



That Puppy Won't Fly

The Core Problem with Educational Standards Today

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Over the past decade, I have had the privilege to interact with a wide range of teachers and parents, schools both public and private, charters, co-ops, and individual homeschooling families. I have also seen the idea of “standards” bandied about—whether they be classroom, district, state, or even the proposed national common core initiatives. While I will admit that the idea of standards is of course good—even necessary—what surprises me is the elephant in the room that no one sees; these so-called standards have no teeth!

If, at the end of fourth grade, a grade four student fails to meet the official grade four standards, what happens? If a grade four student can't read or doesn't know any math facts, what happens? If a grade four student can't or won't make any effort to complete assigned schoolwork, what happens? You know the answer—nothing. Maybe the teacher will be required to submit an IEP, or perhaps the school will provide some special help from an aide. Possibly, the school will do neither. But no matter what the school does or does not do, the student will definitely go on to grade five, regardless of standards or proficiency.

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With academics the elephant-sized problem is age segregation. Once upon a time, being in fifth grade meant that a student had demonstrated competency at a grade four level. No longer. Being in fifth grade today simply means that the child is approximately ten years old and that child will be in sixth grade next year even if he or she learns absolutely nothing. Hence, we can see the true nature of the problem.

Our whole system is based on segregating children by age. Then the system legislates that by merit of age a student must have a particular level of ability in reading, writing, and arithmetic. This idea will of course fail, because not all ten-year-olds are the same. Some learn faster and others learn slower, just like some are taller and some shorter, some lighter and some darker. So in order for the system to give the appearance of being functional, the standards must be lowered. Schools will still fail to make all children of a certain age function above a certain level, which will then necessitate the further lowering of minimum expectations. These will still fail. Then inevitably, some smart legislator will come along and correlate low standards with low basic skills and declare that the standards are much too low, sponsor legislation to raise the academic standards, and start the whole cycle all over again. The system is designed to fail.



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Is there a solution? Of course, but it would necessitate a return to the dangerous idea that students are responsible for their own learning, and that it is their job to advance to the next level. It would require the re-institution of “passing” a grade or class as a requirement to go on to the next grade or class. It would require that not meeting standards would have consequences. However, this is not likely to happen in our modern age-segregated institutions. The stigma of being “held back” is too psychologically damaging. While this has happened in some rare and remarkable schools (with superb results!), the only way it could happen on a broad scale would be through a universal return to the micro-school: a one-room schoolhouse, a cottage school, or a truly mixed-age classroom school, where the prerequisite for doing fifth grade math would be to have attained proficiency in fourth grade math. It’s common sense, really, but common sense is now so uncommon in modern education that to reinstitute such an idea would be radically revolutionary.

So we will continue to see the next iteration of newer, broader, more universal, and probably less rigorous academic standards, engaging public and political debate, ruffling feathers, and failing children. Nothing is likely to change or improve unless we redesign the idea of standards with teeth. Otherwise, as used to be said of harebrained, dysfunctional ideas, “That puppy won’t fly!”