

A FREE BOOK FOR PARENTS

THE ACCOUNTABILITY LIE

What the Testing Industry Doesn't Want Parents to Figure Out

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Introduction: The Lie Is Friendly

This book is not about bad teachers.

It is not about underfunded schools, lazy administrators, or union contracts. It is not a partisan argument. It is not a conservative critique of public education or a progressive defense of it.

It is about a machine. A very profitable machine. One that identified a genuine anxiety in American parents — that their children might be falling behind, that they might not know it, that the school might not tell them — and then built an industry around that anxiety. The machine sells measurement. It sells accountability. It sells the feeling that someone is keeping score so that your child doesn't slip through the cracks.

And it works. Not because the tests are accurate. Not because the scores mean what they say they mean. It works because parents are scared. And scared parents buy things.

I spent twenty-two years inside public education. Eight as a teacher. Fourteen as an administrator. Four of those years as a building principal. I sat in rooms where the decisions were made. I watched what happened when a vendor walked in with a product tied to a test tied to a state mandate tied to federal funding. I watched teachers adjust their practice not because the research supported it, but because the score demanded it. I watched kids labeled, tracked, intervened upon, and remediated — and then tested again to see if the intervention worked.

I left. Not because I gave up on education. Because I finally understood what I was participating in.

This book is what I know.

The Reunion

I went to a high school reunion a few years ago. You know how these go. You walk in, you look around, and without meaning to you start doing the math. Who turned out okay. Who struggled. Who surprised you.

The kids I remembered having the highest test scores were scattered through the room exactly the same way everyone else was. Some had done well. Some were grinding. Some looked exhausted. And the kids I remembered as struggling academically — the ones who got pulled out, the ones with the resource teacher, the ones the school had officially decided needed extra help — they were scattered through that room the same way too.

Nobody in that room wanted to trade lives with anyone else based on their third-grade reading score.

I stood there and I thought: what exactly were we measuring?

The test scores predicted nothing I could see in that room. They predicted, with some reliability, what the next year's test score would be. That's it. They are not a window into a child's future. They are a mirror of a child's current position on a curve — a curve that, by definition, requires someone to be at the bottom.

Someone always has to score in the 30th percentile. That is not a finding. That is arithmetic.

The testing industry built a business on treating arithmetic as a crisis.

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Here is a question nobody in education asks out loud: if we are measuring students to help them, why does the measurement so rarely change their outcome?

The answer is uncomfortable. The measurement was never primarily designed to help the student. It was designed to help the system — and the vendors who supply the system — understand where students ranked relative to each other. That ranking creates markets. The bottom of the ranking becomes a sales category. Those kids need intervention. Those intervention products are sold to districts. The districts buy them with public money. The test scores barely move. New products are developed. The cycle continues.

This is not a conspiracy. It is a business model. And business models do not require villains. They only require incentives.

The Machine and the People Who Built It

In 1983, a federal report called *A Nation at Risk* declared that American education was drowning in a rising tide of mediocrity. The language was dramatic. The intent was political. The effect was to establish, at the federal level, the idea that American schools could be measured, ranked, and graded — and that failing to measure them was itself a kind of negligence.

What followed over the next forty years was the construction of the largest educational measurement apparatus in human history. Standards. Tests. Accountability systems. Report cards. Data dashboards. Intervention requirements. All of it connected, all of it funded by public money, and all of it generating revenue for a small number of companies who figured out early that the business of education is not teaching children. The business of education is supplying systems that claim to improve teaching children.

Pearson is the most visible name in this space. They are not the only one. McGraw-Hill, Renaissance Learning, Curriculum Associates, Illuminate Education — there is an entire ecosystem of companies whose existence depends on the premise that schools need help measuring their students. These companies design the tests. They sell the curriculum aligned to the tests. They sell the remediation products for students who score poorly on the tests. They lobby state legislatures to maintain the mandates that require districts to buy these products. And then they score the tests.

Let me say that plainly: the same companies that sell the curriculum are paid to score the test that determines whether the curriculum worked.

In any other industry, we would call this a conflict of interest. In education, we call it the accountability system.

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The Illinois Report Card is the public face of this system in my state. Every school gets a score. Every district gets a ranking. The scores are reported to parents as though they are objective measurements of school quality. They are not. They are a reflection of the demographics of the school's attendance boundary, dressed up in the language of performance.

A school in a high-income district that scores well on the Illinois Report Card has, with very few exceptions, scored well because its students come from high-income families. The research on this relationship is not ambiguous. It is overwhelming. Socioeconomic status predicts test score performance with more reliability than any school-level variable. More than teacher quality. More than curriculum. More than the principal.

