

The Authentic Standards Movement and Its Evil Twin

Scott Thompson

One thing the standards movement will never be accused of is a lack of critical opposition. But for all the fiery rhetoric that critics direct against this powerful, nationwide movement, there is perhaps no greater threat to standards-based reform than much of what is being perpetrated in the name of standards-based reform. The so-called movement—so-called, because it is not truly a single movement but twin movements bearing the same name—has become its own worst enemy.

If giving twins the same name is a recipe for confusion, consider the havoc that gets unleashed when one of them proves to be an “evil twin.”¹ In the case of the standards movement, the evil twin is the more visible and powerful of the siblings, and so its authentic namesake is in an increasingly perilous situation. In fact, the problem is even worse: the two are essentially joined at the hip.

So what are these twin movements? First, let’s distinguish them by name. I would rename the evil twin “test-based reform” or more specifically “high-stakes, standardized, test-based reform.” The sibling, then, is “authentic, standards-based reform.” The defining distinction between them is their respective influence on the instructional core of schooling and on equity issues.

When academic progress is judged by a single indicator and when high stakes—such as whether a student is promoted from one grade to the next or is eligible for a diploma—are attached to that single indicator, the common effect is to narrow curriculum and reduce instruction to test “prepping.” What gets lost when teachers and stu-

dents are pressured to make students better test-takers is precisely the rich, high-level teaching and learning that authentic, standards-based reform aims to promote in all classrooms and for all students.

Authentic, standards-based reform is fundamentally concerned with equity. It departs radically from the tracking and sorting carried out by the factory-style school of yore. Instead, it aims to hold high expectations and *provide high levels of support* for all students, teachers, and educational leaders. Under the evil twin’s (per)version of standards and accountability, we see students retained in grade because of a single test score, and we typically see a corresponding increase in dropout rates where such *worst* practice is in place.² Equity then becomes the casualty rather than the fruit of reform. And as Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers, recently observed, “When tests are allowed to become the be-all and end-all, they deform, not reform, education.”³

In its influence on both the instructional core of schooling and on equity, the evil twin constitutes an inversion of the “real thing.” It is a politically warped variation on what is arguably among this nation’s most powerful and promising education reforms. Although the evil twin purports to be standards-based, it actually flies in the face of research-based standards on the appropriate use of testing. Consider, for example, the conclusions of the National Research Council’s Committee on Appropriate Test Use, which are being systematically, if not willfully, ignored by many education policy makers, especially at the state level: “An educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score.”⁴

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There are many reasons not to use any single assessment as the basis for assigning high-stakes consequences. Not only does such a practice tend to diminish curriculum and instruction, but most psychometricians will tell you that the assessment has yet to be created with a high enough level of validity and reliability to justify its use as the sole basis for making consequential decisions about the test-taker. This problem is not unique to education. Consider the words of Lt. Gen. Ronald Kadish, director of the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization: “I don’t think we should draw conclusions from any one test that are irrevocable. No one test tells you everything you need to know.”⁵

Another problem is that tests are frequently misused. Standardized tests designed for national comparisons between students, without reference to a particular school’s curriculum or content standards, are, for example, too often used to evaluate teachers and schools. As I have noted elsewhere, that’s a bit like trying to use a jigsaw and screw driver to eat a plate of angel hair pasta. The tools are not necessarily bad in themselves, but they are certainly ill-suited to the task.⁶

High-stakes, test-based reform is an approach that is most often driven by state-level mandate, and it suits the political appetite for rapid, quantifiable (hence readily digestible by the public) results.⁷ Test-based reform represents a potentially lethal threat to its authentic twin. Whether by design or happenstance, it is effectively sabotaging the authentic standards movement. And not surprisingly, it is unleashing a swelling and intensifying backlash against standards and testing that is taking form legally and politically, as well as through mobilized grassroots opposition.⁸

It is the combination of test-based reform, in the name of standards, and the wholesale backlash that such practice provokes that is placing the authentic standards movement in peril. Not only in the general media, but also in specialized education media, one can see that the war between proponents and opponents of high-stakes testing tends to define the entire standards movement in such a way that its actual nature and potential, which some school districts are beginning to demonstrate, gets buried under an avalanche of rhetoric.

