

**IMPROVING LEARNING**  
**THROUGH STUDENT ASSESSMENT IN MICHIGAN**  
**Beyond the Standardization of Learning**

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With input from a Working Group of the  
Whole Schooling Consortium &  
Rouge Forum

**MOVING TOWARDS POLICIES  
THAT SUPPORT LEARNING**

*Away from Policies That Damage Learning*

We need to be clear about the purpose of schools and the real clientele for which schools are established. We propose that *the fundamental purpose of schools is to create effective, literate, democratic citizens, who can think, work, be creative, and continue to learn and grow*, a purpose critical for our national and international survival as a people and that working towards such a purpose requires that we focus on multiple aspects of learning and growth. Towards this end, the clientele served by schools are first and foremost children and their families, secondly to the community including business and industry.

If schools are designed to create thinking, democratic citizens, all systems of accountability must be crafted to serve this purpose. However, in recent years, education policy in Michigan has used a regressive model to improve schools based on a combination of punishment, rewards, and ranking of schools, all linked to increasingly high stakes for students, parents, principals, and, increasingly, teachers. In both cases, the research is clear that such an approach is, at minimum, ineffective, at worst, dangerous. The present system includes:

- ❑ Use of the MEAP as a primary tool for student assessment. Increasing research and analysis shows that this test largely measures race and class rather than growth and learning, is stimulating use of poor teaching practices, and is demonstrating potential for long-term negative impact on learning and mental health of children, and more. (See Attachment 1).
- ❑ Based largely on concerns regarding MEAP scores, the state abolished the elected school board in Detroit and has threatened to do so in other school districts.
- ❑ Until the recent proclamation of the new superintendent of education, the MEAP was tied to state accreditation resulting in the potential non-accreditation of some 30% of the state's schools.
- ❑ The Merit Award scholarship and Golden Apple Awards reward students and schools both for having children take and pass the MEAP, emphasizing that school is about passing a test rather than real learning.
- ❑ Use of \$10 million of state funds for the Standard and Poor's assessment of schools, funds that could be better spent supporting the improvement of instruction and schooling.
- ❑ Teachers, even more than before, are opting out of districts that have high concentrations of students at high risk, thus exacerbating supply of quality teachers in those districts that need them most.

At present, representatives of businesses and people of wealth largely drive accountability. Businesses have a vested interest in having a large pool of people with high degrees of narrowly defined technical skills. Further, many parents, driven by a desire that their children be successful in life are often influenced by these narrow, reductionist approaches to learning, to the actual detriment of

their children. This does *not* mean that people of wealth or the business community has no role in schools, quite the contrary. The total community must be about the business of supporting its children and businesses and people of wealth who take their livelihood from communities have special responsibilities to the community and schools.

The present system that attempts to force educators to improve through combinations of threats, sanctions, and incentives, works no better than using such strategies with children. Another model to improve schools is available – one based on a combination of high expectations and high degrees of support. Real change comes not through force but the slower process of helping people learn through collaborative dialogue and the implementation of best practices. Michigan has a long, venerable, and proud history of promoting excellence in education and human supports for its citizens. In recent years, this tradition fallen by the wayside in numerous policy initiatives that have appeared mean spirited and damaging. We can reclaim our proud heritage, however. We can again provide needed national leadership that may spark the imaginations of policymakers and practitioners throughout the country in the process.

**We congratulate** the Michigan Department of Education and Tom Watkins, newly appointed Superintendent, in important recent actions that move our state towards the possibility of creating democratic citizens rather than sorting children by race and class in the recent move to withdraw the state accreditation process that presently is largely based on participation in and scores on the MEAP. This is an important and critical first step taken with courage and insight. This move signals to many educators the possibility of a new era in pro-active education for children in Michigan. In this context, we present this paper in a spirit of hope and optimism that we can work together to improve real learning for Michigan's children.

