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Take Energy from Assessment

The misuse of standards and standardized testing is draining energy from the profession. Whether the teacher is an experienced professional or a beginner, the ways in which test scores are used in America is one of the most demoralizing, energy-draining forces in education today. Across the country, the misuses of assessment ranked near the top of everyone’s list in my interviews. When districts insist that teachers take months to prepare their children to take normed tests with readings of short paragraphs and extensive work with multiple-choice questions, professionals know that standards for developing good readers are lowered.

There has always been a need to improve the quality of student learning. Every study that I have done in the last twenty-eight years reveals that in each case, we have underestimated what children can do. Our expectations have never been high enough. Fortunately, we were able to adjust after each study and expect more. The excitement of creating a joint vision with teachers based on our own data provided a never-ending source of energy. Sadly, the top-down management styles used to improve standards will bypass the vital energy force that only teachers can provide.

It doesn’t take much intelligence to know that the hunger for numbers to measure proficiency is part of a political game constructed by people far from the classroom. First, we need to listen to teachers like this one:

I think teachers everywhere are so exhausted and teaching is taking so much energy because we are forced to compromise our beliefs too often. There are so many things that contribute to that—politics of district, legislative issues, testing colleagues’ philosophical differences. I think good teachers get tired doing things they know are not right for kids—things that go against everything we know about teaching and learning. It takes a great deal of energy to do this.
Another teacher spoke about how controlling the preoccupation with test scores can be to school administrations. The administrators, in turn, pass on the tension to teachers with specific requirements, like the ones this teacher mentions:

I have to write out how I'll prepare my kids for state frameworks and to pass the state test. My plan will get read and then I'll get prescriptions back on how to spend two months getting them ready for what I don't believe in. It's playing the dual role of what I believe in and being a fake to some extent that is energy draining. What an energy builder it would be if I could feel I was on the same page with an administration that was into real learning.

Two more illustrations point out how difficult it is for teachers who teach in low socioeconomic areas. When normed tests have guaranteed failure rates, it is extremely difficult for tests to show improvements where children are already behind. They may improve but their scores can't show it unless they make enormous jumps. Two different teachers speak about this dilemma:

In our town the local newspaper posts the achievement scores class by class. Next thing you know they'll do it kid by kid. My school happens to be in a tough area economically. And I think our kids do well under the circumstances. But the superintendent treats us like we're an embarrassment to the community. Of course, we all know he'll be gone in two or three years and his reputation is riding on the fact that he can say, “I boosted scores.”

In our state we train to meet certain standards in all subject areas. But the state education department keeps changing their standards on a yearly basis. It's a moving target. We have a wonderful principal in our school and the way things are going he could be fired if our test scores drop. Picture this, we have six or seven first languages in a lower socioeconomic area, and the state keeps changing standards. There's just no cooperation.

It's a rare state department of education, superintendent, or principal who doesn't promise better scores on reading assessments. “This year,” their rhetoric implies, “we will raise our student’s scores above the norm.” Unfortunately, normed tests prevent everyone from going above the norm. The failure rate is guaranteed. As one teacher
remarked, “It’s like Las Vegas. The house always wins. They’ve set it up that way.”

One thing is clear; the country demonstrates an insatiable appetite for scores on normed standardized tests, as well as standards themselves. Unfortunately, test scores, especially normed test scores, are the means by which the public takes the temperature of the educational establishment. It is not unusual for realtors to post on their Web sites either the SAT scores, or reading test scores, to show the quality of the community where a prospective buyer will consider a home purchase.

**Evaluation as a Source of Energy**

Evaluation ought to be one of the greatest energy givers for the teacher in the classroom. The best teachers evaluate from the time the first child enters the classroom until she leaves. Indeed, before children arrive they evaluate the location of materials, the plans they will use, the need for follow-up to lessons of the day before, as well as weaknesses uncovered in both their own teaching and the performance of the children who are their charges for the year. Teachers who design and structure their classroom for learning know what skills their students need. Above all, they prize the initiative exercised by their students and the full range of their expressions. When the non-reader picks up a book and tries to read for the first time on his own, or the smart reader who hasn’t ever read a book is turned on by a new author, that teacher knows the victory and energy provided by informal assessment.