A RATIONALE FOR AUTHENTIC, STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

Too few children in many of our public schools are receiving the quality of education needed for successful life and work in a rapidly changing world. The imperative to provide them with a high-quality education is not so much economic as moral. Given what we know of the lifelong consequences for individuals of educational deprivation—

not to mention the broader consequences for society and democracy—providing a high-quality education for all children is quite simply the right thing to do.

We know that some good schools have succeeded in providing a high-quality education to students deemed least likely to succeed: students of color and students in poverty.⁹ But in a nation of 50 million schoolchildren, we face an enormous, yet-to-be-met challenge: namely, taking such success to scale. There are various theories of change that aim to address this challenge. The theory of change behind authentic, standards-based reform (again, I’m not talking about test-based reform) is that, if you want to improve student learning across the board, then you need to improve the quality of instructional content and practice across the board. In order to do that, you must fundamentally transform schools and school systems so that their focus, energy, and resources are wholly aimed at the primary goal of improving instruction in order to improve learning and thus to improve student performance as measured by a variety of assessments. In short, it is all about quality.

We know that bureaucratic school systems that focus on monitoring mandated inputs for compliance hold little, if any, promise of creating and sustaining good schools for children across the socioeconomic spectrum. An authentic, standards-based system departs radically from this model. It shifts from a focus on inputs to a focus on outcomes or performance. It shifts from a focus on quantity to a focus on quality. It shifts from a concern with organizational doings to a singular, systemwide focus on improving the performance of every student. It shifts from what Richard Elmore calls the “loose coupling” approach to educational governance to a system of governance that is structured around public accountability for educational results.¹⁰

Loose coupling is an arrangement in which governing authorities in public schools—from school boards down to principals—essentially run political interference so that classroom teachers are shielded from public scrutiny and can pursue their idiosyncratic pedagogical approaches. Under this governing structure, which is pervasive in public schools at this time, you can easily find that second-grade teachers in neighboring classrooms are doing completely different things with their students—in terms of content, instructional practice, and even basic objectives.

A standards-based approach departs from this model in two ways. First, it breaks down teacher isolation and calls for collaboration around a common set of standards so that students, parents, and teachers have a widely shared understanding of common educational goals at various levels of schooling. Second, it responds to the demands for public accountability by assuming a results orientation and making those results public.

These shifts mean that structures, roles, responsibilities, and budgets must be rethought and redesigned to dramatically increase the system's investment in high-quality learning for teachers, for school leaders, and for those in the central office whose job it is to support teachers and school leaders. A school system that is not accountable for providing continuous, high-quality, standards-based professional development for teachers and leaders has no business holding students and their teachers accountable for performance against student learning standards.

The urgency of the need for systemic improvement of public education would be difficult to overstate. Any observer of public education whose eyes are even partially open has discerned various currents that represent a potential threat to our public schools. The number of parents who are home schooling their children is growing significantly, as are the number of states that are fostering charter schools, some of which are operated by for-profit firms. Meanwhile, efforts to secure vouchers—including both private and public schools—are not going away.

Over the next decade or two, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario unfolding in which home-schoolers begin forming cooperatives and the number of students participating in them greatly expands.¹¹ In this scenario, publicly funded vouchers also take off, and the charter school movement increasingly caters to groups of families with specialized interests. We might then find textbook publishers customizing their wares for the narrow interests of parents whose children are being educated in cooperatives or in independent schools organized around parochial values. Meanwhile, the remaining public school systems would find themselves increasingly segregated and educationally crippled. The common school—as a meeting ground for students from diverse economic, cultural, and racial backgrounds—would be lost, as society itself became ever more fragmented. Such a scenario would represent a serious threat to the health of our democracy.

