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## *Why the Standards Movement Failed*

### *An Educational and Political Diagnosis of Its Failure and the Implications for School Reform*

Lawrence C. Stedman

*State University of New York at Binghamton*

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#### **Abstract**

*In the first paper, “How Well Does the Standards Movement Measure Up?” (Stedman, 2010), I documented the movement’s failure in diverse areas—academic achievement, equality of opportunity, quality of learning, and graduation rates—and described its harmful effects on students and school culture.*

*In this paper, I diagnose the reasons for the failure and propose an alternative agenda for school reform. I link the failure of the standards movement to its faulty premises, historical myopia, and embrace of test-driven accountability. Its advocates blamed educational problems on a retreat from standards, for which there was little evidence, while ignoring the long-standing, deep structure of schooling that had caused persistent achievement problems throughout the 20th century. As part of the audit culture and the conservative restoration, the movement ended up pushing a data-driven, authoritarian form of schooling. Drawing on reproduction theories and analyses of the neoliberal reform project, I make the case for repealing No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top and outline a progressive framework for reconstructing schools.*



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## Introduction

In the previous paper, “How Well Does the Standards Movement Measure Up?” (Stedman, 2010), I assessed the impact of the standard’s movement on the nation’s schools and students over the past quarter century. I examined a diverse array of quantitative and qualitative evidence, including test-score data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the SAT, and the international assessments. I also examined changes in curriculum and school culture, as revealed by case studies, transcript studies, and national surveys. My purpose was to determine what had happened as a result of the expanded testing, changes in curricular standards, and imposition of state and national accountability systems.

The overall picture is a bleak one. In spite of a generation of effort, from *A Nation at Risk* and Goals 2000 to state testing programs and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), there are few signs of improvement. Achievement has generally stagnated, especially at the high school level; most minority achievement gaps remain as large as they were in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and students still struggle in the major subjects. Civic and workplace preparation are still weak. Class and race inequalities—and segregation—remain vast and vexing problems. Even in the two areas where the standards movement has apparently achieved some success—math achievement at the lower grades and academic enrollments in high school—there are grounds for skepticism. The gains were largely superficial, other forces such as teaching-to-the-test and social promotion were responsible, and serious deficiencies remain.

Beyond their failure to improve achievement, standards-based accountability systems have constricted curricula and warped school culture. NCLB has made things worse, not better. A new Taylorism and a ritualistic compliance with mandates are undermining learning. Testing and grades, not learning, drive instruction. School climates have worsened, with the effects stratified by race and class. A fixation on reading and math testing is short-changing social studies and the arts. Proficiency-based curricula and bureaucratic schooling are devastating the quality of life inside schools and driving away students and teachers. During most of the standards era, drop out rates grew and reading of all types declined. Teachers have joined students in leaving and are now dropping out at alarming rates.

It is time that policymakers, politicians, and educators acknowledge that the standards movement has failed. We need a radically different approach to school reform, but one that is grounded in an understanding of the reasons for the movement’s failure.

In this paper, I provide an educational and political diagnosis of the standards movement and what has gone wrong. This paper is divided into two parts. In Part I, I describe the movement’s faulty premises, its failure to address a century-long record of poor achievement, and its transformation into a bureaucratic accountability system. In Part II, I deepen the analysis by examining the connections of the standards movement to the neoliberal reform project and capitalism. In it, I describe the root problems of NCLB and Race to the Top and propose a progressive alternative for school reform.

## **Part I: An Educational and Historical Diagnosis**

### ***Faulty Premises***

The standards movement was founded on two fictions: that there had been a major achievement decline in the 1960s and 1970s and that schools were responsible. Its proponents argued schools had embraced a soft, student-centered pedagogy, shifted from excellence to equity, and lowered standards (Copperman, 1978; Hirsch, 1987; Itzkoff, 1994; Ravitch, 1995). Driven by ideology and traditionalism, and repulsed by the social movements of the 1960s, many educators were dismayed by an apparently large SAT decline and worried about a loss of American excellence. The great decline, however, was largely a myth (Stedman, 1998; 2003). NAEP scores were generally level; College Board achievement scores had gone up in English, the sciences, and foreign languages; and a short version of the SAT, the PSAT, given to nationally representative samples, showed roughly flat trends. The score declines, where they appeared, were modest and largely due to demographic changes in test-takers. Nor were they caused by an abandonment of traditional pedagogy and standards.