**DOING BETTER**  
**Creating An Assessment Process**  
**To Strengthen Learning, Improve Schools,**  
**& Improve Reporting of Progress and Needs**

We can do better. We can use innovative, research-based strategies to build a manageable system for assessment in Michigan that supports the learning of children. Below, we sketch the main elements of such a system. At the beginning, however, we wish to state practices that must be avoided, so as not to recreate the same problems that are plaguing the use of the MEAP. These include the following:

- ❑ No system should promote or allow the ranking of schools against one another on the basis of student outcomes and learning. The variables are too complex, resources too inequitable for such a process to be fair or even have meaning.
- ❑ High stakes assessment of any sort works against the learning process and must be avoided.
- ❑ Assessment must not compare and rank children but be used to recognize achievement and learning, validating the value of all children.

**The 3 Key Purposes of assessment.**

First, it seems to us that there are three key purposes for which assessment is needed: to . . .

1. Guide teachers in developing, delivering, and adapting curriculum and instruction to facilitate children learning.
2. Improve the culture and environment in schools to support learning.
3. Report progress and needs to parents and the community.

## **1. Guide curriculum and instruction for learning.**

To help children learn, we want to assess . . .

- ❑ what students know,
- ❑ what they want to know (understanding that this itself is part of the learning process),
- ❑ what we need to teach, and
- ❑ how they learn.

Most centrally, we want to focus on the growth and learning of children, to determine if children are learning, to use assessment daily to guide what and how teaching occurs, and to aggregate information for a total school to understand the effectiveness of the school in helping children move ahead. No standardized test is of meaningful use for any of these purposes. To promote the growth of children, we believe there is no use in attempting to quantify scores. Given the many clear and obvious problems with the current assessment system, the MEAP needs to be discontinued for the assessment of individual students, ranking schools, and functioning as the foundation for state accreditation.

Consequently, a meaningful assessment that will promote student learning must have the following characteristics:

- ❑ be organized around the ultimate educational mission of the school – e.g. Democratic citizenship, lifelong learner, etc.
- ❑ be curriculum-based
- ❑ performance-based
- ❑ authentic (connected to genuine activities related to home and community life)
- ❑ focus on growth and improvement as such rather than meeting a predetermined criteria or score that labels a student as ‘proficient’ or ‘non-proficient’.
- ❑ Provide accommodations and supports in the assessment process for all children based on their individual needs, not just children with disabilities.
- ❑ Allow different levels of capacity, basing evaluation of learning primarily on two factors: (1) effort, and (2) improvement. This allows literally all children to be successful while still challenging them to learn and grow, not destroying eagerness and initiative.
- ❑ Provide multiple ways of demonstrating growth and learning – text, art, drama, demonstrations, and more.

We have some promising practices from which we can draw that include:

- ❑ Performance-based assessment strategies used in the classroom organized around key areas of focus. (See one approach at: <http://www.learningrecord.org/> or an essay on several potentially valuable approaches at: <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/assment/as500.htm>).
- ❑ Use of rubrics for particular skill development areas that can be used as a basis for assessment and reported in meaningful terms to parents. The Michigan Literacy Progress Profile is one approach that builds on these guiding principles presently being sponsored by the Michigan Department of Education (<http://12.98.44.5./mlpp/>).
- ❑ Community presentations of learning developed from thematic study of key topics or community issues (See <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/assment/as7key.htm> for a description of such an approach at the Key School in Indianapolis).
- ❑ Portfolio assessment as one approach to performance assessment, a particularly useful with student led conferences (see <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/earlycld/ea51143.htm>) and portfolios to demonstrate learning using models as those of the Coalition of Essential Schools (<http://www.essentialschools.org/fieldbook/classpractice/assessment/assessment.html> ).

Lucy Calkins said, "The tests lose a little bit of their power when we, as a profession, reach out for the tools to conduct our assessments sitting side by side with children." (From A Teachers' Guide to Standardized Reading Tests - Knowledge is Power).

To move beyond simplistic solutions, of course, requires a substantive commitment. Performance based assessment, portfolios, student-led conferences are rich practices that promote effective curriculum and instruction. However, this richness is also much more complex than the simple scores promoted by standardized testing. The results are much more effective, however, and the process can be done.