Part of any teacher’s assessment is a running record system that shows what children are learning and need from day to day. Running records show far more evaluative detail and record, most importantly, the energy-giving successes of the day, than do periodic tests.

**The Field of Assessment**

Before we can begin to deal effectively with the draining aspects of assessment, particularly the emphasis on standardized testing, we need to examine the field itself. We need to know more specifically what standardization can and cannot do. Until we understand some
of these basics and clearly know their weaknesses we cannot be assertive about how our children’s learning is weakened. Finally, we need to know how to turn situations that may be draining into energy-giving events. Following this review of testing, I will show with specific practices how to deal assertively with the process of taking energy from assessment.

The Standards Dilemma
I taught a graduate school course, titled “Research in the Teaching of Writing,” for twelve years. Students were to formulate a research question, review the literature, construct an evaluation design, gather data, and report their findings—all in one semester. I felt that doing research and reviewing the rest of the field of research about writing was the best way to understand research in the teaching of writing. All of these requirements were my version of setting a standard for understanding the field. One spring, at the end of the course the students sported T-shirts with the words, “I Survived 880” on the front. (The course number was 880.) I felt a tingle of pride that I had set high standards and the students respected what they had been through. The course carefully prescribed when each phase of research was due. The best students ignored my dates, either meeting them early or much later since they had their own pace for answering their research question. I remember the tension of allowing deviations in student approaches and due dates. At each point I worried, “Am I lowering my standards in allowing these differences?”

It took me about five years of teaching the course to realize that students’ expectations were often higher than my own. When that was the case, I had to allow a wide range of formats and data gathering approaches, even to the point of reporting their findings. I kept redefining what I meant by standards. The students, who conferred regularly with each other outside of class, kept asking, “What’s the reason behind this approach?” I’d respond, then they’d suggest that maybe another approach might be better. The basic course framework didn’t change that much, but each person usually had permission to pursue excellence in his or her own way. As I look back on those years, I realize that excellence results when students are able to put their own twist on a task.
Presidents, legislators, state and local school boards, and administrators want to be known as people who have high educational standards. The statements collectively imply that we need to be tough in order to see real improvement. We need to expect more from teachers and students if we are to maintain our position of world leadership. All our students need equal opportunity to realize the American dream and a good education is the way to achieve it. The way to find out if our students are doing well is to test them. How else can we find out if we are improving? The numbers have to show that we are getting better and that we are on the road to excellence.

The cry for higher standards is accompanied by rhetoric suggesting that schools are in a sorry state. No question, schools and teaching can always improve. To say that schools are worse than they were in the past ignores data to the contrary. David Berliner's and Bruce Biddle's book, *The Manufactured Crisis*, as well as Michael Kibby's study from the State University of New York at Buffalo, *Student Literacy: Myths and Realities*, carefully point out, using the same normative data by the doomsayers, that rather than slipping, schools on the whole are improving nationwide.

As teachers, we need to understand the business of setting standards. We need to understand in order to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in each approach as well as to formulate our own questions and chart our own journey. Our source of energy in dealing with the assessment dilemma is rooted in a thorough understanding of its causes, the problems in standardization, and a greater understanding of ourselves.

**Normed Tests**

This is the most frequently used device to measure school or district progress. It is not intended to assess individual children as much as to provide a profile of a school district or a state. The test objective is to produce differences in a population in order to compare them with each other. The differences are produced through field testing of individual items. The test items that everyone answers correctly or incorrectly are tossed because they do not contribute to group spread. The test is usually timed, as speed of response is one more factor to develop a difference in test takers. Children who take these tests usually have to select an answer from four or five choices and fill in a bubble with
a number 2 pencil. When the data are returned from these tests, percentile scores show how the district is better or worse than others taking the test.

