

# Race to the Top: An Example of Belief-Dependent Reality

## A Response to “Race to the Top Leaves Children and Future Citizens Behind”

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### ABSTRACT

Although the federal government claims otherwise, Race to the Top is not research based. Rather, its foundation is in ideology and belief-based realism. The overall effort is fundamentally antiscientific and distracts valuable and needed attention, resources, and focus from the nation’s real problems of social, economic, and educational deprivation.

**W**ITH HIGH UNCTION, clerics of educational reform frequently proclaim their notions are grounded on a strong scientific base. The President (The White House, 2011) and his secretary of education, Arne Duncan (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a), have made such claims, although they have not actually demonstrated such a link. In fact, in reviewing the administration’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization plan and supporting research document (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b), the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) found that “there is a general neglect of peer-reviewed research and an overreliance on information gathered from special interest groups, think tanks, government documents, and media reports” (Mathis & Welner, 2010, p. 5). The Race to the Top (RTT) elements are virtually identical to the reauthorization plans and suffer from the same lack of a scientific base.

Science, of course, has certain advantages as a basis for policy formation. Its proofs are subject to verification, are based on careful observations, and must be generally replicable. Science must also follow commonly accepted designs and rules of evidence.

But science has the inconvenient drawback of not necessarily confirming the ideological pronouncements some policymakers wish to advance. This leads to awkward contradictions such as a reformer claiming the success of accountability-based reform as an “established fact” (Klein, 2011) while Duncan said that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) “is creating a slow-motion educational train wreck for children, parents, and teachers. Under the law, an overwhelming number of schools in the country may soon be

labeled as ‘failing,’ eventually triggering impractical and ineffective sanctions” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 5).

Science would pose questions about the Council of Chief State School Officers’ (CCSSO) Next Generation accountability plan. These chief officers simultaneously declare NCLB a failure and recommend that we keep the main features—and make them more rigorous and more prescriptive (CCSSO, 2011).

Further, science demands that findings be reliable. With RTT’s test-based teacher evaluation proposal, however, such reliability poses a significant scientific problem. When the *Los Angeles Times* data was modeled under slightly different assumptions and with three years of teacher data rather than one, individual teacher rating categories shifted in 54% of the cases (Briggs & Domingue, 2010). Falsely labeling teacher effectiveness is an ethical problem as well as a scientific problem.

Some, with a more skeptical eye, look at the RTT elements (standards and assessments, data systems to support instruction, great teachers and great leaders, and turning around low-achieving schools; U.S. Department of Education, 2009) and conclude that

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they are based more on ideology than on science. While RTT certainly embraces ideological notions espoused by many vested-interest think tanks (e.g., The Foundation for Educational Choice plans and the Heritage Foundation proposals), RTT is lacking in the consistency normally expected of a true ideology. Ideology requires an unswerving fidelity to a doctrine or set of concepts. This is troublesome, for example, when a program simultaneously calls for flexibility and for the devolution of decisions to states—just as long as all embrace the national Common Core curriculum and participate in one of two national testing consortia.

Others may contend that RTT is consistent with neoliberal and economic market-model ideologies. The proposals for competing for limited funds, charter schools, and hard-edged accountability would all support this perspective. However, ideologies typically have some definition of a common good that is expressed in value statements or goals. Market-models are bereft of moral purpose. *Good* (if it could be said to be that) is defined as the accumulation or aggregation of wealth. While there is much lip service given to closing the achievement gap and increasing educational opportunities for all, numerous school funding adequacy studies demonstrate that funding for low-achieving students has not been provided and the accountability movement has not closed the achievement gap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; Vanneman, A., Hamilton, L., Anderson, J., & Rahman, T., 2009). Then, there is the fact that the National Academies report says that high-stakes accountability notions simply do not work (National Academies, 2011).

In the preceding featured essay, Onosko (2011) highlights eight fundamental flaws in RTT. Each of these is based more on ideology than on sound educational research. He further notes seven groups whose interests would be advanced by the RTT agenda. In concurring with his appraisal, this response article affirms his findings, albeit through the perspective of a different conceptual set.