## **2. Improve the culture and environment in schools.**

To improve schools, we want to assess the degree to which schools have in place a culture, social supports, instruction, physical facilities, and partnerships that provide a place in which the learning and development of children can flourish. What is needed is a system that supports the improvement of schools and educators through a process of collaborative self-analysis and individual professional development. Some key elements of such a system include the following:

- ❑ Base state accreditation on one or more processes in which schools engage in *meaningful self-study and ongoing improvement*. Presently, the existing NCA process provides one such mechanism. In addition, other school reform models – Comer, Accelerated Schools, Whole Schooling, and more – utilize related processes to move schools towards cultures and practices that support student learning. All these processes move beyond the narrow, technical focus on academics to focus on a school culture based on indicators of success, helping to develop children as humane citizens, looking at the whole child.
- ❑ What is needed is a focus on building a *school culture that promotes learning*, one that helps children tell their own stories with support from adults and addresses other critical issues in the learning process, for example, problems of bullying and promoting inclusive education of children with special needs. The whole school as a community studies itself and decides how to make itself a better whereas accreditation based on the MEAP is like carrot and stick.
- ❑ If *standards* are needed, these *should be based on practices known to impact positively on student learning* against which the culture and practice of a school may be judged. The Whole Schooling Consortium has developed one set of principles and related practices that move in the right direction (<http://www.coe.wayne.edu/CommunityBuilding/WSC.html>).
- ❑ Any school reform effort can also be implemented in a way that does not correspond to the real spirit and original intent. Any *monitoring* process *will need to look at the nature of the culture and teaching process developed in the school*, going far beyond simple counting of professional development events or the existence of documents that tout positive values.
- ❑ *Multiple indicators of impact* may be used to measure the movement of a school: the types of school improvement efforts taken on, student and parent surveys, aggregation of progress information across students broken down by race, class, and other variables (based on measures of growth and learning centered in authentic assessment); progress with students using collaborative consultation; attendance; and other related measures that provide a rich picture.
- ❑ Provide *fiscal support for* schools and teachers to undergo *change and professional development*. Assure that ongoing professional development and collaborative learning sessions are provided to teachers and other school staff and that substitutes are provided to allow release time for teachers.

## **3. Report progress and needs to parents and the community.**

It is critical that processes be established whereby we can be accountable for helping children grow and learn. However, such accountability involves all sectors of the community being mutually accountable to one another, not just one group to another. We must develop strategies for mutual accountability, for building partnerships to support children where all have a role, moving from hierarchy towards building a community that supports the growth and development of children. If the goal of schooling is to create citizens, then schools, in approximate order of importance, are

accountable to: children, parents, community, and business. This accountability, however, is complex, requiring that educators lead and educate as well as listen and respond. Schools should effectively and personally report progress and needs to parents and the community, a process that will be tied integrally to efforts to improve schooling and teaching (#2). This will include the following components:

- ❑ Meaningful involvement of parents and the community in the process of school improvement sketched above.
- ❑ Student-led demonstrations of their learning as through portfolios and student-led conferences. Care must be taken that these do not once more become high stakes measures where children compete against one another but a true student-led process of showing what they have learned, how they proceeded, what they would do better next time.
- ❑ Teachers and other educators having dialogues and mutual professional development opportunities with parents to help all understand best practices for teaching and learning.
- ❑ Responsiveness to parents regarding the special needs of their children, particularly supporting the move towards inclusive schooling for students who have previously been in pull-out programs – students with disabilities, gifted, bilingual, at risk, and more.
- ❑ Publication and sharing of the ongoing efforts to improve the school. Meaningful requests for suggestions for ways to improve learning such as student, parent, and community surveys and focus groups.