Normed tests are only a gross measurement of student abilities. Consider a reading assessment that asks students to read short paragraphs and answer questions, or make judgments about word meanings. The standard they set is quite low simply because so many factors have been removed that good readers need to be able to do. Good readers are usually working with much longer texts and have built up contextual clues over a much longer period in order to understand specific questions posed. Of course, if the texts are longer, then those taking the test will answer more questions correctly. Remember, the test is out to produce differences. The normed test guarantees scores at the bottom and top of the group. What we don’t know is how good is good and how poor is poor. It may be, for example, that none of the top scorers is reading books and understanding them, whereas a number of the lower scorers are. In fact, students who can read entire books and relate their contents may do more poorly on paragraphs that minimize clues to produce separation in the sample.

Multiple-choice questions most commonly used by test makers rely on convergent thinking. That is, there is already a predetermined answer requiring students to arrive at one answer. Our students do need to know this kind of thinking. But they also need to think elaboratively, design problems of their own, and give evidence of problem finding. They need to show conviction and respond with precise language about issues that concern them.

Good readers initiate questions and interpret the texts of others with texts of their own. When students produce texts of their own the scoring of tests gets very expensive. It is expensive because humans must replace the machine scoring. Many test designers will say that text production by students is unnecessary. They can already tell the superior student without the need for any writing. Normed assessments cannot discern those readers who:

- Initiate questions about a text
- Apply reading to other interests and fields
- Read books
• Do long-term thinking using various reading resources to acquire information
• Can discuss a text with two or three other students and arrive at a new understanding, or maintain understanding while discussing other points of view with which they disagree
• Can take an opinion piece and present an opinion with supporting arguments

Test designers would rightfully say that it would cost too much to gather these data about a district. There is a good reason why multiple-choice tests are used: They are cheap and competition is great to have a low bid to a state, city, or local school district. Normed assessments produce a horse race to nowhere and waste the time of both students and teachers in the process. The tragedy of normed assessments is that their standards are so low.

**Criterion-Referenced Tests**
These are the least-used tests. On a criterion-referenced test, there is a body of information to be learned and the test seeks to learn if the test taker knows the material. There is no guaranteed success or failure as in the normed testing. This approach is certainly more fair than normed assessment, because it is actually possible to prepare students for knowledge they ought to know. Students are less in competition against others. Their scores are based on how many answers they get right. Children will at least have a chance to show what they know.

There are, however, limits to criterion-referenced tests. Their formats often continue to use paper/pencil, multiple-choice approaches. We still don’t know if a student is able to carry out longer-term work involving multiple sources and preliminary drafts in order to demonstrate thinking in a discipline over time. Further, it is difficult to agree on specific bodies of essential information.

**The Standards Movement**
At the outset of my career, I was very much involved in the standards movement. I worked with the development of portfolios for the teaching of writing. I liked the way the process began by involving teachers in trying various approaches to find the best ways to collect writing and evaluate portfolios. What began as a grass-roots venture has evolved
into more of a top-down venture in which standards are imposed on teachers and students. Energy for higher standards is generated when teachers in every school system are involved in the process. This means that the early work done to arrive at standards in writing can be used as a body of information to be consulted rather than used as a weight to crush innovation and originality at the local level.

I’ve heard the word *standards* bantered about in so many different forms that I decided to look into the origin of the word. *Standard* comes from the old French *estandard*, which refers to a battle flag for a rallying place. That is, there is a standard holding a flag around which everyone who has a common vision can rally. I very much like the origin of the word because it shows what’s missing in the standards movement. The top-down imposition of standards will never work because the vision making has been lost. Sadly, when I worked on the standards committee I thought that once we had decided what needed to be done educators would see the ideas as good and run with them. I was wrong. Although we had some good ideas, the process of development must start all over again. Tip O’Neil, the senior representative from Massachusetts and former Speaker of the House, used to remind his colleagues, “All politics is local.” To be successful, any educational movement must be local.

