

One of the criticisms of the Common Core and subsequent PARCC testing is that it stifles the creativity and free expression of students. As I have a degree in Art History, and am a certified teacher of HS English, you don't have to be very creative to imagine my feelings on the subject. But, actually, there is a great deal of creativity involved in the Common Core PARCC testing: the proponents of the test have elaborately fabricated the impact, the importance, and the need for the test and for the Common Core.

The entire fallacy is based upon the widely repeated, but patently false idea that American Public Schools are failing, and need to be "resuscitated". The "reformers", who will maintain that drastic measures are needed to "save" schools, note, as "proof", that education in foreign countries, especially in Asia, is swiftly overtaking education in the US. They say that Common Core/PARCC will provide our educational system with some serious revamping, because students in the US are in danger of being "left behind", as other countries surpass us in Math and Reading and, surprisingly enough, Science (since Science is not included on the PARCC test). To that end, they have created (instituted?) an educational environment in which teachers and students are saturated with PARCC test preparation and in which, in the month preceding the test, little other learning can be accomplished.

There are several flaws in this creatively wrought scenario: If, as the proponents of the PARCC maintain, the standards "ensure that every child is on a path to college and career readiness", why, then, are the standards forcing a curriculum that focuses on ONLY on the tests? In some school districts, High Schools have forgone Mid-Terms and Finals (because that will help to prepare students for college?), in order to have enough time to prepare students for PARCC, and to reduce testing fatigue generated by the copious amount of time required for students to "pass" the test.

Further, the idea that American public schools are "failing" is an absurd one, based upon misinformation, at best – an outright lie, at worst. Recently, there have been a number of pieces written about the "amazing" test results of Chinese schools. It turns out that the "successes" of these school systems has also been a creative fabrication. In one NY Times article, entitled "Inside a Chinese Test-Prep Factory", the author, Brook Larmer describes the factory-like conditions of the schools in which Chinese students are drilled from 6:20 in the morning to 10:50 at night in order to cram for a single test. Another piece, a book called "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon? Why China Has the Best (and Worst) Education System in the World" systematically breaks down the notion of higher performing Chinese students. In fact, the author Yong Zhao (himself a product of Chinese education, now presidential chair and professor at University of Oregon) says, that the rigorous focus on testing and drilling has not created better education. It has, you guessed it, destroyed creativity and free expression.

I'd like to read you a little of The New York Review of Books article on Mr. Zhao's book, written by Former Assistant Secretary of Education, Diane Ravitch. The review also discusses Secretary Duncan's contribution to the creative fairy tale of American School failure: Ravitch says, "It is worth noting that American students have never received high scores on international tests. On the first such test, a test of mathematics in 1964, senior year students in the US scored last of twelve nations, and eighth-grade students scored next to last. But in the following fifty years, the US outperformed the other eleven nations by every measure, whether economic productivity, military might, technological innovation, or democratic institutions. This raises the question of whether the scores of fifteen-year-old students on international tests predict anything of importance..."

Indeed, the statistics bear her out. Mr. Zhao maintains that neither China nor Singapore, two countries often touted as paragons of educational rigor and as the measures to which we must compare, will never be as successful as the United States. He says the push to succeed at test-takers has created rampant cheating and a lucrative underground market for test sales. He also speaks of the "cram-schools" noted in Larmer's article. And he says that the stifling of creativity has taken its toll. China, he says, cannot produce meaningful research publications or proofs, because all education is geared toward one thing: passing the test.

America, on the other hand, is a hotbed of creativity and innovation. As an example, of the 860 individuals awarded the Nobel Prize, 253 are from the United States. It is, by far, the most awarded nation. Coming in a distant second is Great Britain at 97. Of the Asian countries to which we compare ourselves, Japan has 21, China has 11 and the Republic of Korea has 2.

American public schools have produced some of the greatest engineers and scientists in the world. Neil Armstrong, John Glenn and Buzz Aldrin went to public school, as did 7 of the 8 newest NASA astronauts.

And if we're so worried about international competition, we should pay heed to James Milgram, professor emeritus at Stanford University who believes that American students who are educated via the Common Core mathematics standards will be two years behind their peers overseas by the time they reach seventh grade. Sandra Stotsky, of the University of Arkansas is concerned that the lack of focus on literature will cause our High School students to be woefully unprepared for and terribly ignorant of the great works they should study before college. I can see this in my own district, where the HS curriculum no longer includes classics like "Lord of the Flies" or "Julius Caesar"; in fact, the curriculum no longer includes a work of Shakespeare each year.

So if the failing American school system is a myth, and if the standards are not appropriate for our students, what is the purpose of our dependence on the Common

Core and our myopic focus on the PARCC test? That's a good question. Four years ago, 26 states supported the Common Core Standards/PARCC. More states have withdrawn or are seeking to withdraw support. Clearly, I am not the only one asking the question.

I propose we create a new scenario – a Common Core/PARCC-free scenario: one in which educators can make the curriculum decisions that are appropriate for their students. One with an injection of truth and a projection of hope. Let's envision an educational system in which students are nurtured as they are instructed – one in which they can explore literature and music and art and science and technology with the freedom that will allow them to become engineers and entertainers and bio-technicians – one in which the educational focus is on discovery and creativity and free expression.