### **A PROCESS TOWARDS BETTER POLICIES**

In recent years, in Michigan and throughout the country, policymakers have joined with other forces to set unattainable standards, establish tests that promote poor teaching, and install punitive policies when schools and children don't measure up. It is clear, however, that policy has often developed laws that schools, even those with the most resources, cannot implement, that shifts constantly occur at the state level creating confusion in local schools. We would recommend a process for proceeding:

- ❑ Announce soon the Department's concern with the multiple problems of the MEAP and its present use in detail as outlined above. There are multiple scholars, teachers, parents, and administrators who can and would be willing to help with such an effort.
- ❑ Form an Action Team to build on these and related ideas to craft a new process.
- ❑ Examine and field-test this process to include: state hearings; focus groups locally of educators, parents, scholars, and community members.
- ❑ Establish a Pilot Process with funding for evaluation of the effort in several school districts of different demographics, including certain areas within the Detroit Public Schools.
- ❑ Develop a timeline for full implementation over a 3-year period.
- ❑ Respectfully submitted.

## ATTACHMENT 1

### THE MEAP The Negative Impacts of Practice and Policy

For the past two decades, Michigan policy has increasingly shifted to using a single standardized test, the MEAP, for multiple purposes, with stakes rising higher for students, parents, teachers, and administrators, and local real estate agents. In the past five years, the emphasis on passing the MEAP in schools has risen to a fever pitch, the heightening of resolve by those who have been in policy positions has continued unabated. This emphasis is literally destroying the quality of education in Michigan schools, particularly schools with high concentrations of working class and low-income children and adolescents. We have a situation where present policies are promoting poor teaching practices, widening the gap between high-income schools and those of working class and lower income children. Specifically, the emphasis on the MEAP is having the following results:

- ❑ First and foremost, test scores are being used as a basis for punitive measures – from the ousting of the elected school board in Detroit, threats of additional state takeovers, threats of the jobs of principals, pressure on teachers and children.
- ❑ With the emphasis on getting the scores higher, children are under increasing amounts of pressure, schools use all sorts of questionable strategies in test taking season – pep rallies, rewards for those who pass the tests, encouraging low functioning students to opt out of the test, using enormous amounts of instructional time to teach test taking skills. The results: children are clearer all the time that school is not about learning
- ❑ This pressure and emphasis on raising the scores creates an unsafe, psychologically harmful environment in schools for children, teachers, and parents. In low income schools principals have been known to literally scream at their teachers in fear, children across the socio-economic spectrum are fearful of doing poorly on the tests creating potential harm to their mental health. In several high-income districts, for example, teachers report students throwing up and berating themselves for missing a single question. The responses by parents to their children’s test scores is not known but can be presumed to be punitive in many cases. The whole scenario contributes to the emotional and intellectual destruction of individual children. Not only does the MEAP have nothing to say about the overall school environment as a culture for learning, it helps create pressures against such a positive learning environment.
- ❑ The test is highly influenced by class and race, virtually assuring that schools are ranked and sorted largely based on the wealth of the parents.
- ❑ The test is highly unfair to children for whom English is not their first language.
- ❑ The test is kept in place by several converging processes: (1) threats to the accreditation of schools and the jobs of principals, (2) publishing of scores and ranking schools in order of scores in local newspapers, (3) tying the value of real estate to the scores on tests, (4) silencing of opposition by teachers through direct or implied threats at worst, lack of support for asking critical questions at best, (5) lack of any reasonable evaluation of the impact of the use of the test on public education and the learning and mental health of students.
- ❑ The emphasis on the test ties literally every educational initiative to the question: “Will it help or hurt our test scores?” Since few in low income and working class district believe that focus on active learning, exploratory investigations will raise scores, there is great pressure to move away from teaching that promotes involvement, engagement and real thinking to rote learning.
- ❑ Upper income districts, confident in the capacity of their children to pass the test at high rates, however, continue to use a higher proportion of good teaching and schooling strategies, thus increasing once again the discrepancy of good learning across class lines.
- ❑ Ultimately, all tests are now reading tests. In many cases, teachers report that children know how to do science and math, but given the emphasis on directions in writing, they must read at a high level to answer the questions on this portion of the test. Thus, the validity of the tests is compromised.