I find that the following factors also work against the improvement of children’s learning through current translations of standards:

- The implication that teachers never had standards before the standards movement began. In short, there is little attempt to meld existing ideas about excellence with the new.
- The lack of clarity for why standards are needed in the first place. Somehow there is the feeling that setting standards for teachers and children will clarify for ourselves a new vision for the direction of America. Our current vision is articulated as, “We must maintain our position as the leader of the world.” Why? What does that mean? How is that to be carried out? Strangely, in the midst of our uncertainty, we crave certainty through standards.
- There is a great rush to impose standards with the continual use of the word *crisis*. The *crisis* word usually means suspension
of human dignities, reduced dialogue, and the use of language that depersonalizes. Real change takes years and is always a combination of administration, teachers, and community working together at the local level.

- I find that most people who bring in standards have little to no understanding of what teachers face on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. Today teachers need more freedom to adapt to the daily needs of children than at any other time in the history of education in America.

There is nothing wrong in having standards, if standards are used as banks of information giving a sense of important components that make up a discipline. When local systems are able to use standards as guidelines or identifiers of important things to know for children's learning, they can be useful. The tragedy of standards is when people use them as weapons to exercise their authority. There is no historical precedent in American education where authoritarian approaches from the outside have raised the quality of education.

Naturally, teachers cannot work alone. But the creation of a vision of possibility that will lift our sights for children often comes with courses and cooperation with universities and state departments of education, along with strong roots in the local community.

For further background on questions about standards, I recommend five books and one source that you may not see as complementary, yet do allow you to make informed judgments.

Calkins, Lucy, Montgomery, Kate, and Santman, Donna. *A Teacher's Guide to Standardized Reading Tests*, Heinemann 1999. This is a well-written guide to understanding tests with a sound discussion of their strengths and weaknesses.

Harwayne, Shelley. *Going Public: Priorities and Practice at the Manhattan New School*, Heinemann 1999. There is hardly a reference to testing or assessment in the entire book yet the reader will find how the highest possible standards are reached with diverse cultural populations, with classrooms using a wide range of approaches—all with a common vision, love, and excellence for children. It is the best example of the power of democracy to educate at the local school, classroom level, that I have seen to date.
Kohn, Alfie. *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools*. Heinemann 2000. This is a short, persuasive book showing how the overuse of standardized tests is seriously affecting the quality of education and especially the thinking of our students. Further, this book shows specifics about how to fight the testing movement.

Ohanian, Susan. *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards*. Heinemann 1999. This is a perceptive analysis of how damaging the standards movement can be for teachers and children. Ohanian pin-pricks bureaucratic arrogance and pillories the ignorance of group think.

The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest). An advocacy organization that recognizes that standardized testing creates and reinforces racial, class, gender, and cultural barriers to equal opportunity and damages the quality of education. FairTest works to end the abuses, misuses, and flaws of standardized testing and to make certain that evaluation of students and workers is fair, open, accurate, relevant, accountable, and educationally sound. To accomplish its goals FairTest organizes testing reform campaigns, provides public education and technical assistance, and serves as a national clearinghouse.

This is a nonprofit organization with whom all teachers ought to be acquainted. They have a Web site: www.fairtest.org; a telephone number: 617-864-4810; and an address: 342 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139-1802.


How To Bring Energy to Assessment

For years I ignored standardized testing. I either pretended it didn’t exist or wished it away. I was confident that our local assessments were more demanding. I can no longer pretend that we don’t have a national problem regarding standardization.

Here are some principles for dealing with assessment issues. The following elements will be discussed in greater detail:

- *Relax and slow down*. Crisis mentalities want us to speed up, suspend judgment, and do as we are told.
• **Be informed.** Make it a point to study issues, take more time before making judgments. Be aware of what may require long-term thinking.

• **Separate the person from the issue.** It may be quite obvious that a person uses a policy for personal power and gain. The minute I get into the personal issues I have joined the other side and the energy will be quickly drained from me.

• **Listen.** There is never a need to answer a question quickly. Wait, rephrase a question, and perhaps ask a question in return to get at the reason the other person is asking the question. This is part of slowing the process down.

• **Broaden your professional contacts.** Don’t be isolated. Seek help and don’t be the only person who asks questions. Don’t get off the subject of what is best for your children. Use the Internet. Attend professional meetings.

• **Ask many questions,** persistently and quietly. Questions are considered acts of aggression (to some degree they are), but the old passive stance must go or there will be no energy return.

