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Tests are clouding our vision of what public education should be

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As Governor Malloy conducts his search for a new Commissioner of Education, this public school parent hopes he starts with an ambitious vision for public education.

What do I want for my children's public school? I want a public education that will help them develop into responsible and thoughtful citizens. I want them to understand their obligations to each other and to their country, and to be aware that their actions have an

OTHER NEWS

effect on the world around them. I want them to be able to think of creative ways to succeed and be happy in this complex and difficult world.

Thomas Jefferson once said: "I know of no safe repository of the ultimate power of society but people. And if we think them not enlightened enough, the remedy is not to take the power from them, but to inform them by education." Our public schools should be a revered institution that helps safeguard democracy by developing analytical, creative and responsible young adults.

Sadly, this is not the kind of public school system that current political and business leaders support. Witness the recent reaction of U.S. Secretary of Education [Arne Duncan](#) to the fact that students in Shanghai scored higher on an international test than those in America. He called it a "wake-up call" for our country. President Obama saw it as a sure sign that America "is in danger of falling behind" in the world economy. This mantra is constantly repeated: Higher test scores are the key to innovation and global competitiveness.

What do Chinese educators have to say about their testing success? In a recent article, an administrator at [Peking University High School](#) was quoted as saying, "Chinese schools are very good at preparing their students for standardized tests," but the Chinese system, which over-emphasizes testing, "creates very narrow-minded students ... [not] entrepreneurs and innovators."

A similar sentiment was stated several years ago by the education minister of another testing powerhouse, Singapore. Comparing American schools to Singapore's, he said, "We [Singapore] know how to train people to take exams. You [America] know how to use people's talents to the fullest ... there are some parts of the intellect that we are not able to test well, like creativity, curiosity, a sense of adventure, ambition. Most of all, America has a culture of learning that challenges conventional wisdom, even if it means challenging authority."

America had a culture that challenged conventional wisdom, that is. Current policymakers are squelching what is strongest about our education system in the empty pursuit of higher test scores. The [Center on Education Policy](#), a nonpartisan group, has found that high stakes tests result in a narrowing of curriculum. We see our children being force-fed content in the never-ending charge toward the next testing goal; content that they will no doubt forget the minute that test is over. So, not only is the curriculum being narrowed, but our children's minds are being narrowed as well. They are being taught how to memorize, and how to write formulaic responses to canned questions, but not how to think for themselves. Is this the key to



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Test scores are easy to measure. However, why reduce our children's development to whatever is easiest to measure? As [Albert Einstein](#) said, not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.

One of the few positive aspects of the rightfully maligned No Child Left Behind law was its public airing of the fact that children of color, children who live in poverty, children who do not speak English fluently and children with disabilities are not as well served in school as those who are more affluent, and suffer less discrimination. Did this revelation require the jettisoning of a rich education? Why can't we use this knowledge to seek a well-rounded education for all children?

If some children need extra resources to get there, so be it. As the judge in a landmark school funding case in Kansas noted, "if a child lives a great way from school, the transportation cost for that child will be greater than for another child nearer to school -- just to provide him or her the same educational opportunity. Similarly, if a child cannot speak English, it may cost more to teach that child English as a second language before the child can learn math and other subjects. Again, a disproportionate expenditure may be required to afford this child an equal educational opportunity." Equality in education should be meeting each child where s/he is, and bringing them to where they can reach their highest potential.

So my wish for a Commissioner of Education is one who is brave enough to demand equity and depth in education for all children, so that all may develop into critical thinkers. My wish is for an education leader with the courage to stand up and say no when asked by the federal government or by a business executive to diminish my children's education, or their teachers' jobs, with yet another high stakes test. And my wish is that we have an education leader who possesses those same critical thinking skills we want our children to develop. He or she must demand evidence before succumbing to yet another education scheme pushed by some interest group.

The United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that education is "the very foundation of good citizenship." A leader who values this goal above others will ensure that this foundation, and our democracy, remain strong.

Wendy Lecker is president of the Stamford Parent Teacher Council. The opinions here are her own, and not submitted on the council's behalf.



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