- All these pressures lead people to act unethically to protect themselves and their jobs.
- An enormous fiscal investment is being made in a process that has little utility. It is not useful for teachers in helping children learn, of limited to no use in helping schools know how to improve, of no use in public accountability. The funds being used on this test could be better spent in providing support for schools in improving teaching and learning.

We feel that these problems are insoluble and that tweaking the present assessment and evaluation system for schools is doomed to failure, doomed to exacerbating the already substantive problems.

*The MEAP should be discontinued for the assessment of individual students, ranking schools, and functioning as the foundation for state accreditation.*

## ATTACHMENT 2

### HOW THIS PAPER WAS DEVELOPED

The ideas in this paper have been developed in several stages. Michael Peterson, Coordinator of the Whole Schooling Consortium and member of the Rouge Forum, was the prime writer of the document. During the last three years, now hundreds of teachers, parents, administrators, and university educators throughout the country have been active with the Whole Schooling Consortium and the Rouge Forum (see below) in developing principles and practices for quality schooling for all children and addressing policy issues that either support or harm their realization. The growth of standardized testing as a driving force in schools throughout the country has been a central concern. We have held two national conferences, conducted an intensive study of schools, worked with 4 Detroit schools supporting reform efforts, engaged a growing national network of individuals, made numerous presentations and national and state conferences, sponsored a rally, and published the Rouge Forum, a mini-journal addressing key educational issues, all involving substantive learning.

For the development of this paper, a working group was convened specifically to articulate areas of concern and suggestions for alternatives to Michigan's present policies. These individuals included the following parents, teachers, administrators, and university professors from the Detroit metropolitan area: Nancy Creech (Roseville), Jan Colliton (Farmington), Kathy Coulter (Novi), Marta Hampel (Plymouth-Canton), Mishael Hittie (Southfield), Joan Huellmantel (Milford / Huron Valley), Sue Huellmantel (Southfield), Georgie Peterson (Detroit), Michael Peterson (Wayne State University), Gloria Prosperi (Southfield), Jorge Prosperi (West Bloomfield), Tanya Sharon (Detroit). Subsequent to the draft document developed out of the 4 hour dialogue of this group, additional individuals reviewed the document and provided input. These included Greg Queen and Katy Landless (Fitzgerald) and Dean Paula Wood and Assistant Dean Sharon Elliott of the College of Education at Wayne State University. Finally, input was sought via email from several hundred parents and educators from around the country. This substantial input has helped us capture language and ideas effectively. However, the responsibility for the content of this document lies primarily with the author and should not be construed as the opinion of any individual who provided input.

## ATTACHMENT 3

### COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS

This paper was developed as a collaborative effort of individuals in the following two organizations.



The **Whole Schooling Consortium** links individuals and schools in work to build better schools

based on the FIVE PRINCIPLES of Whole Schooling.

1. Empowering citizens in a democracy
2. Including all:
3. Authentic, multi-level teaching.
4. Building community & supporting learning
5. Partnering:

You are invited to join this effort. We sponsor several initiatives in Michigan: (1) Action Learning Coalition, a group of parents, teachers, and others who typically meet on the weekend and share, learn, support, and take action, particularly related to inclusive education, good teaching, and standardized tests; (2) school-based research and change projects through funded initiatives. We can discuss collaborative efforts; (3) school adoption of Whole Schooling as a guide for school improvement with support from our office; and (4) the Michigan Network for Inclusive Schooling, a network of schools and individuals. **For more information:**

Whole Schooling Consortium, c/o 217  
Education, WSU, Detroit, Michigan 48202  
[Wholeschool@mediaone.net](mailto:Wholeschool@mediaone.net)  
<http://www.coe.wayne.edu/CommunityBuilding/WSC.html>

The **Rouge Forum** is interested in teaching and learning for a democratic society.