While it was fashionable to blame open classrooms, few children experienced them and, in any case, elementary students had stable or rising scores in the 1970s (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987). Using faulty evidence, *A Nation at Risk* decried a “curricular smorgasbord” in high schools, but better data showed the claim was unjustified (Stedman & Smith, 1983). The notorious SAT decline of the 1960s and 1970s, which was caused mostly by demographic changes, could not be readily linked to school changes (Stedman, 1998). Investigators found that traditional high schools also had SAT declines, as large as those in experimental schools (Jackson, 1977). They discovered that high schools with stable SAT scores had also innovated with their curricula and grading (Echternacht, 1977). Even the Advisory Panel on the SAT Decline (1977), which was concerned about “diminished seriousness” in schools, rejected “any broadside condemnation of ‘more electives’” and advocated even more variation in instruction (pp. 46–47). It concluded that the era’s political upheavals were the only way to explain the “suddenness and concentration” of the SAT decline (pp. 37–38)—half of it came in just 3 years in the early 1970s (Advisory Panel, 1977, p. 6; NCES, 2008, p. 205). The traumas of the Vietnam War, assassinations, “burning cities,” and Watergate had deeply affected the nation’s students (Advisory Panel, pp. 37–38).

### ***Historical Myopia: A Century of Ignorance***

Those who pushed the standards agenda often romanticized the schooling and accomplishments of students in earlier eras. Yet, even before the supposed retreat from standards in the late 1960s and 1970s, achievement was poor (Stedman, 2003). Nationwide assessments from the 1940s through the early 1960s showed that U.S. high school students and graduates had weak academic skills and major deficiencies in core subjects (Flanagan, 1962; Flanagan et al., 1964; Hyman, Wright, & Reed, 1975; Stedman, 1998). Although these students had experienced an old-fashioned regimen of grades, exams, and the traditional canon—and were a more select group than today’s students—they still struggled with basic material in literature, history, arts, geography, and civics. In 1960, for example, Project Talent, a study of a nationally representative sample of 440,000 public high school students, found that high school seniors had trouble with passages from such classic writers as Austen, Cather, Conrad, Kipling, and Verne (Flanagan, 1962, pp. 212–213). They also had trouble answering questions on articles from

magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Look*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Time*. The project director concluded that the material in “relatively popular magazines is beyond the level of reading comprehension attained by the average graduates of our high schools” (Flanagan, 1962, p. 212). The study also revealed that the “typical high-school student knows relatively little about art” (Flanagan et al., 1964, p. 3-113). Only about half, for example, knew who had painted the Mona Lisa. Most seniors also did not know several basic constitutional legal terms (Flanagan et al., 1964, p. 3-114). In 1964, the first international math assessment showed that even some of the best students in the United States—high school seniors in college-preparatory math programs—had serious academic problems. They scored only 20% correct and were last by a large margin (Husén, 1967a, p. 289; 1967b, p. 24).

The difficulties predate the life-adjustment movement of the 1950s, which, like the '60s, was a favorite target of standards advocates and the *bête noir* of earlier critics (Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch, 1983; cf. Bestor, 1985; Hofstadter, 1962). In the 1950s, Gallup surveyed the general knowledge of adults several times and found serious weaknesses among those who had gone to school during the previous decades (Hyman et al., 1975). In 1955, for example, Gallup found that high school graduates, ages 25-36, averaged only 34-65% on questions dealing with domestic events, public figures, history, the humanities, geography, and science (Hyman, Wright, & Reed, 1975, p. 133). (College *graduates* did much better but, as a small and select group, their performance did not reflect how well the schools were doing generally. Still, even they had trouble with the humanities questions.)

Those who have promoted certain types of cultural and academic literacy would be astounded by the gaps in knowledge in this earlier period. Most high school graduates did *not* know who wrote “A Midsummer-Night's Dream” or who composed the Messiah (Hyman et al., 1975, Appendix B, Table 2.5). Only 61% knew who authored Tom Sawyer or what the capital of Spain was. Only about half knew that Montana bordered Canada or that Mt. Everest was the highest mountain. Only 8% knew that Rubens was a painter and only 6% knew which planet is closest to the Sun.

