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Teachers, Testing, and the Governor

The teachers who taught me the most loved their subjects and cared for their students. Mr. Keener, my demanding high school social studies teacher, expressed his love by showing us how history illuminated our worlds. He made us sit up straight in class and take notes; and we understood these demands as marks of his respect for us. Mr. Fleenor, my geometry teacher, lured us into the world of geometry by helping us to think logically, clearly, and elegantly. When we entered his room we knew we would work at it together. Miss Dutro, my biology teacher, could look at a roadside weed and show us its ecological niche. She turned weeds into fascinating objects and she also believed we were fascinating. She was 68 and we loved her. When Keener, Fleenor, and Dutro tested our high school accumulated wisdom, they were assessing what we had tried to learn in their classrooms. In Governor Owen's educational agenda my test scores would have assessed my teachers. As a student I wouldn't want my standardized test score to be the measure against which my teachers would be evaluated. As a student and a teacher, it seems there's something narrow, simplistic, and mean about such an approach.

Schools house children and adolescents for 6 - 8 hours a day. While the school is not a home, its teachers can influence students in remarkable ways. Good elementary teachers teach a love of learning, create classrooms that are caring and respectful, and enable kids to master basic skills. Good secondary teachers convey and create in their students a love of their subject matter, model decent and caring behavior, and create classrooms where kids are hungry to learn. Teaching is work, it is a profession, and for many it is a vocation - a calling. The Governor's testing calculus narrows what is good and worthwhile in teaching to students' standardized test scores. If the work of teaching is measured so narrowly, who would choose it as a profession? Who would want to work in a setting as complicated and demanding as a school only to be judged on such narrow measures? Who will want to share their passion for knowledge and understanding or create classrooms that are respectful and caring if the sum of their efforts is going to be reduced to standardized test measures? Good veteran teachers remain in schools, not because of prestige or money, but for the love it. Teaching is their calling. Reduce teaching to students' test scores and we will destroy any attraction that is left in the honorable and quite cumbersome endeavor of teaching.

In a fair world we would recognize teachers' complex roles. In a decent world a teacher's passion for knowledge and understanding along with their attempts at creating respectful and caring classrooms would be recognized. In a just world teachers would be held accountable for these larger efforts. But we don't live in a fair, decent, or just world. We live in a world that cares more for information bits and corporate markets than it does for an education which promotes understanding, respect, and community. We live in a world where one week last spring our Governor supported legislation to allow guns in schools and the next week fell silent, in mourning. We live in a Colorado that is 49th in state

funding to public education and seventh in household income levels; and yet somehow our state officials bemoan the predictable results of such meager funding. Problems exist in Colorado's schools but they are not the problems that our Governor points to. The Governor's solutions, along with those of William Moloney (Commissioner of Education), are mere shills in the complex problems surrounding public education.

In Governor Owen's and Commissioner Moloney's world the matter is plain and simple: teachers teach kids, the state should test kids and hold teachers accountable for their outcomes. First we were offered the state's reading and writing tests to measure our children, soon we will be offered William Sanders' "value added" tests to measure our teachers. We are being duped. We are being sold a faulty bill of goods that will harm our children. The Governor was wrong when he supported legislation that would have allowed guns in schools. Now he is trying to legislate a harmful educational solution and he is wrong again. The citizens of Colorado do not need another catastrophe to wake them up to this fact but we may need a little education. We need to learn about the forces behind this flawed educational agenda.

Chester Finn and his market-minded think tank, the Fordham Foundation, provide the agenda for this latest onslaught. Our public libraries (which Governor Owens refuses to fund) should have Finn's 1994 manifesto We Must Take Charge, and your librarian can link any citizen up to Fordham's web site at www.edexcellence.net. The Finn-Fordham plan is multi-pronged but the logic is simple: Schools should produce kids who know certain things so that they can be productive workers. In order to get better schools we need to test the kids. When we test the kids we can also measure their teachers. Sanders value-added testing approach would allow state officials to track a child's progress through school. Track the child's progress and you can measure the teacher's effectiveness. Teachers whose students do 'poorly' do not receive raises, those teachers whose kids excel receive added pay increments. Through testing, the logic goes, we can control our child's education, direct teachers to teach the right material, and 'take charge' of our schools.

This approach to teaching is not only narrow and discouraging to good teachers, it is also simplistic. In schools the teachers are expected to teach all students. Finn and Owens assume that all teachers and students play on level playing fields. They don't. Some classes are extremely challenging. In financially strapped settings it is not uncommon for a fourth grade teacher to have two or three languages spoken in the classroom, a hearing impaired child, and one or two wheel-chair bound children in her mix of 28 students. It is not uncommon for these teachers to work in resource-poor schools, with few supportive services. Chester Finn, Governor Owens, and Commissioner Moloney seem to think that by testing students and evaluating teachers all students will be encouraged to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. We'll test the students, measure the teachers, and proceed full steam ahead. They want us to believe that when all of the educational doors are opened anyone can walk through. But anyone with an ounce of compassion knows better. Beginning life in poverty is a huge obstacle that contributes to small, not bountiful, futures. Sadly Owens' reform steam will not energize but will burn; it will burn the kids and teachers who need the most support.

This mean spirited view of school reform through testing bodes ill for the future of schooling in Colorado. If this agenda wins, more children will be lost. We will be left with schools that drill and test students and as a result their learning will be lifeless. Governor Owens and Commissioner Moloney's educational proposals are ill-conceived. I doubt if Mr. Keener, Mr. Fleenor, and Miss Dutro would want to teach in such settings. That's too bad because they taught me well.