

www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-test-scores-20110707,0,1840800.story

baltimoresun.com

Test scores vs. accountability

By Joseph Ganem

5:20 PM EDT, July 7, 2011

The problem of cheating on standardized tests that was recently uncovered in the Baltimore City Public Schools is apparently another in a long list of testing scandals that have plagued school districts across the country. Some might argue that these episodes provide further proof of sociologist Donald T. Campbell's observation made more than three decades ago. "Campbell's law," as it is known, states that the more a quantitative measure is used for social decision-making, the more it will be subject to corruption pressures that distort the social process it is intended to monitor.

While I agree with that assessment, I would go further and argue that testing scandals are symptomatic of a more insidious societal problem: a refusal by its leaders to accept responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. Defining accountability in terms of a quantitative measure — a number — is actually an elaborate hoax perpetrated by the leadership to avoid being accountable.

For example, basing education policy decisions on standardized test scores (numbers) means that the educators in charge are relieved from using professional judgment. Consider all the effort school leaders no longer need to exert and decisions they no longer have to defend.

If the students are judged based on test scores, there is no need to consider their natural abilities and inclinations. Whether B's on a math test result from overachieving C students who become inspired by a great teacher, or underachieving A students who are bored with the class, becomes irrelevant.

If the teachers are judged based on their students' test scores, there is no need to go into the classroom and observe their methods and interactions with students. Whether students are succeeding in spite of bad teaching or failing despite good teaching becomes irrelevant.

If the schools are judged based on test scores, there is no need to work at improving the schools. All that is necessary is to declare schools with low scores failures, fire the teachers and principals, and give the work of educating the students to others — even if there is no reason to believe that schools

advertisement



The advertisement features three gold coins at the top, with the text "NOW IS THE TIME GOLD" in blue and gold. Below the coins is the Goldline International, Inc. logo and a green "Learn More" button with a right-pointing arrow.

with different personnel would do any better.

Test scores are not the only numbers that school officials use in place of judgment. Consider the number zero, as in the "zero tolerance" policies in place for rule infractions. Carry a penknife or lighter to fix your lacrosse stick, as two Easton high school students did recently, and receive a punitive suspension that defies all common sense.

In all of the above examples, the reliance on numbers means that the decisions made are automatic and require no professional judgment. As a result, none of the leaders are accountable for the outcomes.

The field of education is not unique in its use of numbers to avoid accountability. Our economy is still struggling to recover from an elaborate accountability hoax perpetrated by the financial system. Home prices were appraised based on inflated comparables, not on what the market could reasonably support over the long run. Credit scores were assigned based on past payment histories, not on the ability to make future payments. Securities were rated based on mathematical models with faulty assumptions, not on realistic assessments of risk. When the system came crashing down, no one was accountable because everyone's actions were in response to numbers, even though those numbers were meaningless.

Is the kind of wreckage brought on our economy what we desire for our education system? The obsession with test scores to the exclusion of other educational goals suggests that we are heading in that direction. The truth is that judging the quality of teachers and schools requires looking at more than just student test scores, that education has more dimensions than just reading and math, and that the single-minded goal of continually improving test scores is not realistic.

Professionals, whether they are in education, business, law, medicine, science or engineering, are hired because their specialized training and extensive experience endows them with superior judgment. Without the ability to exercise that judgment, there is no point to hiring a professional. There will always be errors in judgment. But do we want a society in which to avoid blame, no one uses judgment?

A society in which decisions are based solely on numbers instead of sound judgment is one in which no one is truly accountable.

Joseph Ganem is a professor of physics at Loyola University Maryland and author of the book "The Two Headed Quarter: How to See Through Deceptive Numbers and Save Money on Everything You Buy." His email is ganem@loyola.edu.

Copyright © 2011, [The Baltimore Sun](#)