

Defining A Good Education

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Wandering the Internet a couple weeks back, I ran across an article by Charles Wheelan, ["Want Good Schools? First, Define 'Good'."](#) which raises the interesting question of how we should measure a "good" education.

"Schools with high test scores," Wheelan writes, "may or may not be doing a great job; perhaps their students are capable of much more. And conversely, some schools with middling or poor test scores may be doing a terrific job educating students who would otherwise be failing abjectly.

"Obviously," Wheelan continues, "we can spot the outliers -- the school in the middle of Detroit that manages to send 95 percent of its students to college, say. If we give researchers enough time and enough data, they can try to answer the school-quality question using statistical techniques that take account of what kind of students are walking through the front door.

"But even then the results are often equivocal. The bottom line is that it's hard to evaluate school quality, which is why it's even harder to make schools better."

What Wheelan is getting at is that not all entering students are equal. Some have more potential than others, and a school district that has a preponderance of such students because of parental occupations or economic influences may score better than another school that has fewer students with parents who have college and advanced degrees.

For the most part education breeds education, and that's a good thing, but how do we define a "good" education given the



vast disparity in student backgrounds and parental and community resources.

Wheelan poses the problem but then leaves his readers hanging. "We're trying to encourage and replicate success," he writes, "without being able to tell with any degree of certainty which schools are succeeding. Imagine a pharmaceutical company trying to evaluate new cancer treatments without being able to determine which patients are getting better.

"So," Wheelan concludes, "that's the first big education challenge -- developing a more sophisticated way to identify 'good schools.' Only then will we be able to create more of them."

Many would argue that [No Child Left Behind](#) is doing what Wheelan wants by forcing schools to get better and better, where "better" is defined by performance on standardized tests. When I was a manager for GE, I believed in Jack Welch's mantra that what we measured got better, but now I'm beginning to doubt that it's a good idea for either students or teachers.

Think about your own education. Would it have been improved if you had taken standardized tests that determined whether you and your teachers were passing or failing? If you struggled with your education, was it your teachers' fault?

In my case my teachers were always ready to help, but I wasn't necessarily listening. My metamorphosis happened in English class when I was a junior in high school. Because I finally decided that education was important, everything changed.

And change, it seems, is the answer to Wheelan's query: We define a good education based on the change in the student's skills and understanding, not on the student's performance on standardized tests.

That we focus so much attention on tests isn't surprising, however, since we don't care about change so much as ability when we're evaluating an adult who's going to fly a passenger

airplane or operate on our brains. But children aren't adults, and our hope is as educators that we bring each child along as far as he or she can go during the semester or year.

If a student can't write an essay at the beginning of the semester but can by the end, that's terrific progress. But that does not mean that this same student has become an accomplished writer, which is the performance measurement we apply when we assign a grade or give the student a normalized test.

The two aren't incompatible during the education process, but they do present problems when it comes time to graduate, which is when society says that it's time to make sure that students have certain minimum skills. The only thing that's wrong with this is the nature of the test, which can be hard to fashion fairly in our diverse society, and the psychological impact the test has on students, their families, and teachers.

But as long as we have a society that depends critically on critically skilled people, there's no getting around the need for skills-based tests. Perhaps instead of exit exams we should have diploma classifications: first class, second class, etc.

But isn't this exactly what grades are? If one were to always look at the grade the student achieved in getting his diploma, wouldn't potential employers already know what they need to know? Certainly colleges already do this.

Ah, there's the rub. The No Child Left Behind exams are given because some in our society believe that teachers are the problem. Teachers are cheating by giving higher grades than they should. Grade inflation is the cause. Teachers have been lax. If we measure teachers' performance, because that's really what we're measuring with these statewide tests, education will improve.

The tests aren't about the students: The tests are about the teachers.

On the other hand, these students who were said to be passing without being able to read -- and the definition of "being able

to read" is an important discussion for another time -- may have gotten their diplomas, but what were their grades? Do you really believe a teacher would give a high grade to someone who couldn't read or write or do math well?

If there are such teachers, they're the outliers. To the teachers I've known both as a student and colleague, without exception, grades have been a measure of performance.

If a teacher passed a student with a D, didn't that say something about the student's abilities? In other words, could we have solved this No Child Left Behind Problem by encouraging everyone to look beyond the diploma to the grade-point average that the student achieved at every level of his education? Weren't teachers doing the right thing all along, but we weren't paying attention?

There'd still be the problem that an A at one school is not the same as an A at another, so standardized exams would be useful in normalizing grades between schools. But teachers never needed to be told that they needed a test to determine good education from bad. Teachers have always known that a "good" education can be measured by how much a student changes, by how much schools help a student live up to his or her potential.

With No Child Left Behind what have we done?

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