As there is negligible scientific basis for the RTT reforms (a point that is developed in greater detail below) and ideology is a partial but imperfect fit, Shermer's "belief-dependent realism" may serve as the best-fitting theoretical foundation. Simply put, "We form our beliefs and then look for evidence to support them afterwards" (Shermer, June 2011). To be sure, all people have a set of beliefs formed on the basis of "subjective, emotional and psychological reasons." Once these belief sets are formed, people distort perceptions to confirm their pre-existing beliefs (Shermer, July 2011, p. 85).

Belief-dependent reality has been discovered to be a far more flexible and useful tool for supporting education policy reforms than either science or ideology. Former governor Jeb Bush's presentation on the Florida Formula demonstrated the liquidity between cause and effect, the cherry-picking of selected data, the omission of potentially conflicting data (such as reading interventions), and the conclusion that his set of RTT-like reforms (assigning letter grades to schools, high-stakes testing, promotion and graduation requirements, bonus pay, a wide variety of alternative teacher credentialing policies, and various types of school-choice mechanisms) caused elementary reading scores to go up (Shermer,

July 2011; see also Foundation for Excellence in Education, 2011). For those with an interest, this set of claims has been demonstrated to lack scientific veracity (Mathis, June 2011).

As belief-dependent notions gain political traction, a supporting science can be and often is retroactively invented (Shermer, July 2011). Contemporary retroscience examples include reports that provide squishy, oblique, and leading evidence on how untrained teachers will do as well or better than will trained ones (Givewell, 2010), how class sizes can be increased without harm to children (Whitehurst & Chingos, 2011), and how test-based accountability will save all (Hoover Institute, 2003), despite the last 20 years of less-than-stellar success. Such retroscience does not have to be conclusive on the matter it examines. It only has to be sufficiently suggestive to a receptive audience that it provides a scientific patina to justify and defend that which would otherwise be considered scientifically unacceptable policies.

Belief-dependent realism can often be identified by its strong declaratory incantations, frequently delivered by people with limited or no experience in the field. Not unlike other programs and policies that rely on nonscientific foundations, RTT relies on the brandishing of symbols, rituals, rites, and testimonials as verifications of truth. The major elements of RTT will be examined within this conceptual framework.

## Symbols

### COMPETITION IMPROVES EDUCATION

The genesis symbol of RTT is the international test score chart (e.g., 4Choice, 2011), which is brought out only to demonstrate the United States is performing poorly and falling behind. (Charts that show other reasons for low test scores, such as poverty, unemployment, or income inequality, are not similarly brandished.) The presentation of the international test scores seemingly must be accompanied by what I now consider an incantation: "If we are going to out-compete (insert nation of choice), then we must improve our international test scores" ("US Must Win," 2011). This is not a scientifically supportable assertion, as international economic well-being has very little to do with international test rankings, nor does it require that every student have high mastery levels of certain cognate (Mathis, 2011), but few question the claim.

Unfortunately, President Obama repeated this myth in his 2011 state of the union address. He even extended the notion to the presumptive and unsupported belief-based fallacy that school quality is to be advanced through competition between and within schools (Obama, 2011). This thinking serves to provide a rationale for states competing with each other for RTT funds, justifies the underfunding of federal initiatives and, most likely, will under-privilege the most needy.

The available evidence on competition improving schools is weak, as evidenced by the Hoover Institute's *Education Next* promotion of a report that showed competition improved schools a mere 1.5% of a standard deviation (Hart & Figlio, 2011). Compare this to the robust findings of the Century Foundation showing that restructuring of communities and schools to eliminate concentrated poverty moved scores 40% of a standard deviation (Schwartz, 2010).

