

# EDUCATION WEEK

DECEMBER 21, 2007

## COMMENTARY

### The Coming Age of Post-Standardization

By Andy Hargreaves & Dennis Shirley

For too many educators, what used to be a positive, rewarding work life has turned into a school reform nightmare. Once thrilled by the unique personality of each child, teachers now find themselves poring over sheets of data to figure out how to meet their "adequate yearly progress" goals. Enthusiastic learning has given way to test-score gains and bland basics. But while they may not yet be noticing it, there are signs that this era of education reform is coming to an end. We may be entering a new age of *post-standardization*, and teachers, like good scouts, need to be prepared.

Some of the omens are already here. Consider the influential report "**Tough Choices or Tough Times**," issued early in 2007 by the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. This widely circulated manifesto called for "a major overhaul of the American testing industry," to push the learning and achievement of America's young people beyond the basics. The commission argued that most high-stakes tests do not promote "creativity and innovation" or "facility with the use of ideas and abstractions."

"We categorize and dissect and compare and contrast," the report noted, "but we do not often ask our students to create something new."

**Dennis Shirley**



We applaud this shift in emphasis (ironically, brought to us by many of the same policymakers who led the push for standardized testing in the last decade and a half). Although America is definitely behind in its conversion to creativity, better late than never. No nation should be left behind, least of all the United States. But what other options are there? The United States today is making a final surge with an old and largely ineffective theory of change that is being sidestepped by more and more nations.

Imagine you are a newly appointed education official in a nation looking for policies to study and adopt in its school system. A couple of options stand out. Country A offers extensive measurements of learning gains for millions of pupils in all its public schools, generates only fair to poor academic outcomes, and ranks near the bottom of 21 industrialized countries in child well-being in a recent UNESCO study. Country B has no system of national testing at all, but its children are consistently at the top of tests used for international comparisons, and it is among the world leaders in the child-well-being rankings.



Which model looks the most attractive? Country A is great for number-crunchers and advocates of "data-driven decisionmaking," but produces poor outcomes and yawning achievement gaps for students. Country B has world-class standards of living and learning for students, but is data-impooverished in comparison to country A.

**Andy Hargreaves**

Substitute the United States for country A and Finland for Country B, and you have a pretty good picture of why standardized and market-driven school reform in the U.S. has fallen flat. It turns out that the data-starved Finns, who have needed no annual testing of pupils to leave no child

behind, beat the rest of the world in the math, science, and reading abilities of their 15-year-olds on international tests. What's going on?

One of us visited Finland earlier in 2007 and co-authored a report for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development on the relationship between leadership and school improvement in that country. In less than half a century, Finland has used its schools to transform itself from a rural backwater into a high-tech economic powerhouse. Finns view science and technology as high priorities, though not at the expense of artistic creativity or social responsibility. Finnish high school graduates rank teaching as the most highly desired occupation, and only the nation's top graduates are able to enter the profession, where they effectively lead Finns into their enviable position as one of the world's top learning societies.

Within this dynamic and future-oriented social vision, the state steers, but does not prescribe, the national curriculum. Teams of highly qualified teachers write much of the curriculum together, in ways that their colleagues can then adjust to the students they know best. Tellingly, one principal said, "Unlike the Anglo-Saxon countries, we do not have to spend our time responding to long lists of government initiatives that come from the top."

High-performing Finland has chosen a path to educational and economic reform that is very different from the government-driven, market-prompted short-term strategies that dominate U.S. policy. The Finns build their future by wedding education to economic development, without sacrificing culture and creativity. They promote a broad and enriching curriculum, rather than obsessing only about literacy and math; they raise standards by lifting the many, rather than pushing a privileged few. And they morally inspire, rather than financially incentivize, a high-status profession. Why can't our political leaders learn from this?

Almost equally high-performing Ontario, Canada's most populous province, experimented with several years of market-driven standardized reforms in the late 1990s, and the public rejected them, as well as those who proposed them. Education was one of the big issues to bring about a change in political control in Canada.

**It's time to accept that standardization has gone down like a lead balloon, utterly failing to inspire teachers, students, or the public at large.**

Ontario's new policies are making the curriculum more flexible once again, moving closer to the Finnish and away from the American model. The government has settled grievances with and secured support from the unions, developed ways for strong schools to help their weaker counterparts, and invested fresh financial resources to make all this happen. Results are promising, and the public's confidence in public education is rising. Here, indeed, is a kinder, gentler path to educational improvement in a country with many cultural attributes similar to those of the United States. It involves working with and through the teaching profession, rather than around and against it. Shouldn't Americans learn from these strategic and adaptable Canadians?

The United States today is making a final surge with an old and largely ineffective theory of change that is being sidestepped by more and more nations because it cannot raise standards in the creative, high-level skills that knowledge societies need.

In places like Finland and Canada, the world is increasingly embracing a second theory of change that we call "post-standardization." This new theory pays more attention to developing teachers' capacity to meet higher standards, rather than emphasizing the paper standards themselves. It replaces imposed standardization and privatization with networks and peer-driven improvement. Assessment for summative quality assurance is replaced by assessment *for learning*, where data are used to inform ongoing decisions to produce better outcomes. In this second theory of change, the teaching profession is a high-caliber resource for and responsible partner in modernization, not an obstacle to be undermined.

It's time to accept that standardization has gone down like a lead balloon, utterly failing to inspire teachers, students, or the public at large. Post-standardization, on the other hand, inspires people's commitment to and capacity for change by connecting a visionary future to a sense of

pride in the best of one's past. New economic and social needs beckon, and existing strategies are self-evidently exhausted. Other countries are beating better paths, and it's time for America to follow their lead. The future is not going to be soulless or standardized. Why should our schools be?

***Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley are professors in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, in Chestnut Hill, Mass.***