

# Advocate

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a pencil, poised to mark an answer on a multiple-choice test form. The test form has columns of letters (A, B, C, D, E) and rows of numbers (1-36). The hand is in the foreground, and the pencil tip is pointing at one of the bubbles. The background is slightly blurred, showing more of the test form.

Texas State Teachers Association/National Education Association

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**By Linda McNeil**

Hear her comments at the LBJ School of Public Affairs Measuring Up Conference



# ‘What new piece of the universe did your students touch today?’

I love this quote because it captures the heart of what it means to learn. In these few words, Dr. Bruce Alberts — the former head of the National Academy of Sciences, current editor of Science magazine, and someone who is absolutely passionate about kids’ learning, not just in the sciences but in the full scope of human endeavors — gives both a vision for teaching and an operational model for evaluating teaching and learning.

These words might not be a bad guide for our education policies to follow:

- The question is addressed to the teacher: “What new piece of the universe did *your* students touch today?”
- And it embraces that essential relationship between the teacher and the children: “*your students.*”
- “What *new piece* of the universe did your students touch today?” suggests not only

ongoing learning, but building on what came before — continuity and connections, a growing, cumulative knowledge base.

- And *universe*: a reminder of the wonder of learning and of the infinite scope of all we have to teach the children. The *universe*: a moral imperative to remember the expansive possibilities for our teaching. The universe can’t be contained in a Scantron bubble.

We — the grownups — have never had more to teach our children. We are not limited by our own knowledge, by our geography or our language or our own personal experiences. We now have access to all that humanity has ever explored or studied or created or discovered.

And we’ve never known more about the ways children learn. Every day we learn more about the brain, the mind, multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, dimensions of cognition, the sociocultural and linguistic aspects of learning.

This should be the most amazing moment in all of human history to be a teacher. And it should be the most exciting moment in all of human history to be a child in school.

How is it, then, at this moment of greatest possibility for teaching and learning, we have limited our children’s schooling to content that can be measured by computer-scored multiple-choice tests? And how is it that we have done so by force of law, first in this state and, for the past decade, by

federal law? What price have we paid for a system so limiting?

## A SEVERELY NARROWED, FRAGMENTED, OFTEN MEANINGLESS CURRICULUM

The current system of standardized “accountability” began in Houston in 1994; No Child Left Behind took the system national. What do we have to show for 18 years under this system?

- A severely narrowed, fragmented, and often meaningless curriculum;
- A de-skilling of teachers, a de-valuing of teacher knowledge and of the essential relationships between the children and their teachers;
- A one-size-fits-all system of testing that ignores or completely discounts all we know about the multiple ways children learn;
- A reduction in classroom instructional practices to the production of a single indicator, a test score on a state-mandated standardized test;
- A dominance of class time and teacher professional development by test-prep drills and strategies;
- Evidence from flat or declining scores on NAEP, SAT, ACT, and international tests that state-mandated, accountability-driven schools are not educating our youth to high standards;
- The masking of old inequalities across ethnic subgroups and the production of new inequalities as students deemed liabilities to the schools’ test score ratings are pushed

### HIDDEN COSTS OF TESTING

- Tests (initial and re-takes)
- Test prep materials
- Scoring the tests
- Test-prep consultants
- Benchmark/snapshot tests
- Test acquisition
- Test storage and security
- Test distribution to schools and collection
- Shipping to vendors
- Technology support
- School-site and sub-district level costs parallel to central office costs
- Test prep tutorial programs

### HIDDEN COSTS OF THE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

- Managers of the accountability system
- Staff of clerks and statisticians
- Accountability officers in sub-district offices
- Principal-accountability supervisors
- School-accountability supervisors
- Teacher-accountability supervisors
- Accountability liaison to Texas Education Agency and U.S. Department of Education
- Federal accountability reporting staff
- Signs in front of schools
- Interim scoring and reporting of benchmark tests
- Administrative time and travel for staff training
- Central office staff allocated to district-wide accountability
- Sub-district staff allocated to sub-district-wide accountability
- Counselor time for testing and retakes
- Accountability consultants





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out, counseled out, or strategically held back in grade until they drop out. These losses from Texas schools alone number above 100,000 every year and are disproportionately poor, African American, Latino, and/or English language learners.