## STANDARDS ARE THE SOLUTION

The Common Core monolith is more an RTT symbol than it is a reality. According to some, the brandishing of these tablets will cure the nation's education problems (R. Romer, personal communication, 2011, October 25). This de facto national curriculum, benchmarked against other international tests from around the world, is said to represent the knowledge we need to survive and prosper in the 21st century. (There is a magical logic to the religious copying of "successful" nations' curriculum and standardized tests.) The Common Core website (<http://www.corestandards.org>) generously displays testimonials supporting the talismanic nature of this icon. However, how this cognate will meet the needs of society 40 years into the future is not explained. Given the obsolescence of knowledge and the speed of technological change, the sounder approach would be in teaching soft skills such as adaptability, cooperation, teamwork, social conscience, and the like (Walser, 2008).

How this set-piece curriculum, once it has been adopted, will be moved into practice in every classroom in the nation also is not explained. Neither the states nor the federal government have such a capacity (Minnici & Hill, 2007). Federal funds are being reduced and most states are facing deficits and austerity. Local districts are likewise squeezed. The dissemination strategy is to lay hands on a group of missionaries in each state who will then go forth holding workshops. However, there is a significant and underappreciated gap between state bureaucrats passing out copies of a new curriculum accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation and the curriculum actually being a vibrant reality in every classroom.

This workshop approach is the same method that has been in place since the basic-skills movement of the 1970s. Thus, 90% or so of practicing educators have worked their entire careers under a variant of this model. Further, through either Goals 2000 or NCLB, test-based accountability schemes have been the rule for the past 20 years. As the National Academies notes, this system just doesn't work (National Academies, 2011). How a failed system will be more effective by embracing it more intensely is not explained.

## ASSESSMENTS

The belief in the Common Core will be sustained by the pillars of the two major testing consortia (McRae & Wurman, 2011) that will blanket the nation in continuous computerized accountability. The student database is to be linked to teacher databases, providing virtual accountability to every student regardless of the divergent thought processes of the individual student. Social conditions, impoverishment, the underfunding of schools (particularly urban schools), and the lack of capacity for implementing the new programs are generally unaddressed. (Weakly measured covariates—such as the use of free and reduced lunch as a proxy measure for poverty—in a statistical equation may partially account for some of these factors but they do nothing to resolve the underlying problems.)

Furthermore, the testing consortia are running out of money, do not have assessment procedures in place (or even invented) for higher-order skills, and do not have the hardware and software capabilities to pull off the computerized assessments by their 2014

deadline (Slover, Wilhoft, Nellhaus, & Darling-Hammond, 2011). Issues like the standardized assessment of creativity remain an unresolved contradiction (Strauss, 2010; Hess, 2011).

Thus, a procession of international test-score rankings precedes the incantation for international competitiveness. This leads to the chant that having states and schools compete with each other will improve schools. In turn, this will be advanced by implementing uniform high national standards measured by an assessment system that doesn't exist. (All the while, federal, state and local budgets are being cut.) Repeated presentation of these symbols will result in an educational renaissance. How this will produce better education is not clear.

## Rituals

The highlight of the liturgical calendar is the ritual of the administration of the tests, in which proctors reverently pass out tests and number-two pencils. After completion, the tests are counted, sealed, and sent to inner sanctums in Princeton, New Jersey, Iowa City, Iowa, or similar scoring centers where, under high security, they are boiled down to their delphic essence: failing scores.

This is necessary for the celebration of the failures. State departments of education ritualistically announce the ever-increasing numbers of failures with press releases saying, "We are proud of the scores of our affluent, White children but other schools and teachers must work harder."<sup>1</sup>

The celebration of the failures leads to the invocation of the miracle of the shining of the light. As is well-known, the scores for students who are less affluent or who are of a race other than White or Asian/Pacific Islander end up as the lowest. Continuing to emphasize the failings of these groups, the incantation is repeated: "We must continue to shine the light on these failures if these children are to receive a proper education program." The problem, of course, is that little to nothing is actually done to improve the education of these children. Urban schools are still funded at lower absolute levels regardless of higher absolute needs (Grayson, 2005). Furthermore, while all National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores improved over the past 20 years (the period most influenced by test-based accountability), the gap still remains (NCES, 2011).

