

“What’s Required: A Paradigm Shift in School Reform,  
from ‘Tests and Sanctions’ to ‘Helping Schools Improve’”\*

Gary M. Ratner, Esq.\*\*

Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues: Conversation on Education Reform  
Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C.      March 24, 2010

Good Morning! Thank you very much to Chris Woodside and SPSSI for inviting me this morning. I’m very pleased to be here.

I.      Introduction

As I was thinking about Chris’ invitation to talk with you about some of the Citizens for Effective Schools (CES) advocacy work related to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization, Diane Ravitch’s new book, The Death and Life of the Great American School System, burst across the news. I was particularly struck by two of her conclusions: first, “that NCLB was a failure,”<sup>i</sup> leading, in part, to narrowing the curriculum and “[t]est-taking skills and strategies [taking] precedence over knowledge,” with “none of [its] prescribed remedies ... making a difference [.]”<sup>ii</sup> and second, the vast extent to which “tests and accountability”, i.e., sanctions for low test scores, have become the dominant, bi-partisan paradigm of “school reform” in America.<sup>iii</sup>

As I reflected on these two points, it struck me that all the advocacy that CES and others, especially the Forum on Educational Accountability, [www.edaccountability.org](http://www.edaccountability.org), do to try to restructure ESEA takes place within the context of Congress, the Obama Administration and the media essentially assuming that “tests and accountability” is what true “school reform” is. That is, they have huge perceptual blinders on because of the way the debate has been framed. To have the best chance of persuading the powers that be to fundamentally restructure the law, we must first change people’s understanding of what “school reform” needs to be in today’s America – that is, we must change the “school reform” paradigm. That is what I would like to talk with you about this morning.

Specifically, I’d like to address:

1. How did the “standards, assessment and accountability” paradigm evolve and get off track?
2. Why is it totally inadequate as a paradigm for effective school reform? and
3. What is the “right” paradigm?

\*Prepared text of talk, slightly revised.

\*\*Executive Director and Founder, Citizens for Effective Schools, a national citizens’ school reform advocacy organization. See [www.citizenseffectiveschools.org](http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org).

4. Then, I would like to conclude with a suggestion for research in one critical policy area.

## II. How “Standards, Assessments and Accountability” Got Off Track

The starting point is a short article in 1997 by Norman Augustine, the then CEO of Lockheed Martin and Chairman of the Business Roundtable’s Education Task Force, published in a journal sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, *et al.* In the article, titled “A New Business Agenda for Improving U.S. Schools,” Augustine describes four different strategies that business had taken to try to help educators improve schools since the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983. He explains how business learned from the first three approaches - which involved ad hoc programs, such as adopt-a-school - that ad hoc programs do *not* work.<sup>iv</sup>

Rather, in the fourth wave that business was implementing in 1997, business learned that “improvements must be comprehensive and address all parts of the education system, from public policies to classroom practices.”<sup>v</sup> Specifically, in 1990, “[i]n pursuit of comprehensive reform, the Business Roundtable published a nine-point agenda ... for change based on the fundamental belief that *all* children can and must learn at ever-higher levels.”<sup>vi</sup> (Emphasis in original)

Those nine factors included: “high academic standards”, “measuring ... student ... performance,” (i.e., “testing”) and “school accountability”, but they went way beyond those three factors to also include: professional development for “teachers and administrators” that focuses on “improving teaching, learning and school management” in a process of “continuous learning”; a system that “enables parents to support the[ir children’s] learning process”; giving “individual schools the ... resources necessary for high performance and true accountability”; providing a “safe, well-disciplined and caring environment for student learning”; and helping “other public and private agencies to overcome learning barriers caused by poverty, neglect, violence, or ill-health for students of all ages.”<sup>vii</sup>

Moreover, immediately after listing and explaining the ninth component, Augustine wrote: “*This is not an a la carte menu, but nine interacting components that are a comprehensive and integrated whole. Leaving any one of them out of a reform agenda will sharply reduce the chances of success.*”<sup>viii</sup> (Emphasis added)

So, from the very beginning, “standards, assessments and accountability” were *only* intended to be *3 out of 9* interrelated factors, *all* of which the Roundtable regarded as *vital* for reforming public schooling! Since even the Roundtable recognized that leaving out “any one” component would “sharply reduce the chances of success,” under its reasoning, leaving out 6 of its 9 necessary reform components would be a prescription for likely failure!

In effect, that’s what occurred. While Augustine wrote that the “U.S. business community [had] learned [that] improvement *must start with*” “standards,” “testing” and

“accountab[ility]”<sup>ix</sup> (emphasis added), in fact, what has essentially happened over the last 13 years is that those three factors - *by themselves* - have been ripped out of the carefully constructed, comprehensive framework of which they were a part and treated as if they were a largely complete and self-contained paradigm for reforming American public schools!