The **Rouge Forum** is a group of educators, students, and parents seeking a democratic society. We are concerned about questions like these: How can we teach against racism, national chauvinism and sexism in an increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic society? How can we gain enough real power to keep our ideals and still teach--or learn? Whose interests shall school serve in a society that is ever more unequal? We are both research and action oriented. We want to learn about equality, democracy and social justice as we simultaneously struggle to bring into practice our present understanding of what that is. We seek to build a caring inclusive community, which understands that an injury to one is an injury to all.

To join or obtain more information contact:  
[elethinker@geocities.com](mailto:elethinker@geocities.com) or send your name, address, email, and phone number to Dr. Rich Gibson, [rgibson@pipeline.com](mailto:rgibson@pipeline.com)  
[http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/rouge\\_forum/](http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/rouge_forum/)

## RESOURCES

Following are web sites that provide many resources with information where ideas in this paper can be explored.

### **Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning**

2550 S. Parker Road, Suite 500

Aurora, CO 80014

Website on standards and benchmarks.

<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>

Briefly peruse this list across a couple of subjects. Go to the standards list for two subjects for second graders. Think how you might feel if you were required to effectively respond to these standards to keep your present job. Similar standards statements are finding their way into the standards documents of states all over the country, representing impossible and potentially undesirable technical knowledge on the part of children. These standards statements are significant for what they include. Perhaps they are the most significant for what they exclude. Go to the section on civics, for example, and try to find examples regarding how grassroots organizations, such as those who headed the civil rights movement in the 1960's, developed political impact. Or look for standards that talk about building emotional health or the capacity to care for other human beings, to develop a sense of character. We have to remember that standards have presently been driven by the coalition of the technical needs of corporations and the perceptions of what academics think the world should know about their subjects. To date, minimal to no conversations have been held broadly with parents, community members and organizations, and children themselves regarding what they think the goals of learning should be.

### **National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing**

UCLA, GSE&IS Building, Mailbox 951522

300 Charles E. Young Drive North

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1522

<http://cresst96.cse.ucla.edu/index.htm>

At this site you can read much research that is organized around the central themes – assessment should be driven by the standards described in the MCREL site above. What's missing in much of this research is a questioning of the real goals of learning.

### **Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)**

101 SW Main, Ste. 500,

Portland, OR 97204

<http://www.nwrel.org/eval/index.html>

This site provides examples of useful assessments that are directly linked to instruction, providing teachers, students, and parent's ongoing authentic assessment information that helps students learn and teachers teach.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

1120 East Diehl Road, Suite 200

Naperville, Illinois 60563

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/as0cont.htm>

This site provides information and links regarding ways to link assessment to effective learning and teaching in meaningful ways, strategies for assuring equity in the assessment process, particularly concerned with issues of race and class. On this site, we would particularly recommend the following article: **Why Should Assessment be based on a Vision of Learning?** M. Kulieke, J. Bakker, C. Collins, T. Fennimore, C. Fine, J. Herman, B.F. Jones, L. Raack, M.B. Tinzmann  
NCREL, Oak Brook, 1990. Available at: [http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/rpl\\_esys/assess.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/rpl_esys/assess.htm)

**National Center for Fair and Open Testing.**

342 Broadway  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
<http://www.fairtest.org>

This site provides a very important source of information. FairTest has provided a source of information for parents and teachers all over the country who are concerned about the devastating impact of standardized tests and the standards movement on meaningful learning in the United States. The site articulates issues, provides a listserv for individuals to dialogue with one another, guidelines for effective assessment practices, and more.

**Alfie Kohn: Rescuing our schools from “tougher standards”.**

<http://www.alfiekohn.org/standards/standards.htm>

Alfie Kohn has been a most visible proponent of effective education for students (See The Schools Our Children Deserve, What to Look for in a Classroom, and No Contest). Likewise, he has been most visible in the struggle against the harm being imposed by the standards movement and standardized tests, an approach summarized by the cartoon below taken from his website (See The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining our Schools). This site has short articles regarding the problems with the standards movement and standardized tests, links to additional resources including a national network of coordinators in each state.