Federal and state improvement funds have been reduced or eliminated or simply have not kept pace. The federal government touts the historic investment in RTTT of about \$4 billion. Considering that the United States spends about \$550 billion a year in education, the thought that a sum representing less than 1% of spending will miraculously transform education defies reasonable credulity.

Overlooked is the fact that a dire economy leads to lower test scores and more failing schools. A National Bureau of Economic Research report shows that a one-year job loss of 2% of a state's workers (which happened in seven states) was accompanied by a 16% increase in schools failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP; Ananet, Gassman-Pines, Francis, & Gibson-Davis, 2011).

How shining a light on such schools, those that lack the resources and the socioeconomic capacity, will result in an educational renaissance requires belief-based reality rather than science.

## Rites

Next in our version of a liturgical calendar is the purification rite. Under NCLB, and as expanded in RTT, failing schools must go through the stakeholder planning process, make data-based decisions, purify the teachers and principals, and if all else fails, implement transubstantiation.

### STAKEHOLDER PLANNING PROCESS

Schools generally round up a group of teachers, the usual parent volunteers, and other partners or stakeholders. After pouring over the test scores and other planning materials and adding mysterious symbols (circles, arrows, and feedback loops), they generally adopt a package program of some sort, such as those touted in *Education Week* or at an ASCD meeting.

Particularly troublesome is that highly advertised and popular instructional strategies have failed to establish a very strong record of success, as judged by the independent and respected What Works Clearinghouse (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011).

### DATA-BASED DECISIONS

RTT requires that special attention be given to data systems to support instruction. Although the federal government's Institute of Education Sciences has published a report concluding that this process shows low evidence of being successful (Hamilton, Halverson, Jackson, Mandinach, Supovitz, & Wayman, 2009), local teachers must meet with central-office and state officials to mine test scores in the hope that they will find something beyond the common-sense solution of providing underserved children with more learning resources and safer, healthier places to live.

Still, somehow an intense focus on data will overcome the lack of capacity of the federal government, the states, and the local districts to improve learning conditions (Lecker, 2005). In total, data-driven deciding has about the same prognosis as does charting horoscopes.

### PURIFICATION OF GREAT TEACHERS AND LEADERS

Since all this has not worked particularly well, the leading oracles have concluded that teachers, principals, and "forces committed to the status quo" have not implemented the rituals and rites with sufficient faith and fervor.

Therefore, sacrifices are required.

The four turnaround strategies generally require the direct or indirect sacrifice of the principal (Denver, 2010). But the reformers demand more. The RTT criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, November 18), along with pronouncements by the Secretary of Education, demonstrate considerable support for sacrificing a greater number of teachers based on student growth scores. This is in spite of the reservations and cautions about this approach from 10 of the nation's most prominent educational leaders and measurement experts (Baker et al., 2010). In his New York City study, Corcoran found that the variation in teacher value-added scores provided an unacceptable uncertainty rate of 34% when three years of data were used. The figure increased to 61% when only a single year's test scores were employed (Corcoran, 2010). Similarly Briggs and Domingue's (2010) reanalysis of the *Los Angeles Times* rating of

teachers found that teacher success categories changed in 54% of the cases when an equally (or more) appropriate model was used. The error rates and fundamental invalidity of such systems argue that they cannot be used as a way of promoting student achievement or improving teacher quality.

### THE TRANSUBSTANTIATION: TURNING AROUND THE LOWEST ACHIEVING SCHOOLS

In the current system, failure to improve test scores over a period of time triggers one of four ultimate sanctions: turn the school operations over to the state, turn the operations over to a private company, reopen as a charter school, or reconstitute the school by replacing some or all of the teachers, staff, and administrators. This process has not worked particularly well, and states and districts simply do not have the staff or the capacity to make it work (Mathis, 2008). (A fifth approach, *other*, is the most used.)

Under RTT, federal guidance has shifted to the bottom 5% of schools in each state (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2009). The fact that states vary dramatically in social, economic, and educational health means that a low-performing school in one state could be a very high (or very low) performer in another.