The real potential of authentic, standards-based reform can be seen most clearly against this disturbing backdrop. We live in a time when both politicians and the general public are demanding educational accountability. Public opinion research shows that, while the public favors public schools over publicly funded vouchers, patience is wearing thin.¹² Public schools must demonstrate their ability to help students across the socioeconomic spectrum achieve high-quality educational results. Majorities of the public and of teachers support the movement toward high standards. But, according to poll results recently released by the American Association of School Administrators, a majority of voters reject the idea that a single test can accurately measure students' educational growth.¹³

Authentic, standards-based reform holds the potential for improving the quality of student performance to meet

systemwide standards. It is an approach that is designed to make schools accountable to the communities they are meant to serve and to do so by focusing on high-quality teaching and learning, not on test scores. It is an approach that could stand up to the threat of privatization. It is an approach that aspires to reach a goal this nation has never achieved through its systems of public education: a high-quality education for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background. But authentic, standards-based reform—and arguably public education itself—is seriously threatened when high standards get confused with high-stakes, standardized tests.

A 180-DEGREE INVERSION

Identical twins can be difficult to distinguish solely by surface characteristics. But if one is evil and the other virtuous, their character traits or essential natures will stand in stark contrast. So it is with test-based reform and standards-based reform. On the face of it, they are both about moving from an approach to education that values inputs to an approach that values outputs or results. But a deeper look into the essential natures of these twins reveals that test-based reform is nothing less than a 180-degree inversion of its authentic counterpart. This, I believe, becomes readily apparent when their essential characteristics are considered side by side.

- Authentic, standards-based reform involves teachers, parents, and others as active participants in developing and refining common learning standards. Test-based reform uses high-stakes tests, written in secret by expert psychometricians, as single indicators for deciding whether students are promoted or graduate, thereby making the tests the *real* standards.
- Authentic standards describe what *all* students should be learning at each level (not necessarily at each grade level). Test-based reform makes the scores on standardized tests for students at specific grade levels, in effect, the only meaningful standards.
- Under a system of authentic standards, the school system invests heavily in high-quality professional development for teachers and administrators in an effort to support their work in teaching to the standards. Under a system of test-based reform, teachers and principals are pressured in a variety of ways to raise test scores, and students are drilled accordingly.
- Under a system of authentic reform, student assessments are aligned with the standards, and students have numerous opportunities to demonstrate that they have met the standards. No single test is used to

determine whether a standard has been met. Under test-based reform, a single state or national test is used to determine whether students are promoted to the next grade or are allowed to receive a diploma.

- High-quality, individualized support for students is a hallmark of authentic, standards-based reform. Such support is rare in test-based reform efforts. When it is present, it tends to focus on test-taking techniques rather than on teaching and learning.
- Authentic, standards-based reform has implications for every person, policy, and practice in a school system because it involves a complete abandonment of the bureaucratic, “seat time” approach to education and replaces it with a system of learning communities dedicated to helping all students reach their intellectual, social, and personal potential. By contrast, test-based reform, through its focus on high-stakes tests, narrows the curriculum to what is included on the tests and reduces instructional practice to test preparation.

A still more profound point of contrast between the two movements emerges when we consider what educational *purpose* is implicit in each kind of reform. In the case of test-based reform, the purpose of education is raising test scores. In the case of authentic, standards-based reform, the purpose is enabling all students to achieve as much of their creative, intellectual, and social potential as possible. Thus the goal of authentic, standards-based reform is to prepare students to live successfully and contribute actively in their communities.

THE WRONG QUESTION

As opposition to high-stakes testing mounts and as negative consequences pile up, observers and policy makers are beginning to ask, “Are we moving too quickly?”¹⁴ But this is the wrong question, and it represents an extreme misreading of the problem at hand. The problem is not one of pacing, quantity, or timing. It is a problem of replacing a reform aimed at systemically enriching and deepening teaching and learning with a reform aimed at raising test scores, regardless of the impact on the quality of instruction or on the number of students being pushed out of schools and onto the streets. At *whatever* point a high-stakes, standardized test is imposed as the sole basis for determining student success, that test will replace whatever content and performance standards were previously in place. It’s something like a computer virus that erases and replaces everything that was stored on one’s hard drive.

We could realize significant progress in public education if the proponents of standards-based reform joined hands with the critics of high-stakes testing and effectively outlawed the use of high-stakes tests as sole indicators of student success. Moreover, such a move need not lead to toothless standards. It is possible to require all students to meet a set of rigorous standards in order to graduate from high school without using a single test as the means of determining whether those standards have been met. We should be interested in students who can produce high-quality work rather than students who have mastered the ability to take standardized tests. It is the former who will be rewarded in their personal and professional lives after graduation, when test-taking skills will no longer be relevant.