• **Do not be surprised.** Slowing a process down often brings upset, a challenge to your credential of “just being a teacher,” or an appeal to a higher order, “this is board policy, state policy, etc.” Once again, you are asking on behalf of your students with specific questions relating to the nature of learning itself, a specific case where you know policy will not help the child. Your counter questions are quiet and persistent. You expect people to give professional responses that demonstrate a knowledge of children and learning.

**Relax and Slow Down**

One of my wise former secretaries who served several demanding professors mounted a sign on her desk that read, “A Crisis in Your Life Doesn’t Necessarily Mean There’s a Crisis in Mine.” When we strode into her office sweating a crisis of our own making, that sign would stop us dead in our tracks before saying something like, “Could you have this done by noon?” Gradually, she created better work habits in the people she was serving.

In top-down management systems, crises are passed from one level
to the next. The more lofty the position, the greater the power the person has to declare a crisis. Quite suddenly the legislature wants a report, the superintendent needs data for the school board, or the latest scores have been published and there is an urgent need to design a program to deal with supposed declining scores. The crisis word usually means a suspension of current plans, the compacting of time, extra working hours, and immediate action. It is the military equivalent of being called from combat readiness to actual combat. There is no time for dialogue or discussion. Indeed, there may be such urgent crises as in bomb scares or the influx of weapons into schools that threaten the safety of our children.

Apart from the safety of the children, however, there is no need to use the word crisis. One of the great drainers for professionals is to be in a constant state of combat readiness where our best energies are wasted to satisfy immediate political needs instead of serving our children.

INVITATION: Practice slow in-and-out breathing when confronted by tension or demand.

When you are confronted with a crisis or a demand, breathe in and out slowly several times before responding. You are deliberately entering a different time dimension moving from immediate demand to thoughtful consideration. You deliberately slow time down. The in-and-out breath can be very relaxing. In fact, it is good to practice this in minor situations before applying the strategy to more demanding problems.

After the act of relaxing, I ready myself for questions. I relax my posture and reflect the emotion that usually accompanies the other person’s demand. “This is upsetting to you. You feel an urgency here. It sounds like this creates a lot of tension for you.” The range of emotions may be diverse: anger, worry, panic, aggressiveness, or sadness.

Be Informed
INVITATION: Consider a study group to further your knowledge about standards and assessment.

When crises are raised about standards, you must be informed in order to know which questions to ask. Part of being relaxed and having energy is knowing the ground you choose to challenge. You have
already begun to examine issues relating to normed assessment and standards, but you should continue to study the field and especially keep in touch with data supplied by FairTest.

**Separate the Person from the Issue**

I'll admit that when I see people using standards to seemingly further their own careers, and to use them as a means to control others, or to give and withhold money, I get angry. That's natural enough but when I start to construct an evil person in my opponent to boost my adrenaline for the fight ahead, I've joined the other side. That approach will quickly drain my energy, especially when I play the game of winners and losers. We have to take the long-term view that change comes about through long-term persistence. I have to be open to the fact that I may be changed by the person I disagree with most. When I changed the time dimension to slow down the process, to use listening, dialogue, and thoughtfulness, I entered into a long-term view that would give me energy instead of taking it away. I have also taken the learning stance. Again, if I thought one contact would produce great changes, I have joined the time dimension instituted by the person with whom I disagree.

**INVITATION:** Practice by yourself and with others taking the point of view of the person who may be on the opposite side of the issue.

**Listen**

Listening is an energy giver because it is consistent with the long-term view of not feeling compelled to respond or act immediately. The person I disagree with may take my listening stance as assent or a show of weakness. I have to take that risk.

