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**The greatest danger to education is the threatened loss of professional freedom.**

# Goal-digging

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There is a pathos that characterizes the current movement toward establishing uniform standards in education, be they tests for promotion and/or graduation in the schools or the proposed core curriculum for Harvard undergraduates.<sup>1</sup> As with a Greek tragedy, the end is foreordained; what we are not certain about is how the plot will develop.

One can't help wondering why it is that Americans are so attached to the idea that the best way to cure a social illness is to set goals rather than eliminate underlying causes.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we are victims of a history of almost unrelieved success in confronting challenges like a continent, Pearl Harbor, Sputnik, the moon. Contemporary reflections of this national tendency to attack our demons head on are affirmative action goals to redress employment imbalances, a Humphrey-Hawkins bill<sup>3</sup> to put a percentage goal on unemployment and a "back-to-basics" movement replete with specific educational goals.

The difficulties associated with implementing promotion or graduation requirements based on standardized tests have become almost immediately apparent. Witness the outcry when nearly half of Florida's high school seniors failed a graduation test this past year and when a proposed New York State graduation exam was rejected as far too easy and, therefore, of no academic significance. As one might have guessed, an examination of some rigor would prove to be politically unacceptable, and one politically acceptable would be viewed as academically impoverished. A Catch 22!

Nonetheless, it may be too much to expect politicians not to respond with legislation in order to appease a public they perceive as full of resentment about economic pressures and the increased difficulty of "making it" in a world of decreasing opportunity and affluence. And perhaps it is too much to expect the man in the street, whose own education left much to be desired, to be

sophisticated about such matters as education for life in a democracy, the dismal history of efficiency movements in education, the relationship between means and ends and the distinction between test performance and competence. But those directly responsible for educational policy and curriculum development should know better. What is especially sad about the performance objectives and accountability movements is the number of their supporters to be found among school administrators, curriculum directors and professors of education. No doubt some of this support is politically inspired, but some of it derives from a sincere belief that these movements will serve the cause of education.

I propose in this short essay, therefore, to question the three principal benefits which proponents claim for standardized testing and accountability systems, viz., (1) efficiency, (2) the development of competence, and (3) a greater sense of responsibility on the part of students and teachers. At the risk of seeming contentious, if not perverse, I should like to argue instead that the systems may well be inefficient, produce incompetence and result in a lowered sense of responsibility.

## Efficiency

The argument that the educational system should be made more business-like or "scientific" is intriguing to many critics of education. Education has been labelled America's largest "industry." The costs per annum are in the neighborhood of \$140 billion. It is understandable that a public nurtured in a business climate and accustomed to the visible fruits of scientific investigation and technology should seek some proof that it is "getting a dollar's worth of education for a dollar spent." That the difference between producing an Apollo and "producing" a moral agent should not have occurred, however, to so many enamored of the business or science models is difficult to comprehend. However that may be, it might be of some value to examine some of the myths associated with business efficiency and to say something about the history of efficiency movements in education.

Business efficiency is ordinarily associated with a centralized, hierarchical, institutional structure, where decisions from the top are implemented by subordinates who have little or no role in the decision-making process. This model of human organization has, of course, many historical precedents, including the Church and the military. Its most pristine form is the factory system. Many critics of education look with dismay on the relatively decentralized character of the educational structure with extensive power in the hands of local school boards and with curricular decisions largely made by individual teachers. It is no surprise, therefore, that state departments of education are growing more powerful. And it is no surprise, given political realities and a traditional business mentality, that legislatures and even mayors like Koch of New York and Young of Detroit should seek greater control in running the schools. Education, apparently, has become too important to leave to educators.