But the machine cannot sell that finding. You cannot build a remediation product around zip code. So the machine sells a different story: the school is failing, the teachers need training, the students need intervention, and here is the product that will fix it.

The product never fixes it. A new product is developed. The money keeps moving.

What Measuring Does to the Thing Being Measured

There is a principle in physics called the observer effect. When you measure a particle at the quantum level, the act of measuring it changes its behavior. You cannot observe the thing without affecting the thing.

Children are not particles. But the principle is not wrong.

Here is what I know from twenty-two years in buildings: when a child knows they are being measured and that the measurement matters to the adults around them, the child does not perform. The child performs the anxiety of the adults. The score does not go up. In many cases, it goes down.

This is not a theory. It is what happens in rooms.

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Now here is the part aimed directly at parents, because this is the part nobody will say to your face.

When you start measuring your child — when you buy the reading app that tracks words per minute, when you hire the tutor and watch the weekly progress reports, when you pull up the district data portal every semester to see where your kid landed — you are participating in the exact same system this book is critiquing. And the act of your participation makes your child's outcome worse.

Not because you are a bad parent. Because you are an anxious one.

Children can feel when they are being watched for results. They can feel the difference between a parent who reads to them at night because it is enjoyable and a parent who reads to them at night because the reading level assessment is in six weeks. Children are extraordinarily good at detecting what is actually happening, even when adults are careful not to say it out loud. The anxiety transmits. The score reflects the anxiety.

So here is the honest version: the parent who is most worried about their child's reading score is the parent whose worry is most likely to suppress it.

And here is where it gets harder. Some parents know this. Not all, but some. They have read enough, thought enough, felt enough in the room with their own child, to sense that the measuring is making things worse. And they measure anyway. Because the alternative — trusting the school, trusting their kid, not knowing where they rank — feels more dangerous than the measurement that they know is making things worse.

Think about what that means. There are parents who knowingly do the thing that makes their child's outcome worse because they do not trust the system enough to stop doing it. And the measurement industry has designed the system precisely to produce that feeling. If you trust the system, you don't need to buy the products. The anxiety is the market.

The best thing many parents can do for their child's academic development is to stop measuring and start trusting. Restraint. Not indifference — restraint. Let the child read because reading is interesting, not because the score needs to move. Let the teacher teach without watching every data point. Let childhood be something that unfolds rather than something that is tracked.

That is not a comfortable thing to say. It is true.

The Special Education Expansion and the Data Confession

When I was a kid, I knew which students had special education services. Not because anyone told me. Because it was obvious. These were kids with significant, visible needs — Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, significant cognitive disabilities. The kids whose lives looked genuinely different from mine in ways that had nothing to do with a test score. Nobody questioned why they had support. Nobody needed a spreadsheet to explain it.

That population still exists. Those kids still need real, intensive, individualized support. And they deserve it.

What has happened since then is that we added an entirely different population to the same system, called it by the same name, gave it the same legal framework, and built an enormous industry around serving it. The new population is kids who scored below a line on a standardized test.

That is not a disability. That is a percentile.

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Here is how the modern special education referral process works in most districts.

A student scores below a threshold on the MAP, or the NWEA, or the state assessment, or the reading screener, or some combination of all of them. A teacher flags the student. A referral goes in. An evaluation is scheduled. And then — and this is the part that nobody talks about in public — the district assembles a team to look at everything else, because they already know the test score alone is not enough.

They collect teacher observations. They conduct classroom-based assessments. They do a developmental history interview with the parents. They look at attendance patterns and behavior records. They request input from every teacher who has worked with the child. They look at the trend over multiple years, not just the most recent score. They talk about the whole child.

Why? Because the test score by itself is not reliable enough to make a legal determination about a child's educational classification.

Read that again. The test score — the same score that is reported to parents as an objective measure of their child's learning, the same score that triggers the referral, the same score that the district has paid a vendor to produce — is not reliable enough on its own to do the one thing the district is now using it to do.

So the district triangulates. They layer data source on top of data source. They call it a comprehensive evaluation. And when they have gathered enough data points to feel confident in what they already suspected from the first test score, they write the IEP.

The system knows its own instrument is unreliable. It has built an entire additional process to compensate for that unreliability. And then it uses the unreliable instrument anyway, as the trigger for the process, and as one of the justifying data points in the final determination.

The testing company still gets paid. The child still gets the label.

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Now ask yourself: if the test score requires teacher observations, developmental history, classroom performance data, trend analysis, and a team meeting to confirm it before it can be used — what exactly is the test score doing?

The honest answer is that it is providing cover. It is providing the appearance of objectivity, the appearance of science, the appearance of a neutral instrument making a neutral finding. Without it, the district would have to say: a group of adults in a room decided this child needs a different kind of education. With it, the district can say: the data indicates this child qualifies for services.

