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## Star Educator Decries Emphasis on Testing

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Deborah Meier did not have to worry much about standardized tests when she created the now-famous Central Park East School in East Harlem. It was 1974. Neither American educators nor American newspapers had begun what today is intense annual scrutiny of test results.

Few people expected much out of Meier's low-income students. Administrators were willing to let her experiment with having children learn the way graduate students do -- in small seminars, debating key points with enthusiastic teachers and researching questions of their own choosing. Her principal assessments were reviews of written work and interviews of individual students about what they had learned.

The startling fact that this worked, that Central Park East graduates went on to success in college and the workplace, is now a major irritant for the federal plan to improve schools through standardized exams. Meier, distressed at the effect of such tests on her new Mission Hill School in Boston, is giving the small and politically weak anti-testing movement an authority and credibility it has never had.

The effort to raise learning standards through regular testing began with several state governors in the 1980s and has been adopted by both major political parties. Its first priority is to rescue the nation's worst schools, in inner cities and rural areas, and many educators have welcomed the promise of more resources for the lowest-scoring schools -- as provided for, most recently, by the federal No Child Left Behind law.

Yet Meier, who has devoted her life to urban school children, says the standards and testing movement won't help them at all. "The idea of holding schools accountable to test scores has its attractions, fits aspects of the national mood and adheres to a long-standing American tradition of turning to standardized testing as the answer to our ills," she writes in her new book, "In Schools We Trust."

"But the trouble is, as we keep relearning generation after generation, it contradicts what we know about how human beings learn and what tests can and cannot do."

Defenders of the standards movement say Meier is a wonderful teacher but cannot replicate her success in enough schools to save this generation of low-income children. "What she has accomplished in her own school is wonderful," said Mark Christie, president of the Virginia Board of Education, "but the reality is that across the entire spectrum of public education, it would take not one generation, but several, to duplicate her type of success in all classrooms in all schools, if it could ever be done."

Abigail Thernstrom, a member of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, said, "The day we get such extraordinary teachers [as Meier] in all of our schools -- or, at least, in all of our urban schools -- we can start a serious debate about the Meier philosophy."

Without major change in the way schools teach, however, Meier expects most low-income students to lose out anyway. Their grasp of lessons will remain weak, and the tests will be a poor measure of what they have learned, she says.

Other critics of testing applaud her views. "Deb Meier is correct," said Monty Neill, executive director of the

National Center for Fair & Open Testing in Cambridge, Mass. "State exams do not and cannot measure most important learning."

Alfie Kohn, a lecturer and author who has been a national leader in the anti-testing movement, said: "Lots of inner-city schools were horrible to begin with. But we're no longer talking about how to improve them, just how to raise their test scores." For the moment, the debate is hindered by contradictory research and limited numbers of low-income schools that have had much success either with tests or without them.

But William C. Cala, superintendent of the Fairport (N.Y.) Central School District, said new data are revealing the dangers of relying on standardized exams to determine school ratings and student promotion.

In New York, he said, "the gap in performance between large urban centers and other public schools has widened. . . . Staff development no longer addresses teacher improvement, but rather test scoring and alignment of curricula to the tests."

And nationally, he added, good teachers are fleeing the profession and students are dropping out of school.

Cala cited several New York City schools, including the Urban Academy, Fannie Lou Hamer High School and the El Puente Academy, that "serve the poor, people of color and English language learners and beat the hell out of any school using high-stakes testing."

Supporters of regular testing have their own school lists. The "No Excuses" schools identified by the Washington-based Heritage Foundation, including Bennett-Kew Elementary in Inglewood, Calif., Newberry Elementary in Detroit and the KIPP Academies in Houston and the Bronx, achieve unusually high scores despite large numbers of low-income students, who usually do not do well academically.

Mel J. Riddile, principal of Stuart High School in Fairfax County, said his high-poverty school could not have scored as well on Virginia tests and raised its average SAT score by 104 points in four years without the structure provided by standards and tests. "The classroom environment described by Meier has very low structure and only proves that certain individuals with dynamic personalities can get kids to achieve," he said.

Susan H. Schwartz, a veteran Montgomery County physics teacher, said she is concerned about teachers who "dismiss their students' failure as the sign of a lack of skills and interest in their audience." She said standardized tests ensure teachers are held accountable "for a minimum level of competency."

Gary R. Galluzzo, executive vice president of the Arlington-based National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, said both sides have good arguments, and the best approach may be regular testing until fourth grade, when "children should begin to experience the curriculum that Meier advocates, where they learn how to engage more actively in their learning through exploration, asking good questions, testing hypotheses, and the like."

Arthur W. Gosling, executive director of the Washington-based National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, said he favors testing children to see which schools need the most help. But, he said, policymakers must be required to devote more resources to those schools once they have seen the test results.

"The truth is, that rarely happens," said Gosling, a former Arlington County superintendent. "Rather, the person at the end of the line, the teacher, takes the heat but doesn't get the support she needs to get the job done."

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