- The accruing of what University of Texas Professor Angela Valenzuela has termed “cumulative deficits” as test-prep drills and curriculum scripts, often produced by the testing companies themselves, displace the study of substantive curriculum and the development of many ways of knowing.

**IMPOVERISHING SCHOOLS WHILE ENRICHING TESTING COMPANIES**

The focus on measurable outcomes has turned public attention away from discussion of all it takes to create and sustain good schools. The flaws in this system are evident in its perverse use of resources. The last legislative cycle in Texas left us with cuts of almost \$6 billion from public education, with the governor and Republican-dominated legislature refusing to use any of the state’s ample “rainy day” funds to prevent the layoffs of thousands of teachers.

The one budget item the governor insisted on protecting from cuts? The half-billion-dollar contract to the Pearson testing company. Schools, starved of needed teachers and instructional resources, still had to be rated by their test scores, and the salaries and job security of teachers and administrators remained contingent upon those test scores.

Educators would be “held accountable” in a state whose governor and legislature were not being held accountable for how they provisioned, or deprived, the public’s schools.

Many parents — whose children were suddenly in overcrowded classrooms, whose schools had lost art and music teachers, who were being asked to contribute to classroom supplies — may have known about the big budget cuts but not realized how many of their tax dollars were not reaching the classroom. The chart of Texas payments to Pearson testing company on this page shows the current “educational” priorities.

These dollars are staggering, especially when we consider the harm being done to teaching and learning under this system. But even half a billion dollars

doesn’t begin to cover the actual costs. During the last legislative session, I tried to find out from legislators and school officials what the testing system costs the local school districts. No one seemed to know. The general sense was that if we could total up all the dollars spent by local districts on the testing and accountability system, the amount would equal the state’s payments to Pearson — taking us up to a total of a billion dollars for this flawed system.

Many of the local costs are hidden. They don’t show up in separate lines in the budget because the state does not require schools to differentiate the costs of the testing system when they report their expenditures. So, for example, test-prep materials may be included, innocuously, under “curriculum materials.” Expensive consultants, hired to coach teachers to help their students game the test with a yellow highlighter and “key word search,” are likely to be coded under “teacher professional development.”

I call these the “hidden costs” because they are not honestly, transparently disclosed. Taxpayers see all the money being spent on education and wonder why our schools aren’t improving, why so many students do not graduate. They have no idea how many millions of their tax dollars never make it to the classroom and, in fact, are spent on a system that undermines the quality of teaching and learning, weakening our schools’ capacity to teach our children.

I drew up the lists of the “hidden costs of testing” and the “hidden costs of accountability,” shown in the sidebar on page 15, from conversations with teachers and administrators. One former teacher already let me know my lists are not complete: “You forgot the doors!” She informed me that each school is required to have heavy, lock-

able metal security doors on the rooms where tests and answer sheets are stored. Who knew? (And what science supplies or music program was cut to pay for that door?)

This absurd system is impoverishing our schools and our children while it is enriching the testing companies and their lobbyists and the suppliers of all these things we don’t need.

What’s at stake is the very survival of the public’s schools. Resources are leaving our classrooms, especially in the communities where they are most needed. The not-surprising result of this strategic deprivation is low scores on the tests, which then are used as an excuse to close neighborhood schools, to outsource our poor children to charter chains, or to push them out of school entirely. We now have in Texas 18 years of studies — and the experiences of children and teachers in our schools — showing beyond a doubt that this is a failed system. It’s time to invoke the system’s own logic: if failing schools are to be closed for not making measurable progress, then why haven’t we shut down this visibly, measurably failing system?

The public’s schools are like the public commons — that green space shared for everyone’s use and benefit, a meeting ground for the common good and for sustaining the community. Parents are realizing that their children’s opportunities for a meaningful education are being cheated by the testing system. Communities are becoming aware that as standardized accountability weakens the public’s schools, it threatens the very legitimacy of a public education, making our treasured schools vulnerable to those who would love to capture our tax dollars not just for testing contracts but for commercializing the education of our children. The system is a fraud, and it must be dismantled.