A PERSONAL NOTE

I hope my use of the “evil twin” metaphor helps bring some clarity to this time of rampant educational confusion. But I want to be clear about what I don’t mean, as well as what I do mean, in using this metaphor. I do not intend to call any individuals “evil.” I believe that the tendency to demonize people who hold opposing points of view has a coarsening influence on civil discourse and so is bad for democracy itself. What I refer to as the “evil twin” is a set of actions and the consequences I believe these actions can have and are having on children and on schools. Determining whether such consequences are intended or unintended requires discerning what is at work in the hearts and minds of many people who are crafting and enacting such policies. The human hearts and minds of others, I believe, are simply too complex and too inaccessible to be read as a book.

But I see the metaphor as useful in bringing out how sharp the contrast actually is between the two movements. At the same time, it’s important to acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between the authentic, standards-based reform and test-based reform. As I noted above, these twins are often essentially joined at the hip. What I mean by that is that most of the districts that I would point to as exemplars of authentic, standards-based reform are operating within state systems that more or less exemplify test-based reform.

THE THEORY IN ACTION

The task of sorting through the complexities of conflicting policy contexts is daunting, but when it is done, what emerges is evidence of what the authentic twin is already beginning to accomplish in a number of school districts. I would point, for example, to District 2 in New York City,

which has posted some exemplary early results in its efforts to institute best practices. This story has been extensively documented by Richard Elmore, Deanna Burney, and others, and I recommend that readers explore their work.¹⁵ Anthony Alvarado, who was the chief architect of the reform effort in District 2, has since become the chancellor of instruction in San Diego. That district is now moving forward rapidly along the same lines and has developed a unique “blueprint” for intervention and for support of students who are failing to meet standards.

As uneven as some of the early results may be at this stage, I would point to a number of other districts whose experience suggests the potential of standards-based reform: Aurora, Colorado; Clovis, California; Edmonds, Washington; Minneapolis; and the three districts constituting the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence, as well as the Houston Independent School District.¹⁶ And there are certainly others.¹⁷

For an example of a state accountability system that balances the public’s need for individual student and school-level results against the school’s need for support and for a genuine measure of autonomy in achieving those results, I would point readers to Rhode Island’s SALT (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching), an accountability program that gathers extensive qualitative as well as quantitative data on school quality for the purpose of supporting continuous, standards-based school improvement.¹⁸ Each school in the state engages in self-study and develops a school improvement plan. Periodically, a team of teachers, parents, and administrators from outside the district spends a full week in the school, reviewing the self-study and other data, shadowing students, visiting classes, and interviewing teachers, parents, and administrators. The results of this external review are written up as a report containing conclusions, recommendations, and commendations. The full report is read to the entire faculty by the chair of the visit on the Monday following the visit.

School districts that are working to fulfill the original promise of standards-based reform can play a vital role in the future of public education. They will be more likely to succeed in this critical task if increasing numbers of states adopt approaches to standards and accountability that look more like Rhode Island’s SALT and less like a brawny and aggressive twin—wielding a high-stakes weapon.

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Elmore has observed, “We will get standards-based reform. But what kind is in doubt. Will it be the version that proponents envision or a corrupted and poorly-thought-out evil twin?” See Richard F. Elmore,