My listening, however, is quite active. I continually restate what the person is saying. “Let me see if I have this right. What you are saying is that both teachers and children must be able to articulate the same standard using roughly the same language. And you have developed the standards that teachers must follow. Is this what you are saying?” When I enter into the discipline of active listening, I am doing several things at once. First, I am making sure we both can agree on what is being said. Second, I am showing that I respect the position of the person enough to articulate it clearly. Third, I am introducing a
structure for dialogue. That is, there may come a point at which I may ask the other person to restate what I have said. I say that with the proviso that he or she may not agree at all with what I am saying. I freely admit that it takes a bit of artful listening and exchange to know whether the other person is able to restate my position. Some persons in power enjoy demolishing listeners. They perceive a great gap between their own power and position in the hierarchy and the position you now hold. This is always a risk.

Viktor Frankl (1989) tells the story of being a Jew in a Nazi concentration camp. The Nazis did everything in their power to dehumanize the Jews. But the day came when he realized that they could not assign his status or value. As a human being, he could assign his own value and ignore what was assigned to him by his captors. He had the freedom to define how all that the Nazis were doing was going to affect him. When he realized that basic fact, he took on new energy and power. As professionals we have the power to decide how others will affect us. There is much energy in that realization.

INVITATION: Discuss with other teachers how you assign value to yourselves and how others seek to change those values.

Broaden Your Professional Contacts
An important source of energy for dealing with standards and assessment issues are our colleagues. One of the effects of the standards movement is professional isolation. We are not brought together in order to develop a vision or to create something new. Rather, we are brought together to be informed and adopt what has been previously digested.

INVITATION: Create a small study group to look into the origins of standards and to look at tests more carefully.

Our first move in increasing professional contacts is to listen carefully to mutual concerns and then to be informed. You may wish to bring in a well-informed colleague or to access good sources on the Internet. FairTest already has a Web site (www.fairtest.org), and CATENET, the California Association of Teachers of English network, is also available for professional inquiry and chats. If you wish to enter into this
relationship use: jburke5@ix.netcom.com. This is an award-winning program used by teachers across the county.

**Ask Questions, Quietly and Persistently**

I find that the management style in the standards movement is top-down. That is, a law has been passed, or a directive has gone out from state departments of education, or from the local board and superintendent that certain standards are now in place and that teachers need to give evidence that their children are meeting those standards. I find that good teachers have very high expectations for their students and their standards often exceed those proposed by external authorities. Their standards, however, are quite individual and require extraordinary artfulness both to engage the student and guide them on a learning path. A solid classroom carries with it an atmosphere of high expectation and support and gives evidence of great risk taking both by the teacher and students.

What quickly follows with standards approaches is the prescribed methodology for achieving the standard. Most supervisors are under the gun to show evidence that students are on their way to achieving the standard. How else can there be immediate evidence that all is well unless there is discrete evidence that a reliable approach is in use?

None of this is good for the learning of all children. I stress all children because it is our unspoken oath to provide the best of teaching for all children. As teachers, we must begin to ask questions of those who may not think carefully enough about what is best for all children. I find that teachers are drained because their unspoken anger has no place to go. The source of our energy will be in our actions and refusal to accept the status quo on behalf of the children we teach. We must ask questions. Plenty of them. And we must ask others to join us in this endeavor.

When I ask questions, I have to ask them with the expectation of dialogue. I want my tone to be inquiring with the respectful expectation that the other person has done much thinking about the matters about which I am inquiring. Above all, I have to separate the person from his or her actions and ideas. On the other hand, I expect respect in return and know that I am asking on behalf of the children I teach. My best hope is that I will be able to ask questions without an audi-
ence of spectators. That means I will make an appointment with a sufficient amount of time for dialogue. I recommend that you have someone accompany you to show you are not the only concerned person, as well as to have another listener.

Questions About Standards
1. Would you cite a historical precedent that shows that this approach to raising standards works for children? (What you are looking for is a historical precedent that shows that top-down mandates have raised standards for children.)

2. Let me tell you about X child. From your view of learning, would you tell me how this approach of raising the standard will help this child? (You need to choose a child who may have a learning or language interference problem, a child with whom you are now seeing some progress but who may require a long time to go before meeting specific standards.)

3. How soon does this approach to standards assume that she will meet it? (It may be that an assessment will follow too soon. If the child fails then how will failure help this child? Be prepared to ask questions about the assessment device that will follow in another section.)