There is, however, a considerable body of literature which puts into question the assumption that the hierarchical, centralized, institutional model, even for business, let alone for education, is "efficient." Much depends, of course, on the definition of the word. But if we should accept the criteria of business efficiency to include such matters as productivity, quality of product, absenteeism and employee turnover, it would appear that the evidence

indicates that the decentralized, participatory model of institutional organization may be **more** efficient. For support, one can point to the studies of McGregor, Hertzberg and Schumacher, as well as those frequently cited in **Working Papers and the World of Work Report.**<sup>4</sup>

As for education, we should have learned from Callahan's **Education and the Cult of Efficiency** about the inefficiencies that attend applying traditional business management techniques to education. Nevertheless Santayana's warning that an ignorance of history dooms us to repeat it goes unheeded. As an accountability atmosphere moves in to education, a noticeable increase is occurring in administrative costs both in terms of the amount of time expended in non-productive activities on the part of teachers and the personnel costs incurred in the attempt to satisfy those who control the purse that monies are well spent. In Detroit, for example, the recent decrease in enrollment has been shown to correspond with a decrease in the number of teachers but an **increase** in the number of administrative and ancillary personnel. And **The Chronicle of Higher Education** reports a similar state of affairs in higher education.<sup>5</sup> Those of us engaged in the educational enterprise are, of course, not surprised. My own stock joke is that teachers will soon spend 50 percent of their time accounting for the other 50 percent.\*

In addition to the question of institutional efficiency, there is the matter of educational efficiency. Proponents of standardized testing are, of course, hopeful that its implementation will ensure satisfactory levels of attainment for most students, particularly in so-called basic skills. This problem has been the subject of much speculation. There is no need to go over that ground. However, history should tell us something. And if the English experiment of the late 1800's with a model similar in many respects to that which is being put into place in almost every state of the union is any indication, we can expect what Alan Small has described as a "disaster." Although the English plan called for payments to teachers based on pupil achievement, a kind of performance contracting system, which has fallen into bad repute in this country, its emphasis on uniform testing for specific objectives and some sort of accountability was almost identical to that currently advocated. Quoting J. Kay-Shuttleworth, an education critic of the day, Small notes:

The (system) has constructed nothing; it has only pulled down. It has not simplified the administration . . . It has disorganized the whole system of training teachers and providing an efficient machinery of instruction for school. These ruins are its monuments. It has not succeeded in being efficient, for it wastes the public money without providing the results which were declared to be its main object.<sup>6</sup>

### Competence

The foregoing discussion of efficiency leads naturally to the subject of competence. I might say first

\* In referring to the efficiency of participatory management, I am confining myself to its mechanical aspects. I am not touching on certain other extremely important elements to be considered in assessing any human organization, such as its moral quality, particularly in regard to human happiness and human rights. The morality of participation may in fact be a far more significant dimension of the participatory model than efficiency, but that is another problem. Decentralization, an essential feature of participation, is described as a social desideratum by Anthropologist Levi-Strauss: "In short, if the anthropologist were to make so bold as to play the reformer and say: 'This is how our experience of thousands of societies can be of use to you, the man of today!' he would no doubt advocate decentralization in all fields so that the greatest number of social and economic activities could be carried out on the level of authenticity at which the members of a given group have a concrete knowledge of each other." Cited in **Footnotes to the Future**, Vol 6, No. 11 (Futuremics, Inc.)

that the appropriation of the term "competence" by advocates of "performance-based" education will go down in educational history as a brilliant strategy. By opposing the standardized testing movement, one is automatically labeled a foe of competence and a friend of all that is wrong with education. A familiar political device—but effective nonetheless.

In human affairs, situations rarely repeat themselves, and "right" answers are contingent. Therefore, competence—what Dewey called "executive efficiency"—rests principally on such qualities as theoretical understanding, objectivity and independence of judgment, and its development is influenced much more by the **methods** used in education than by predetermined goals. Insofar as an educational program focuses on a set of objectives to be satisfied as efficiently as possible, it limits the use and development of intelligence on the part of both teacher and student and, therefore, is productive not of competence but, rather, of **incompetence**.

Objections are raised to this idea on the assumption that means and ends are separate matters, that any number of methods might be employed to arrive at particular objectives. But one cannot have it both ways. If the attainment of certain goals defines educational success, and if efficiency is an overriding concern, methods become prescribed: methods employed will necessarily be those which most efficaciously produce the goals regardless of their impact on competence. That fixed educational standards may be deleterious to the development of competence was repeatedly pointed out by Dewey and no more eloquently than in the following passage in **Experience and Education**:

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 worthwhile, 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?<sup>7</sup>

### Responsibility

Much of the literature on uniform standards is devoted to the problem of making teachers (and students) more efficient and competent through some form of accountability. Whether the accountability system takes a contractual form, where teachers are to be held accountable for certain performance levels on the part of students, or whether it takes a consensual form, where teachers become part of an "ecosystem,"<sup>8</sup> a total educational community, is of little consequence. In either case, the professional freedom of teachers is restricted. The classroom door is to be kept closed no longer. Teachers must be prepared for inspection. Such a situation makes Bertrand Russell's view about the necessary independence of the teacher almost quaint:

The teacher, like the artist, the philosopher, and the man of letters can only perform adequately if he feels himself an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not dominated and festered by authority.