Serious academic problems show up repeatedly in different inquiries going back through the years. In the early 1940s, first-year college students floundered so badly on a *New York Times* survey of basic historical information that Congress called for an investigation of the nation's schools (Fine, 1943). In the 1920s and 1930s, high school and college students were doing poorly across the curriculum (Dawson, 1924; DeGraff, 1925; Learned & Wood, 1938). Longitudinal studies showed that most of what they learned, they soon forgot (Pressey, 1933).

Some standards advocates took an even longer view. They blamed the 1918 Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education report, which had emphasized social and personal development, for a century-long institutional retreat from academic excellence (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918; Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch, 1995). Low achievement, however, was widespread even before that (Stedman, 2003). During the first decades of the 20th century, high school students struggled greatly in math and social studies (Ruch et al., 1926; Ruch & Stoddard, 1927; Symonds, 1927; Whittington, 1991), and even the tiny, elite group of college-bound seniors regularly failed their College Board entrance exams (Fiske, 1920, 1925). Young adults lacked basic historical, literary, and scientific information (Yerkes, 1921; Yoakum & Yerkes, 1920). Such weak achievement helped fuel the growth of progressive education because it showed that traditional schooling, with its emphasis on tests, facts, and memorization, was failing.

## ***The Structural and Political Roots of the Failure***

Poor achievement, therefore, is a long-standing problem and not one caused by a modern collapse of standards. While social forces beyond the school, such as anti-intellectualism and consumerism, help sustain this, its persistence also implicates the historical deep structure of schooling: assembly-line teaching, encyclopedic curricula, test-based accountability, and impersonal institutions. Textbooks and chalk-and-talk methods have dominated teaching for over a century. Schools remain obsessively concerned with measuring, controlling, and classifying students. At the secondary level, many schools still have madcap 40-minute periods and excessive teacher workloads—120 or more students—that hamper sustained, engaging instruction. The international assessments have repeatedly shown the U.S. has superficial teaching and a shallow curriculum (Stedman, 1997).

Ignoring these realities produced misguided school reform. In the 1980s, the major reform reports exaggerated the test score decline and advocated a return to old-fashioned practices and standards. Goals 2000, IASA, and NCLB echoed—and legislated—their calls. Under the sway of the conservative restoration, politicians promoted work intensification and accountability (Apple, 2000; Shor, 1992). It would be a mistake, though, to construe this as simply a conservative effort. The political and social shift to the right spanned both parties, and both neoconservatives and neoliberals supported the standards movement (Apple, 2006). Yet, in spite of a national effort over the past quarter-century, their standards-based policies have not produced academic quality.

A revealing, though flawed, epistemological and political move was made at the outset. Policymakers and educators generally conceived of standards in narrow technocratic terms. They established standards of curricular material to be covered and tested, with the focus on benchmarking student performance and not looking at the school culture and physical conditions in which the learning was taking place. Even if one embraces the logic or mantra of standards, one could conceive of a much different, multi-dimensional constellation of standards: workplace standards, school climate norms, aesthetic aims, and quality of life guidelines. There also could have been criteria for community involvement; cultural pluralism; and shared, democratic governance. Contemplating these shows starkly how conservative and limiting the *standard* approach to standards has been. One can just imagine, though, what would happen if standards were set up for such fundamental qualities as academic engagement and democratic life. Rubrics would be ginned up and *students*, not the institution, would be scrutinized and then rated for how well *they* were measuring up; an approach that would have blatantly ignored the ways that school organization, authoritarian structures, and imposed pedagogy alienate both students and teachers. Ryan (1976) was right that social systems and institutions blame the victim.

Other political and bureaucratic factors contributed to the movement's failure. Originally, *national* standards had been conceived of as a combination of content, performance, and opportunity-to-learn standards (Ravitch, 1995). The effort soon unraveled. What were supposed to have been rich, *voluntary* standards that would permeate school culture and reshape teaching, as had started to happen with NCTM's standards, became *compulsory* standards of a vastly different nature. State curricular standards ended up being sprawling lists of skills and knowledge that lacked depth and intellectual rigor. Most received low marks (Finn, Petrilli, & Julian, 2006). With their bizarre amalgam of academic trivia and age-inappropriate benchmarks, they were justifiably satirized (Ohanian, 1999). The third element—equity in resources and learning environments—did not fit the excellence agenda and was largely discarded, helping

keep achievement gaps wide. Legislators rejected national resource standards because of a concern over too much government involvement in education and a desire to preserve federalism (Ravitch, 1995). Nevertheless, they still passed IASA and NCLB with far greater federal intrusion into local and state schooling. Testing and “excellence” had trumped equity.