Recent conversation has drifted toward a greater push for charter schools and, in fact, this has led Secretary Duncan to propose that states increase the numbers (Goodman, 2009) and fund charter schools in equal measure with public schools (some would argue they already receive more funds when private foundation monies from Broad, Gates, Walton, etc. are counted).

Missing from these pronouncements is a very strong research base concerning school choice and charter policies. Notwithstanding the political popularity of these efforts, they have failed to produce achievement scores that exceed those of traditional public schools (Zimmer et al., 2011; Institute of Education Sciences, 2010; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Some major studies show negative associations with test scores (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009; Bifulco & Ladd, 2004) and that they segregate students by race, class, special needs, and English proficiency (Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010). Further, charter schools tend to redirect funds from instruction into administration and overhead (Miron & Urschel, 2011).

Yet the belief-dependent reality that school transubstantiation will somehow single-handedly overcome the effects of impacted poverty continues in the minds of Secretary Duncan and those who embrace market-based reforms.

### Testimonials

Lacking a scientific base, or even a consistent ideological base, the Obama administration has placed a great emphasis on testimonials asserting the truth of its proposals.

In a classic example, President Obama and former governor Jeb Bush used Miami Central High School as a Beat the Odds stage prop in March 2011. Bush declared "high expectations for students, hard-edge policies that focus schools on learning and an array of choices for families" will raise student achievement (Armario & Farrington, 2011). Unfortunately, Miami Central's 2010 reading proficiency rate was 16%—down from 21% in the previous year.

In a *New York Times* opinion column, Ravitch noted the less-than-stellar performance of three of these testimonial schools (Ravitch, 2011). Alter then attacked Ravitch, saying she was “sliming reformers by creating powerful myths” (Alter, 2011).

The NEPC noted this reliance on anecdotes over evidence in its review of the research supporting the administration’s research base for the blueprint for reauthorization (Mathis & Welner, 2010). Further, on Common Core standards, Ravitch and Mathis noted that “nearly half of [the administration’s] references are from organizations with either strong ideological predispositions or a clear financial interest in these policy decisions” (Ravitch & Mathis, 2010). Shaker (2010) reported that only about 10% of the references on great teachers and leaders could be considered as true research. Belfield, in reviewing the innovation proposals, said the administration simply doesn’t weigh the evidence in any clear manner: “. . . this treats each piece of evidence as equivalent in value, putting an anecdote on a par with a longitudinal quasi-experiment or a rich in-depth case study” (2010, p. 83).

While disconnected from science, frequent use of mutually supporting testimonials creates the impression that there is a scientific consensus. Politically, this can excite a bandwagon effect but it is bad logic and poor science.

## Conclusions

Of course, the National Academies report found that high-stakes accountability that imposes sanctions or offers rewards for students, teachers, or schools on the basis of students’ test performance does not work and, unfortunately, often backfires (National Academies, 2011). But this is scientific evidence, and it’s no match for the power of belief-dependent realism.

Belief-driven discussions can be enjoyable when we’re jawing with the neighbors at the recycling center but, ultimately, school reform is serious business. Unfortunately, we have suffered no shortage of conjurers seeking to enshrine their prejudices in law. It’s time to hand over education policymaking to people who will base their decisions on evidence, not sleight of hand. If belief-driven wishes could solve the problems of our schools, then all would have been fixed during the past 20 years of accountability-driven reform.

Fixing our schools can be done. And all we have to do is look to what science (and human decency) tells us. Then, we must have the political and the moral courage to deal with economic inequities in society, dismantle the residential and school policies that segregate and deprive our neediest, repair our school facilities and funding inequities, train and support our teachers, and reestablish the purpose of schools as the strengthening of a democratic society. Certainly many of today’s would-be Merlins with millions mean well. Just don’t expect this kind of magic to save our schools before King Arthur makes his mythical return.

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## Notes

1. See the real-world example from which I wrote my satirical version at <http://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/888848/detail.html>. This type of press release is universal.