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Guest columnist

No Child Left Behind: Test-obsessed education won't move us ahead

By David Marshak

Special to The Times

But far from being an implement of reform, the intense focus on standardized testing, on which No Child Left Behind relies, tethers schools to the industrial model of education devised during the first two decades of the 20th century.

As the United States became an industrial power, schools were shaped to fit this same industrial model of efficiency and production. Children were sorted by age. Some were groomed for higher education, but most were deemed best suited for labor and encouraged to drop out and go to work. Competition among students was encouraged, and student/teacher relationships were minimized.

Now, despite evidence from developmental psychology that children grow and develop at different and variable rates, we still keep age-grading as a key structural element of schooling. Age-grading rewards those who develop more quickly and punishes those who are slower or different, even though they may have great abilities and gifts.

In elementary schools, children move from one teacher to the next every year, trashing the bond built between children and their teacher as well as the teacher's knowledge of the needs and abilities of each student. Each year, we tell every child and teacher to start all over again, even though we know that the teacher's knowledge of and caring for the child is the single most important variable for many children, particularly for children who are most vulnerable, in determining whether or not they will learn and succeed in school.

In secondary schools, students move from one teacher to the next every 50 minutes (or 80 to 100 minutes with block periods). Five or six teachers a day; for many students, new teachers each semester. No wonder that 50 to 70 percent of students pass through their high-school years without developing a single important relationship with an adult in their school. We dump teens into industrially configured high schools, and then we complain that teens are disconnected and alienated from adults.

No Child Left Behind will not change any of this. In its single-minded focus on accountability and testing, it does not address the key issue of moving from an industrial model of school to a post-industrial model that integrates relationships and personalization with academic and personal success for every child. Such a movement requires that *we change the structure and culture of public schools simultaneously*.

Two important studies from the late '80s-early '90s, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor to connect what students are learning with the needs of employers, acknowledged that basic academic skills, such as reading, writing and mathematics, were central for student success in school and adult life. But both studies included additional categories of competence and knowledge as being equal in significance to

traditional academics: speaking and listening skills, problem-solving skills, creative-thinking skills, knowing-how-to-learn skills, collaboration and organizational effectiveness skills, and personal-management skills.

These reports looked not only at which skills were needed to support the economy, but also considered the wider range of human capacities, including citizenship, personal relationships, creativity and self-expression. But during the past decade, a string of political leaders (Bill Clinton, Gary Locke and most other governors, and now George W. Bush) have abandoned the needs of the present and future and retreated into the familiar paradigm of the industrial school, only with more testing and more penalties.

Look at Bush's education plan: reading, math and science. And the only accountability measure that is supposed to matter: standardized tests.

No Child Left Behind puts a standardized test gun to the head of every child, educator and parent in the nation. It guarantees pain and suffering for millions of children and teens whose cognitive and learning styles do not readily fit the narrow structures of standardized testing. It places huge demands on most states to pay for the development and administration of new tests, monies that states will have to raise either by taking money away from other state services or by raising taxes.

Finally, it seems likely that the standard for yearly improvement set by No Child Left Behind will not be met by many schools — certainly some bad schools but also many schools that serve middle- and upper-middle-class children that are currently held in high esteem by the parents whose children attend them.

There may eventually be good news to be found in the folly of NCLB, although it would come at enormous cost to large numbers of children, teens and teachers.

Here's what may happen: First, there already is significant hostility toward NCLB in states where its penalties have begun to kick in. Some school districts have already begun to sue the federal government about provisions of the act.

But the most significant response, and the rebellion, may come from middle- and upper-middle-class parents, as they see their children's schools become increasingly focused on test preparation and test scores, and the quality and richness of their child's schooling decline. Less attention paid to the arts, social studies, physical education, fewer studies based on children's interests and curiosities. More drill, more drill, more test prep. More frustration, more boredom, more anger.

Enough of this and it may take only a few years before parents become sufficiently enraged with the standardized-test obsession to demand an end to it. Perhaps a rebellion against this standardized-testing obsession will open the door to the reshaping of our schools and the implementation of much more sophisticated and effective accountability measures.

The bulk of our culture is already moving into post-industrial forms and desperately needs students who can fit into what "Megatrends" author John Naisbett calls the "high tech, high touch" workplace. We need, as Naisbett says, to reinvent education by teaching students "how to think... to be creative."

That means personalization, small schools, and relationships between students and teachers developed over several years (for example, through looping classrooms in which a teacher works with the same class for two years rather than one, multi-age classrooms, and/or multi-year advisories and tutorials). It also means common learning goals for all students and individual learning goals for every student, and many and varied uses of new communication technologies in ways that are intensely student-centered.

Look at how the post-industrial energies take form in the work world: Effective post-industrial

organizations motivate workers by giving them more responsibility and authority, and by valuing their resourcefulness, knowledge and skills — essentially by treating them as professionals. Contrast that to the way teachers are treated within standardized-testing regimes. Teachers are like assembly-line workers, relying on simplistic rewards and punishments. And students are treated not like unique human beings, but like interchangeable parts.

It's not that standardized testing has no role in the post-industrial school. Indeed, it does have potential value as one of many different assessment tools that can be used to fairly and accurately measure the learning and capabilities of diverse students.

The tragic irony of our times is that we know how to create schools that will prepare responsible, competent citizens and meet the needs of the post-industrial workplace. There are exemplary schools all over the nation that are doing this right now. Not one relies primarily on standardized testing. These schools all have high standards and rigorous accountability, and they respect and value the diversity of their students. And everything that happens in these schools starts with personal, long-term relationships between adults and children.

We also know that the agenda for schooling for the future should include a multidisciplinary curriculum that encourages inventive thinking (problem-solving, synthesis, analysis, creativity) and develops a range of communication, interpersonal and productivity skills.

For example, the Tahoma Public School District in Maple Valley, a district with forward-looking leadership, has the following post-industrial list of desired school outcomes: self-directed learning, collaboration, effective communication, contributors to the community, quality production, and complex thinking. For several years, educators at all grade levels in the district have used these desired outcomes as guides in their curriculum development and in their teaching.

Perhaps the No Child Left Behind Act will be a necessary disaster that will so discredit the industrial paradigm of school that we can finally let it go — and begin to move ahead. Unfortunately a lot of children and teens, and teachers and parents, will get hurt in the process.