As the push for accountability grew, state and local educational systems became more tightly coupled, thus weakening local control and focusing teaching even more on the tests (Fusarelli, 2002, McNeil, 2000).<sup>1</sup> To satisfy NCLB’s requirements and produce higher success rates, many states dumbed down their tests and lowered proficiency standards (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The original call for authentic assessment gave way to low-level, multiple-choice testing. Inside schools, teachable moments and long-term projects were sacrificed at the altar of drill and test preparation (Fagnoli, 2003; Mathison & Freeman, 2003). The resulting system has diminished curricula, deskilled and demoralized teachers, increased dropouts, and further centralized power in state bureaucracies (Mathison & Ross, 2004; Ross, 1996).

## **Part II: A Political Economy Analysis**

### ***The Audit Culture***

Some will argue it is a mistake to equate the standards movement with the bureaucratic, test-driven accountability nightmare that has arisen. To be sure, it is worth distinguishing the initial curricular efforts of the professional subject matter organizations from much of what has arisen. At the same time, we must remember that their standards activities were funded by the federal government—and were part of an overall Bush-Clinton school reform strategy, which also included performance standards and curricular testing (Kendall & Marzano, 2004; Ravitch, 1995). The entanglement of standards with bureaucratic accountability was inevitable. Viewing the movement merely as a beneficent pedagogical endeavor ignores the larger political context and these central elements of its agenda. Moreover, a generation of experience shows that the hopes for proficiency-based, standards-driven reform failed in the real world and that expanded testing has only made things worse. In spite of that, some policymakers, including NCLB’s architects, still argue testing has not gone far enough (Stedman, 2009, 2010). We must look more closely at this mindset and how it has reshaped the work of schools.

Standards-based accountability systems are part of a pernicious “audit culture” that emphasizes enumeration and regulation (Apple, 2006). It has turned learning into a commodity (Kozol, 2005) and produced what Freire (2001) calls “bureaucratized” minds (pp. 42, 102, 111). Within schools, institutionalized accounting schemes transform teacher and student work. Curiosity is suffocated and social problems are recast as issues of test performance. Professional learning communities degenerate into “data teams” and “data huddles” with a singular focus on raising test scores and improving the *numbers* (Mikoda, 2009; Servage, 2008). Students are repeatedly drilled for the next test and, when data is available, remediated for their failings on the last one. Such systems depend upon the alienated labor of both students and teachers.<sup>2</sup> They also

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Aleksey Tikhomirov for highlighting the linkage of tight-coupling and the standards movement.

<sup>2</sup> My gratitude to Marianne Lawson for pointing out Freire’s phrase and providing a fresh look at how Marx’s concept of alienation applies to traditional schooling. I also thank Carol Mikoda and Betta Borelli, veteran secondary school teachers, for describing to me their first-hand experiences with professional learning communities.

threaten liberty and democracy in fundamental philosophical and political ways (Fromm, 1966; Gibson, 2008; Kesson, 2004). Few standards advocates recognize the need for regional and variable standards or understand how centralized standards conflict with community, autonomy, and liberty (Strike, 1997). One size, indeed, fits few (Ohanian, 1999).

### *Repealing No Child Left Behind*

On a national level, we need to organize to repeal NCLB. It has imposed a counter-productive accountability system that substitutes testing for education (Kohn, 2004; Meier, 2004); fails to address long-standing inequalities (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Karp, 2004); and promotes privatization at the expense of public education (Kohn, 2004). NCLB also subverts democratic participation in shaping school policy (Meier, 2004).

Like the standards movement generally, NCLB has misdiagnosed the root causes of low test scores and has disregarded how public policies sustain poverty (Anyon & Greene, 2007). Its supporters do not address the “significant economic realities, and existing public policies, that severely curtail the power of education to function as a route out of poverty for poor people” (Anyon & Greene, 2007, p. 157). They ignore how “job, wage, housing, tax, and transportation policies maintain minority poverty in urban neighborhoods” and undermine “systemic, sustained improvements in the schools” (Anyon, 2005, p. 66).