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**TEXAS PAYMENTS TO PEARSON TESTING COMPANY**

2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
\$39,122,054	\$50,208,435	\$47,451,455	\$58,692,430	\$62,641,857
2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
\$87,427,757	\$100,214,658	\$87,260,970	\$92,103,116	\$85,208,340
2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
\$90,665,041	\$89,058,910	\$93,369,544	\$96,532,517	\$98,766,605



#### RELATED LINKS

- What does the resolution about high-stakes testing say? [www.tasanet.org/sites/tasa/files/gr/2012/sampleresolution.pdf](http://www.tasanet.org/sites/tasa/files/gr/2012/sampleresolution.pdf)
- Who has signed the resolution? <http://www.tasanet.org/adopted-board-resolutions>
- “Avoidable Losses: High-Stakes Accountability and the Dropout Crisis” <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/28>
- National Center for Fair & Open Testing [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org)
- Linda McNeil at the LBJ School [www.utexas.edu/lbj/videos/2012/dr-linda-mcneils-remarks-lbj-schools-measuring-forum-9242012](http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/videos/2012/dr-linda-mcneils-remarks-lbj-schools-measuring-forum-9242012)

### A MOVEMENT TO RESTORE EDUCATIONAL CAPACITIES OF OUR SCHOOLS

We do have cause for optimism. Parents across our state are joining in common cause, not only against this expensive accountability system but for equal and substantial funding for the schools in their own communities and across our state. Eighty-four percent of Texas school districts representing 90 percent of all Texas public school students have signed a resolution ([www.tasanet.org/sites/tasa/files/gr/2012/sampleresolution.pdf](http://www.tasanet.org/sites/tasa/files/gr/2012/sampleresolution.pdf)) urging the legislature to end the dominance of the testing system over Texas schools.

This is a heartening development. It reflects a growing national movement of educators, business leaders, parents, and students advocating to restore the educational capacities of our schools.

Organizing is essential. And the resolution is helping galvanize a consensus that bridges regions and ethnic groups and political divides. My question is why not take action? If all those “whereas...” clauses in the resolution are true (“Whereas, imposing relentless test preparation and boring memorization of facts to enhance test performance is doing little more than stealing the love of learning from our students and assuring that we fall short of our goals”), if they are worthy of the courage it must have taken for the early signers to endorse, then how can Texas public school districts wait for legislative changes while more generations of children are subjected to this system?

It’s time for local school boards to send a letter of conscience to the Texas Education Agency, the governor, the legislature, the state commissioner. I imagine the letter of conscience would begin something like this:

“To the Elected Officials of the State of Texas:

We are writing to let you know that we can no longer afford to participate in your testing system. We need to use those dollars to re-hire teachers, to make sure our curriculum materials are up to date, to make sure the instruction in our schools is supportive of the cultures and languages and aspirations of our children and their families. We have children to educate. If at some future time, we have all the money we need and more, we’ll get back to you about doing some of that testing.”

Such a letter might conclude something like this: “You know, we just re-read that resolution we signed, and we realize we really mean what it says. We can’t keep doing harm to our kids. We have a different vision for our schools. We want our students to touch a new piece of the universe today — and every day they come to school. Feel free to come visit, and we’ll show you what evidence of real learning looks like.”

School boards will have that courage when they hear from the parents, the teachers, the students, the people who elected them, that we believe that they have an important educational mission: to educate our children to the highest and most equitable standards and also to teach the officials who govern our schools that they need to dismantle this harmful system and work with us to make the public’s schools places of extraordinary learning.

*Linda McSpadden McNeil is professor of education and director of the Center for Education at Rice University. This essay is adapted from her remarks at the Measuring Up conference at the LBJ School at the University of Texas at Austin, Sept. 24, 2012.*



a child has many feelings...



hunger shouldn't be one of them.



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