4. I ask this question if a specific methodology is prescribed: From all the data that I have given to you about this child, from the standpoint of your understanding of teaching/learning theory, how will this help him or her to improve? (It is most important to keep questions case and classroom specific. We are here at this meeting on behalf of all our children, not ourselves.)

Our right to ask questions means that we have to be prepared for questions in return. For the case that you present above, it would help the session if you come prepared with running records, folders, or collections of papers that help you to be specific. You have already thought about your standards and the expectations you have about your children.

Questions About Normed Tests
Your objective in this conference is to be able to develop common understandings about what normed assessment can and cannot do.
Once again, you want to establish a dialogue about all the children. If possible, you want to have repeated dialogues, keep them relaxed, as you know that it takes a rather long time to develop a trust and common language between you.

INVITATION: Ask two colleagues to join you to either gather information or discuss the current uses of normed assessment (if it is used) in your school district.

Most test designers would agree that they often disagree vehemently with the ways states and local school districts use the data from their normed tests. To be fair to test makers, it is important to first learn how the data are used as a means to help educators. Once again, you have to keep in mind the bottom-line question: How can the data ultimately be used to help children learn?

After you have learned as much you can from your own impressions, your group will call for an interview with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, or the person who makes decisions about the meaning of the data. Doubtless, the person you call asking, “And why do you want to hold this meeting?” You will have to answer as honestly as you can. “We want to have a continuing dialogue about assessment that ALL the children we teach will benefit from a mutual exchange of information about assessment and the teaching of reading. We know what we teach from day to day and we also have careful records on each child, we’d like to talk about assessment in relation to our own data.”

You may want to consider some of the following questions during this interview. As you consider them, remember to listen to the answers carefully, often restating the response to make sure you have heard accurately, and make your tone one of curiosity and genuine interest:

- How do you use the data from this test to make educational decisions within our district? (For the sake of an example we will assume your query will be about a reading test. Ask about the following categories if they are not covered in the first response.)

About children? About teachers? About policy?
• How has the school board used the data in the past to make policy decisions?
• What process did this test publisher use to make up this test? If your publisher hasn’t informed you, how are normed tests of this type generally put together?
• From your perspective, what do you think it is important to learn about what good readers are able to do?
• From your knowledge of the reading process and what good readers do, how close do you think this test comes to actually finding out who they may be? (It may be that the district is not interested in doing this and that the test is used only as a general measure.)
• How accurately do you think this test measures the ability of students from other cultures?

Again, it is only fair that if you ask questions, the person you interview should be free to ask questions in return. As much as you can, you need to have answered each of the questions for yourselves. Think through what you consider essential for good readers as well as how close the tests actually come to assessing those features.

**Do Not Be Surprised**
The questions you have asked may not necessarily be welcomed. To some degree, you have reversed the process of top-down management structures. You have tentatively redefined the meaning of power, for usually the person in the power position is entitled to ask the questions. On the other hand, a good administrator wants to know what others think and will take a welcoming posture.

I think you know your own local situation well enough to consider what risks you take in even asking questions. You have introduced a change in time because you have slowed the process of rapid, unquestioning adoption. Your energy will be in knowing you are doing well by the children and becoming more professional yourself. Indeed, you have left the drain of passivity to tap into the energy of becoming proactive. You are conscious of the fact that you have entered a long, slow process of beginning to reverse a trend that may actually lower standards and is dangerous for children.
Reflection

We can never forget that our first energy comes from our children. It is the day-to-day, detailed accounting of how well our students are doing that gives us energy. Others may design standards that are beneath what our students can do, or provide expectations so unrealistic that it affects our day-to-day teaching. We have to steer the right course that we know will help our children.

We are very much aware that many of the uses and misuses of standards and normed assessment tend to separate ourselves from other professionals. Separation comes when systems are imposed and dialogue reduced because of the press of time. We cannot let this happen. We need each other to help our children.

Finally, we have to remember that when confronted by a world and a profession that is in a hurry to get to an unknown destination, that we relax, listen carefully, become informed and ask tough, persistent questions. We relax because we know that we are on a long journey on behalf of our children.
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