While the backers of NCLB and proficiency-driven schooling celebrate inconsequential gains on NAEP and state tests, savage inequalities are devastating communities and schools, and deeply scarring students, families, *and* teachers (Gibson, 2008; Kozol, 1991, 2005). The spectacle is jarring. With each new release of NAEP results, NCLB supporters proclaim success, no matter how small or limited the gains have been (Stedman, 2009, 2010). In 2004, for example, in spite of decidedly weak results, Secretary of Education Spellings claimed that long-term NAEP trends were “proof that *No Child Left Behind* is working” (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In 2008, although the long-term NAEP revealed that the overall picture had changed little since 2004 and that NCLB had dampened progress even among the youngest students, she still asserted, “It shows that we are on the right track... It proves the policy principle.” “Accountability is working” (Glod, 2009; also see Bush, 2008).

One of the fundamental problems is that proponents of test-driven schooling accept test score gains as *prima facie* evidence of improved learning, without questioning what is causing them. Given all the testing, however, mandated by NCLB and the state testing systems it has spawned, any such gains must be examined carefully. They are often artificially induced and short lasting, reflecting drilling and teaching-to-the-test rather than genuine learning. The dramatic increase in attention to NAEP tests adds to the problem. As NAEP has expanded into the business of state testing and comparisons, state education departments have actively promoted the use of NAEP test items in classroom instruction (Stedman, 2010). Any improvements on either state or NAEP tests, therefore, are increasingly suspect.

In any event, a series of NCLB assessments have raised serious questions about its efficacy and impact (Fuller, Wright, Gesicki, & Kang, 2007; Lee, 2006; Orfield, 2006; Ravitch, 2010; Smith, 2007). In general, NCLB’s drill-based score gains are low quality, limited to a few test areas and ages, and not worth their social, fiscal, and educational costs. Even leading standards advocates are now speaking out against it. Ravitch (2009a) calls it “ruinous,” “harshly punitive,” and “a costly failure.” In her latest book, she questions the central elements of the

contemporary school reform agenda, including high-stakes testing, choice, sanctions, reliance on business models and foundations for ideas and programs, market-oriented policies, and especially NCLB (Ravitch, 2010). Murray (2007) finds NCLB “pushes classrooms toward relentless drilling” and uses a “bad standard for educational progress.” He concludes it is “beyond uninformative. It is deceptive.” Coulson (2007), a leading proponent of choice, observes that NCLB has made “public schools far more expensive to operate” and “wasted almost \$100 billion.” He concludes that it has “gambled away” children’s “chances of receiving a good education.”

NCLB even includes provisions that have opened up high schools to intrusive, and disturbing, military recruitment (NCLB, 2002b, p. 559 of PDF). These provisions show starkly that it serves a deeper agenda, one that furthers the militarization of education (Saltman & Gabbard, 2003). Schools are required to turn over the names, addresses, and phone numbers of students when requested by the military. While parents can opt out, schools often fail to notify them of their right to do so. (Having to opt out is itself an unfair burden on parents.) The military is not supposed to receive special treatment compared to colleges or other employers, yet its recruiters are often given unfettered access to students, being allowed to set up in school corridors and even permitted to recruit directly in classrooms (Dobbs, 2005; Inouye, 2007; Medina, 2007). Recruiting excesses, with misinformation and false promises, are legion, especially in schools serving minority students (Dobbs, 2005; Inouye, 2007; Medina, 2007). The embedding of recruiters in the schools is akin to an unwelcome military occupation.

Gibson (2008) rightly decries NCLB’s “assaults on educators and kids.” Teachers are being deskilled and treated like factory workers, while students are being regimented into training mills. As discussed in my previous paper (Stedman, 2010), social studies, the arts, and now even recess are being sacrificed at the altar of drilling for test scores (Blackwell, 2004; Kozol, 2005; McMurrer, 2007, 2008; Ohanian, 2002; Orfield, 2006; Patte, n.d.; Wood, 2004). Gibson argues that the struggle against NCLB needs to be connected to the broader struggle against capitalism. He observes that the “education mis-leadership mindlessly accepts capital’s division of labor,” and that the skirmishes so far have been along “the narrow line of, for example, the Reading Wars, when history, recess, art, and above all, critique are fully purged within utterly segregated schools, not public schools, but capitalist schools inside capital’s state.”