- “Building a New Structure for School Leadership,” *American Educator*, Winter 1999-2000, p. 8.
2. See, for example, Maureen Kelleher, “Dropout Rate Climbs as Schools Dump Truants,” *Catalyst*, June 1999; and Walter M. Haney, *Supplementary Report on Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Exit Test (TAAS-X)* (Los Angeles: Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, 30 July 1999).
3. Sandra Feldman, “Where We Stand,” *Education Week*, 12 July 2000, p. 17.
4. Jay P. Heubert and Robert M. Hauser, eds., *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999), p. 15.
5. Quoted in Elaine Sciolino, “Key Missile Parts Are Left Untested as Booster Fails,” *New York Times*, 9 July 2000.
6. Scott Thompson, “Shared Accountability—Shifting from Heavy-Handed to Helping Hands,” *Strategies*, May 2000, p. 1.
7. Donald B. Gratz, “High Standards for Whom?,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2000, p. 684.
8. See, for example, Lynn Olson, “Worries of a Standards ‘Backlash’ Grow,” *Education Week*, 5 April 2000, p. 1; and Drew Lindsay, “Contest,” *Education Week*, 5 April 2000, p. 30. For more information on the growing opposition to test-based reform, see Alfie Kohn, “Fighting the Tests: A Practical Guide to Rescuing Our Schools,” pp. 348-57, this *Kappan*.
9. The evidence along these lines is enormous. One good example is a study conducted by the Center for Performance Assessment on what it calls the “90/90/90 Schools.” These are schools in which more than 90% of students qualify for a subsidized lunch, more than 90% of students are ethnic minorities, and more than 90% of students still achieved “high academic standards, according to independently conducted tests of academic achievement.” The results of this study appear in Douglas B. Reeves, *Accountability in Action* (Denver, Colo.: Advanced Learning Press, 1999), chap. 19. See also “Doing What Works: Improving Big City School Districts,” AFT Educational Issues Policy Brief No. 12, Washington, D.C., October 2000, pp. 1-12; and Scott Justus et al., *Student Achievement and Reform Trends in 13 Urban Districts* (Washington, D.C.: The McKenzie Group, May 2000).
10. Richard F. Elmore, “Building a New Structure for School Leadership,” *American Educator*, Winter 1999-2000, p. 8.
11. I credit the observations in this paragraph to Phillip Schlechty, who outlined a similar scenario in a keynote speech he delivered to the Panasonic Foundation’s Leadership Associates Program in

- October 1999. He has since written up this scenario in the epilogue to his new book, *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
12. Jean Johnson, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform* (New York: Public Agenda, 1995).
 13. Lynn Olson, "Poll Shows Public Concern over Emphasis on Standardized Tests," *Education Week*, 12 July 2000, p. 9.
 14. "High-Stakes Testing: Too Much? Too Soon?," *State Education Leader*, Winter 2000, p. 1. See also Chris Phipps, "The Sting of High-Stakes Testing and Accountability," *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2000, pp. 645-46.
 15. Richard F. Elmore with Deanna Burney, *Investing in Teacher Learning: Staff Development and Instructional Improvement in Community School District #2, New York City* (New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1997); Richard F. Elmore and Deanna Burney, "School Variation and Systemic Instructional Improvement in Community School District #2, New York City," unpublished paper prepared for High Performance Learning Communities Project, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh, October 1997; idem, "Continuous Improvement in Community District #2, New York City," unpublished paper prepared for High Performance Learning Communities Project, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh, December 1998; "District 2, NYC: Teacher Learning Comes First," *Strategies*, August 1998, pp. 11-13; and Liz Gewirtzman and Elaine Fink, *Realignment of Policies & Resources* (Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2000).
 16. "Aurora, CO: A Long, Bumpy Road," *Strategies*, August 1998, pp. 4-10; "Clovis, CA: Thirty Years and Counting—Sustaining Continuous Improvement," *Strategies*, July 1999, pp. 4-7; "Minneapolis: Aligning Assessments," *Strategies*, August 1998, pp. 13-14; Stephen Fink and Scott Thompson, "Standards and Whole System Change," unpublished paper on standards-based reform in Edmonds, Washington, prepared for Panasonic Foundation, December 1998; M. Susana Navarro and Diana S. Natalicio, "Closing the Achievement Gap in El Paso: A Collaboration for K-16 Renewal," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1999, pp. 597-601; "Houston, TX: Aiming High," *Strategies*, May 2000, pp. 3-6; and Rod Paige, "No Simple Answer," *Education Week*, 8 November 2000, p. 48. (*Strategies* can be accessed at <http://www.aasa.org/publications/strategies/index.htm>.)
 17. See, for example, "Doing What Works."
 18. "Rhode Island: Accountability = School Improvement," *Strategies*, May 2000, pp. 3-6; and "Coming to Judgment," *Strategies*, May 2000, pp. 7-8.