Thus, the very “standards, assessments and accountability” paradigm that has been widely accepted in recent years as *the* meaning of “school reform” in America – the fundamental underpinning of the states’ “high-stakes testing” movement and the No Child Left Behind Act – is based on a total distortion of the original intent. Even the Business Roundtable recognized that any reform agenda based on just 3 of its 9 components would be grossly insufficient.

III. So, the question becomes: Why is “standards, assessments and accountability,” especially as embodied in NCLB, a totally inadequate paradigm for effective school reform?

To a large extent, this is a direct consequence of the conscious decision Americans made as a result of a 1918 national commission study’s recommendations to create academic tracks in high schools – with only a minority of students to be given an “academic course,” preparing them for college and professional careers and business management – while the majority would be put into “general” and “vocational” courses at a much lower academic level.

Within that system, which is still essentially with us – though students have more choice to opt into higher courses – poor and minority students have been disproportionately assigned to the lower tracks. And that two-tiered system has had profound consequences for teachers: much less was expected and required of them in the way of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills, and much lower level learning was expected, and provided, for the students. In short, many teachers, particularly of disadvantaged students, have not been prepared to have, and do not currently have, the knowledge and skills to effectively teach diverse students at a high level, and many principals do not have the knowledge and skills they need to effectively lead transformations of low-performing schools.

“Standards, assessments and accountability” is totally inadequate as a scheme for reform because, as in NCLB, it starts with standards and testing at the “front end,” and then, when the continually increasing percentages of students required to pass are not met, jumps right to sanctions at the “back end.” The “standards, assessments and accountability” paradigm, by its nature, virtually skips the crucial “middle” phase of school improvement: how to help teachers, administrators and parents strengthen their knowledge and skills and provide them the support they need to help students learn at a high level.

To a substantial extent, the steps that have to be taken in the “middle” are some of the very ones identified by the Business Roundtable in the remainder of its nine points.

These include: continuous professional development for teachers and administrators and helping parents to support their students' learning, as well as providing adequate resources, a caring environment and coordinated services to combat external learning barriers due to health and the effects of poverty.

Contrary to the implication of the recent *New York Times*' editorial,<sup>x</sup> "the provision of the [No Child Left Behind] law that requires the states to raise student performance – especially for poor and minority children – in exchange for federal money[...]", by itself, does *not* help children learn. It does nothing to enhance the capability of school staff, the parents or the level of the curriculum. Increasing pressure on schools without helping them improve does not lead to dramatic increases in children's learning, but to narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test and other manipulations to seek to avoid sanctions.

IV. What, then, is the right paradigm for "school reform" to replace the overwhelming current emphasis on "standards, assessments and accountability?"

Fundamentally, for school reform policies to be effective in dramatically improving student learning, Citizens for Effective Schools believes that the policies must focus on building three conditions in schools in which the conditions do not already exist: challenging curriculum, effective teaching and family support for high level student learning. "School reform" needs to consist chiefly of doing whatever is necessary to help schools, local and state education agencies create those conditions.

Put differently, while there is a place for testing and accountability in improving schools, the emphasis of American school reform needs to shift *dramatically* away from tests and sanctions and toward actually helping schools improve – particularly by strengthening the human capital. That is, American "school reform" must focus on filling in the very "middle" that NCLB and the "standards, assessments and accountability" paradigm largely jump over.

While there is not time this morning to discuss in detail the specific policies that CES believes the ESEA reauthorization should adopt to help schools improve, we have written extensively about this. Please see: [www.citizenseffectiveschools.org](http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org).

V. Future Research

As to future research that I believe would be extremely helpful, I would invite any researchers in the audience to look closely at three components of helping families, or other adults, to support their children's learning at home: programs for adult literacy, parenting skills, and adult mentors for children without families available. Either more probing research needs to be done to demonstrate the efficacy of the federal Even Start family literacy approach, which I understand has not been highly rated, or new kinds of programs must be identified that are successful.

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that this has given you some food for thought as to why and how we need to change the paradigm of what “school reform” is in the United States. It is not enough to pressure schools to raise test scores: if we are serious about the goal of effectively educating all our children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must concentrate on “helping our schools improve.”

Thank you.

<sup>i</sup> Diane Ravitch, The Death and Life of the Great American Schools System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education, Basic Books, p. 99 (2010).

<sup>ii</sup> *Id.*

<sup>iii</sup> See *id.*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>iv</sup> See Norman R. Augustine, "A New Business Agenda for Improving U.S. Schools," *Issues in Science and Technology*, Spring 1997, <http://www.issues.org/13.3/august.htm>, at p. 3.

<sup>v</sup> *Id.*, at p. 1.

<sup>vi</sup> *Id.*, at p. 3.

<sup>vii</sup> *Id.* at p. 4.

<sup>viii</sup> *Id.*

<sup>ix</sup> *Id.*, at pp. 1-2.

<sup>x</sup> Editorial, "Mr. Obama and No Child Left Behind," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2010, p. A24, col. 1.