Tinkering with NCLB will not fix its profound flaws. There is a vast difference between a bureaucratic system fixated on holding schools and teachers accountable for raising test scores and a collaborative effort focused on democracy and social justice—and ensuring that engaging teaching and learning are taking place. The latest effort, however, is to re-label and re-market NCLB, as if its problems were ones of image rather than misguided policymaking. Even Arne Duncan, President Obama’s Secretary of Education, has said, “Let’s rebrand it. Give it a new name” (Dillon, 2009).

### *Stopping the Neoliberals’ Race to the Top*

For school reform to be successful, therefore, we will have to reorganize schools *and* deal with the social and political contexts of education: unequal power and resources, a lack of universal high quality health care, segregation and racism, discriminatory school funding systems, a political system that values war-making over education, and an economic system that puts profits before people.



Educators also must understand that standards-based reform is part of a larger managerial and neoliberal project that diverts democracy and sustains capitalism (Apple, 2006; Ross, 1996, 2004). Supported by neoconservatives and a new professional middle class, the effort combines accountability and social control (standardized testing, merit pay, centralized curriculum, teacher evaluation, and staff dismissals) with choice and the market (transfer rights, vouchers, and charter schools). Thus, the changes we have seen in schooling and school culture were not only unavoidable, but were also the desired ones. What many of us perceive as a failure is, in fact, a success in managerial terms. A proficiency-driven, command-and-control, authoritarian type of schooling was, in fact, the goal of the reforms and serves capital's interests well.

The Obama administration's major educational initiative, Race to the Top, embodies this project and reflects key tenets of modern bureaucratic capitalism: competition, control and benchmarking (now of teachers as well as students), privatization, profit seeking, a focus on technical workplace and career preparation, and a valuing of the market over democracy (McKenna, 2009). It further entrenches the noxious features of NCLB: auditing through false metrics, accountability without regard to circumstance, distrust of teachers, and a fixation on test scores instead of learning. Those in charge are out of touch with the real world of schooling and the lives of children. As Ravitch (2009a) explains, the Obama administration has driven away experienced educators and school reformers, such as Darling-Hammond, and instead favors entrepreneurs and think-tank experts who are ill-equipped to understand public schools and help them improve. She has aptly derided the Obama-Duncan approach.

Now that President Obama and Secretary Arne Duncan have become the standard-bearer for the privatization and testing agenda, we hear nothing more about ditching NCLB, except perhaps changing its name. The fundamental features of NCLB remain intact regardless of what they call it.

The real winners here are the edu-entrepreneurs who are running President Obama's so-called "Race to the Top" fund and distributing the billions to other edu-entrepreneurs, who will manage the thousands of new charter schools and make mega-bucks selling test-prep programs to the schools. (Ravitch, 2009b)

### ***New Directions for Reform***

Real reform, therefore, will require a fundamentally different philosophy of education and the direct challenging of entrenched interests. A blend of Dewey's (1916, 1938) democratic education and philosophy of experience, Noddings's (2002) ethic of care, and Freire's (1970, 2001) pedagogy of *conscientization* would serve us well. We need to replace social control and transmission models with a dialogic, experience-based pedagogy that involves authentic learning, makes caring a central part of competence and the curriculum, respects student autonomy and teacher professionalism, and embraces intervention in the world.

We should be educating through vibrant, *democratic* communities, where students and teachers work together to solve real social problems (Apple, 1992; Apple & Beane, 2007; Dewey, 1938). We need to forcefully remind politicians that education is about more than high test scores and meeting bureaucratic standards. Dewey (1938, p. 49) rightly—and pointedly—deconstructed the traditional conception of academic preparation:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and

history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?

We want, and need, students to develop their imaginations and intellectual passions, not just cram material for a state test. We should echo Einstein's advice to the New York State Education Department that the "Accumulation of material should not stifle the student's independence" (Isaacson, 2007, p. 6). He also believed that "Imagination is more important than knowledge" (Isaacson, p. 7). While both are crucial and not in opposition, his remark is a healthy antidote to the imbalance in today's schools where creativity and imagination are short-changed and knowledge is viewed as information and packaged for transmission instead of arising from student exploration and reflection (Anyon, 1981, 2006; Dewey, 1938).

