which they would have to analyze a theme or an idea and provide supporting evidence. In other words, there was no intellectual rigor to the engagement; students were not being asked to use their minds for anything more than factual recall. Nor did the superintendents comment on the often demeaning manner in which this teacher interacted with the women and minority students in the class.

In order to graduate from high school, these 10th-graders must now pass state tests. They should also have the skills required to succeed in college, to vote intelligently, to serve on juries, and to add value to the knowledge economy -- all tasks that will require much more rigorous teaching if students are to be adequately prepared. Sadly, the overwhelming majority of superintendents did not see the gap between what these students were being taught and what they, as soon-to-be adults, must know and be able to do.

But their responses were hardly unique. My colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and I have shown this videotape to numerous audiences of education leaders in the last several years with the same result. In fact, when I've asked groups to grade the lesson, the average is a B+. But even more stunning is the range of grades that groups of educators in the same room -- often from the same district -- give the lesson: from an A to a D.

In summary, the new reality is that, in the last few years, with the increased emphasis on accountability and more and more high-stakes testing, the consequences of poor performance on standardized tests for students and for educators have grown steadily more serious. The policy theory -- what some might call the theory of change -- behind this new reality is that, if you raise the bar with tough new tests and raise the stakes for failure, performance will improve. But the theory is fatally flawed. It does not take into account the fundamental fact that, while we have a few examples of good individual schools, we do not know what a school system looks like in which all students master intellectual competencies at a high level. One simply doesn't exist anywhere in this country. Nor does the theory of change take into account the fact that we do not even have agreement on what good teaching looks like! Teaching is still considered an "art," performed in the privacy of one's classroom by people who prefer to think of themselves as self-employed. The number of school districts in this country that have effective teacher and principal supervision (not evaluation) programs in place can probably be counted on one hand.

Sadder still is the fact that the failure of this new accountability system is not likely to be blamed on the policy makers who passed the new laws. No, it is the victims -- teachers, students, and their families -- who will be held accountable. Ultimately, what is most likely to be "proved" a failure is the entire concept of public education. I do not believe that the intention of policy makers is to cripple or destroy public education. But I do think that most of the people -- Democrats and Republicans alike -- who pass these new laws know little or nothing about the daily reality of schools. I also believe that they do not have any idea how to create a very different kind of education and accountability system. It is this lack of informed, imaginative thinking and policy making that led me to write my most recent book, *Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools*, and to offer proposals for very different school, district, state, and national accountability systems.

But it took a trip to Denmark to confirm my hunches about what's possible and what works -- and to give me a sense of hope for the future of public education. In the spring of 2001, I had the opportunity to accompany a small group of educators on a study tour of the Danish education system, sponsored by Marc Tucker and Judy Coddling of the National Center on Education and the Economy. It is beyond the scope of this article to recount all that I learned on this trip, but let me describe a few highlights, from which we might learn. (Readers who want more in-depth information on the Danish education system should see the reports Marc Tucker and his colleagues have written at <http://www.ncee.org/>.)

Ten years ago, education reform in Denmark did not begin with new laws mandating more testing, as it did in the U.S. It began, instead, with a national conversation about values, about what it meant to be an educated citizen, as Denmark approached the 21st century. These discussions were promoted by the Danish Ministry of Education and took place throughout the country. The result is that today even elementary teachers know what skills students need to master for a knowledge economy and to be contributing citizens in a thriving democracy. The Danes decided that both education goals were of equal importance, as they began working to create much more rigorous education standards for all students.

Next, the ministry developed various incentives and policies that encouraged the creation of many different kinds of secondary schools and colleges, all of them rigorous, but which allowed students to develop mastery in different ways -- some through conventional academic preparation, others in more of a technical or trade school environment. It is important to note, though, that these different kinds of schools were all considered "college prep," and a correspondingly diverse array of what we would call community colleges has been developed in parallel. The result: all Danish students graduate from high school "college ready," and almost all go on for some kind of postsecondary education. In Denmark, there are many ways of becoming well educated, and there are carefully constructed safety nets for even the most educationally challenged and unmotivated students. There are almost no school dropouts in Denmark, despite the fact that the system is now educating an increasingly diverse population.

Meanwhile, the Danish tradition of small schools in which teachers spend as much as eight years with the same group of students continues to be the norm. Danes have long understood the importance of relationships in motivating students to want to achieve and of a more "personalized" approach to teaching and learning -- ideas that I explore at length in *Making the Grade*.

The Danes have also long understood that computer-scored tests "dumb down" the curriculum because computers cannot assess the most important intellectual competencies, such as critical thinking and problem-solving ability. So the kinds of standardized tests that have become the daily reality in virtually all U.S. public schools do not exist in Denmark. Instead, the Danes have created a comprehensive national system of oral and written examinations at both the elementary and secondary levels. Even more significant, these exams are developed, administered, and scored by educators -- usually from a neighboring school or district. The results are used to continuously improve the curriculum and to guide teachers' professional development.

In short, the Danish system works. Nearly all students are educated to high standards and motivated as learners. Educators are esteemed, and morale seems excellent. The Danes are justifiably proud of what they've accomplished. Can the system be imported "as is" into the U.S.? Of course not. But perhaps one of the most significant lessons I learned on my trip was the importance of having leaders and policy makers who truly understand -- and are committed to -- public education. I was told that nearly two-thirds of the Danish Parliament consists of individuals who are or have been educators. Perhaps this explains how and why the Danes have moved so far ahead internationally in creating an education system that meets the demands of the 21st century.

While it may be a well-intentioned attempt at ensuring greater accountability and educational equality, thus far the high-stakes testing approach to change appears to be increasing our rates of failure and dropping out. Thus it works to widen the gap between education's haves and have-nots. At a deeper level, this reform strategy leaves unanswered the fundamental question of what good lessons look like that teach all students to use their minds well as citizens, workers, and lifelong learners. Nor does it answer the questions of what school systems must do to ensure that all educators master the new skills needed to teach such lessons and to motivate students to *want* to learn. Rather than waste so much time arguing over the merits of more testing, policy makers, business and community leaders, and educators must learn to work together in new ways to "reinvent" the American education system so that all students can find both challenge and joy in learning. The Danes may have a few lessons to teach us.

TONY WAGNER is co-director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Mass. His most recent book, Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools, has just been released in paperback by RoutledgeFalmer. This article was adapted from the introduction to the new edition. He can be reached through his website at <http://www.newvillageschools.org/>. ©2003, Tony Wagner.

[PDK Home](#) | [Site Map](#)

[Kappan Professional Journal](#)

Last updated 25 April 2003

URL: <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0305mat.htm>

[Copyright](#) 2003 Tony Wagner