The greatest danger to education posed by the current performance movement is the threatened loss of professional freedom. Not only, as I suggested earlier, will restrictions imposed on teachers by a standards program

tend to make teachers less competent by virtue of the constraints applied to the use of their own intelligence as well as that of their students, **but such a program will also tend to make teachers less responsible.** That an accountability system should depress rather than enhance responsible action may appear to be an anomaly, particularly since the terms "accountable" and "responsible" are so frequently used synonymously. But there is a crucial difference between the terms, and recognition of that fact can have a significant impact on educational policy.

In ordinary discourse, we mean by accountability the holding of someone to account for the fulfillment of certain standards, a rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's. We are accountable to someone for something. On the other hand, responsibility is predicated on satisfying personal standards, rationally arrived at, to which one has a commitment. One may be said to have a sense of responsibility, but it would be odd to say one has a sense of accountability. Responsible action is intelligent action; action taken to satisfy the demands of others is unintelligent action. As Plato observed, to the degree a person does another's bidding, he is a slave, and, therefore, acting unintelligently.

Insofar as unintelligent action is irresponsible action, we can expect an accountability system to lead to various forms of irrational and antisocial behavior, particularly lying and cheating.<sup>9</sup> And, in fact, this is exactly what has been occurring. In order to protect their flanks, teachers teach for the test, they ask academically slow students not to appear on the day tests are to be given, they fudge test results, and they spend time almost exclusively on what they will be held accountable for. All this should not be surprising, any more than it is surprising that malpractice suits are forcing physicians to practice defensive medicine with its attendant medical and economic inefficiencies. Any society or social organization which depends on surveillance inevitably corrupts its members, and an educational accountability system designed to enhance competence will in fact do just the opposite: it will kill the one quality that ensures competence—a sense of responsibility which when present makes accountability unnecessary and when absent makes accountability impotent.

#### Footnotes

1. For an interesting description of the Harvard proposal, see the *Saturday Review*, April 1, 1978.

2. I have often thought goals are the opiate of the people. One of my favorite quotes with regard to the emptiness of goals is a statement by R.S. Peters: "The Puritan and the Catholic both thought they were promoting God's kingdom, but they thought it had to be promoted in a different manner. And the different manner made it quite a different kingdom." See *Authority, Responsibility, and Education* (New York: Atherton Press), 1966, p. 95.
3. For an interesting analysis, see the editorial, "The Cruel Hoax of Humphrey-Hawkins," *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1978, p. 30.
4. See, for example, Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* and *The Professional Manager*; Frederick Herzberg, *Work and the Nature of Man*; E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*. The *World of Work Report* is a monthly published by the Work in America Institute, Inc.
5. For a little humor on the subject, see Donald C. Freeman, "Higher Education's Malthusian Multipliers," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 9, 1978, p. 56.
6. Alan A. Small, "Accountability in Victorian England," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March, 1972, pp. 438-39.
7. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books), p. 49. Echoing Dewey, Roger Farr, Associate Dean, Research and Evaluation, School of Education, Indiana University, writes in connection with the recent drop in SAT and ACT scores: "It might . . . be appropriate to couple the concern about SAT and ACT scores to a concern about whether the recent emphasis on the basics at the lower grade levels is starving out the kind of conceptual teaching of reading that the college entrance exam measures at the higher levels . . ." See "Is John's/Mary's Reading Getting Worse?," *Educational Leadership*, April, 1977, p. 526.
8. A term used by John Goodlad in *The Dynamics of Educational Change: Toward Responsive Schools* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 1975.
9. I am reminded in this connection of an interview with a defecting Russian mathematician which was reported in *the Humanist* several years ago. To the question, "What is the prevailing ethic in Russia," he answered, "Lying. Everybody lies."