The dominant discourses of schooling must be transformed, too. Instead of thinking and talking about education in terms of standards and testing, we should be discussing how to create quality, inviting learning environments for students *and* teachers—and how to redesign schools to develop meaningful, participatory democracy. "Preparation for democracy," a goal that has been lost in the human capital onslaught, has become a timeworn cliché and needs deconstructing and resurrecting. It is not a matter of students acquiring a potpourri of civics information and knowing how to read a sample ballot. As Dewey (1916, p. 101) explained, "democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience." Authoritarian, test-centered, bureaucratic schools cannot educate well and cannot prepare students well for their roles in democracy.

A shift in language can produce a shift in action. Noddings (2007, pp. 204–207) contrasts "accountability," with its emphasis on subservience to hierarchical authority and external mandates, and "responsibility," with its focus on concern for others and the world around us. (As part of this, we will have to move past the traditional, conservative constructions of responsibility, which are centered on obedience to authority and living up to institutional norms. They are typically invoked whenever rights and participation are brought up.) Similarly, asking what makes a *good* school takes us in different directions than asking what makes an *effective* school (Purkey & Smith, 1983). The implications are enormous. Instead of ritualistically pursuing high scores on dumbed-down, deeply flawed "proficiency" tests, we should be creating schools in which students can thrive; in which they can learn, care, *and* act.

*We want our students to be well read, not just read well.* In an increasingly diverse society, we need students who relate well to others and know well the people, struggles, and literary works that have shaped our multicultural nation. We will serve democracy, the nation, and the planet much better by designing schools to turn out well-informed, imaginative, and socially-dedicated graduates than by continuing to rely on encyclopedic curricular training and traditional, textbook focused classes. As global warming transforms the Earth, we should aim for a scientifically-literate people who will confront the self-serving arguments of economic interests and fashion creative solutions. In an era when civil liberties have been subverted in the name of homeland security, we need a constitutionally-literate and activist public who will work to overturn the Patriot Act and restore basic democratic principles.

Habits of mind, tolerance, literary activity, and civic participation, however, cannot be commanded; they must be nurtured. We need to make schools places where students *and*

teachers want to be. Large, modern high schools are characterized by anonymity and powerlessness (Clark-Pope, 2001), yet spaces for learning should embody democratic values and be inviting to their participants (Lamash, 2007). We need a school culture that is intellectually engaging and personally supportive. School reforms and accountability systems that do not centralize such matters are doomed to failure. If we continue pushing testing and mindless standards instead of restructuring schools, reconceptualizing curricula, and humanizing classrooms, we will worsen education. We may superficially raise some test scores, but we will not develop the type of schools, teachers, and students we hope for and truly need.

### ***Confronting Capitalism and the Stratification of Reform***

Our reform efforts, however, should not be based on utopian thinking or isolated demonstration projects; rather, they should be grounded in a critical-historical analysis of capitalism (Engels, 1880). We must understand how the interests of capital shape educational reform and how schools reflect the social relations of production (Anyon, 1981, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 1976, 2001; Gibson, 2008).

To be sure, schools have always had other purposes, such as egalitarian and developmental ones, that are in tension with assimilation and supporting the existing order (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Cremin, 1961). In certain eras, equity and children's needs receive greater attention. Schools also produce contradictions in socialization that can generate resistance and offer possibilities for reform (Anyon, 1981). Nevertheless, the primary business of institutions of acculturation is to perpetuate the society and its social and economic arrangements, and so, regardless of the era, the schools' central mission remains political socialization, workplace training, and class reproduction. The interests of capital ultimately dominate. It is that reality that must be confronted to understand what happened over the past generation and what must be done to establish a new school reform agenda.

The standards movement was, in large measure, a response to a crisis in capitalism. It was designed to address a shortfall in the human capital needs of corporations in a globalized economy. In the United States, the movement was also a reaction to the erosion of the country's economic dominance. That is a key reason the education reform commissions of the early 1980s highlighted declining student skills, the weak standing of the U.S. in the international assessments and emerging global markets, and the value of education for economic growth and prosperity (Stedman, 1987).<sup>3</sup> It is also why Goals 2000 called for the U.S. to be first in the world in math and science achievement (National Education Goals Panel, 1997). Later legislative efforts, specifically IASA (1994) and NCLB (2002a), focused even more explicitly on improving students' human capital skills and imposed accountability measures to ensure that happened.

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<sup>3</sup> To be sure, the reform reports of the early 1980s were also responding to an institutional crisis in schooling (Stedman, 1987). Their emphases varied; some were more focused on economic growth than others. The most prominent reports, such as *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983), had multiple aims, including more narrowly-defined educational ones. Nevertheless, overall, the commissions were intent on preserving U.S. economic and political preeminence and did not challenge the power of dominant social groups or link school reform to issues of inequality and class reproduction. The major exception was *Saving the African American Child*, the report by the National Alliance of Black School Educators (1983), which called for economic justice; an end to racism in testing; the provision of quality housing, health care, and employment; and community-based, cultural education outside of schools.

Through these external control and accountability systems, schools were recommitted to the business of producing a well-trained, compliant workforce, one that would acquire the relevant technical, financial, and analytical skills, accept the commodification of labor and goods, and, for the higher echelons, internalize capitalist values and aggressively pursue corporate interests.

Schools play a central role in the reproduction of this consciousness. Students are socialized to accept alienation, compete for external rewards, and pledge allegiance to the State and corporate system (Gibson, 2008; Kesson, 2004; Kozol, 2005). Knowledge has been commodified, a managerial imperative holds sway, and a “pervasive corporate indoctrination” characterizes school culture, language, and practices (Kozol, 2005, pp. 94–97). Textbooks promote a celebratory narrative of U.S. history that ignores inequality, reinforces white privilege, and masks the people’s role in social change (Loewen, 2007).

Yet, this socialization is not done monolithically. It reflects the hierarchical division of labor in modern capitalism and the racist history of the U.S. and so is tailored to students’ class and race. Decades ago, Bowles & Gintis (1976) outlined a correspondence between the social relations of production and schooling. They identified three distinct modes of workplace activity and norms that varied by employee position in the economic hierarchy—rule-following, dependability, and internalization—and documented how these were mirrored in the schooling students received. More recently, they have presented evidence that their insights about schooling in capitalist America still hold true (Bowles & Gintis, 2001). In her classic study, Anyon (1981) richly documented how social and economic stratification is reflected in teaching and curricula. Working-class schools, for example, emphasized rules, disconnected facts, and simple skills, while executive elite schools were pressure-cookers that stressed research, high performance, and cultural capital. She, too, has recently argued that such stratification is even more clearly present today (Anyon, 2006).

These differentiated forms of schooling are strikingly similar to those we have seen the standards movement take in urban-poor schools and professional-suburban ones (Clark-Pope, 2001; Humes, 2003; Kozol, 2005). A growing bifurcation in the economy is reflected in an increasing bifurcation of the schooling given to the masses and elites (Anyon, 2006).

While we should not overstate the extent of economic determinism, the relative autonomy of schools is eroding as they become more tightly aligned with State demands and the needs of capital. Given this reality, we will not overcome the standards movement or transform the structure of schooling without confronting their hegemonic functions and relationship to the overall political economy. As Gibson (2008) reflects,

Anyone interested in confronting our conditions today must follow Hegel’s dictum: ‘The truth is in the whole.’ The whole is capitalism... The failure to create a mass base of class conscious people, which is our life and death high stakes test, remains the Achilles Heel of nearly every social movement in the US. It follows we need to openly talk about what capitalism is, why class struggle takes place, what of CAPITALIST schooling, what can be done, and what a better future might be.

Schools will not be fundamentally changed until educators take this message to heart and work in tandem with popular movements that are addressing the inherent contradictions between

capitalism and participatory democracy and between the purposes of capital and the needs of learners and their families.

Educators who seek fundamental reform, therefore, should dedicate themselves to critical-historical analysis and comprehensive social change. To succeed, we will have to join forces with those seeking social justice, democratic voice, and new forms of community, institutional, and economic life. As Counts (1932) expressed it so well so long ago, it is finally time we dared to build a new social order.

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### **Author**

LAWRENCE C. STEDMAN is Associate Professor in the School of Education at the State University of New York at Binghamton. His research interests include historical and contemporary achievement trends; federal policy and school reform; and the transformation of the high school in the 20th century.

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