Those two sentences describe the exact same process. The data sentence sounds better. It sounds like nobody is making a judgment call. It sounds like the machine decided, not the people.

But the people are still deciding. They are just hiding behind the machine while they do it.

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The equity argument that districts now make about special education is this: we are serving our most vulnerable learners. We are identifying students who need support and providing it. Look at how many students from historically underserved populations now have IEPs. Look at how we are closing the gap.

This argument collapses under the slightest pressure.

If your district has disproportionately high rates of Black and Latino students in special education — and most districts in Illinois do — that is not evidence of equity. It is evidence that the referral process is producing different outcomes for different populations, which means either the assessment instrument is measuring something other than learning disability, or the referral threshold is being applied differently, or both.

What it cannot mean is that certain populations of children have higher rates of learning disability by birth. That is not supported by any credible research. What is

supported by research is that poverty, chronic stress, housing instability, and language barriers produce test scores that look like learning disabilities on the instruments we are using. And then we give those children a label that follows them through their entire school career.

We are calling a zip code a diagnosis. And we are doing it with the full apparatus of federal law, vendor-designed assessment tools, and team meetings that make it feel like science.

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Here is the question I would ask at any board meeting in any district in Illinois: how many students who received an IEP in first grade exited special education by the time they graduated?

The number will be very low. In most districts it is close to zero.

A system designed to provide temporary, targeted support to students with genuine learning disabilities does not have a near-zero exit rate. A permanent classification system has a near-zero exit rate. What we have built is a permanent classification system that uses the language of support.

The label is not neutral. When a child is told, in the official language of their school, that they qualify for special education services, that child receives information about who they are. The child processes that information. It shapes how they understand their own capacity. Research on academic self-concept is clear and consistent: children who are labeled as struggling learners early carry that self-concept for a long time — often longer than they carry the actual skill gap the label was meant to address.

We have built a system that is more effective at producing a permanent self-image than at producing a skill. And we have convinced ourselves it is compassionate because we called it services.

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The real special education population — the kids who always existed, who have always needed genuine intensive support — they are in there somewhere. Sharing a system, a label, a budget, and a stigma with a much larger group of kids who scored below a line on a test that the district already knows it cannot fully trust.

Neither group is being served well. The kids with genuine significant disabilities are competing for resources with a much larger population whose primary qualification is a percentile. And the kids who scored below the line are being given a permanent institutional identity based on a measurement the institution has already admitted is insufficient on its own.

This is the accountability machine at its most damaging. Not because anyone in it is malicious. Because the incentives, the mandates, the vendor contracts, and the legal framework have all aligned to produce this outcome — and nobody in the system has the authority, or the job security, to say it out loud.

I do. So I am saying it.

What Teachers Know and Are Not Allowed to Say

I have supervised hundreds of teachers over fourteen years as an administrator. I have sat in classrooms, walked hallways, conducted evaluations, and had honest conversations in private that nobody was allowed to have in public.

Here is what the good ones know.

They know which child is struggling because of reading and which child is struggling because of what is happening at home. They know which assessment results are accurate reflections of what a child can do and which ones are the result of a bad night, a fight on the bus, a week of anxiety that landed precisely on test day. They know which interventions are working and which ones are theater — performed because the data system requires documentation, not because the teacher believes the protocol is helping the child in front of them.

They know. And they are largely not asked.

The accountability system was designed around a premise that teacher judgment cannot be trusted — that the only reliable information about student learning is the standardized score. So the score supersedes the teacher. The teacher's knowledge of the child, built over a school year of daily contact, is treated as anecdote. The test score, administered in ninety minutes by a child who may or may not have slept, is treated as data.

And yet — and here is the contradiction the system cannot explain — when a student is referred for special education evaluation, the first thing the district does is ask the teacher. They collect teacher observations. They request teacher input. They want to know what the teacher has seen over time in the classroom.

So which is it? Is teacher judgment reliable or isn't it? Is the test score the gold standard or does it require a team of humans to confirm it before it means anything?

The answer the system has settled on is: both, depending on what is convenient. The score is reliable when it triggers a referral. The teacher is reliable when the score needs confirmation. The score is objective data when it is reported to parents. The teacher observation is essential context when the legal determination requires more than a score.

The teachers who have been doing this for twenty years know exactly what is happening. The best ones learned to protect their practice — complying with what the system required, and teaching the way they actually believed in the spaces they could get away with. They did not say this publicly. It was not safe to say publicly. But they knew that the child in the room was more real than the score on the report. And they taught to the child.

Those are the teachers who matter. The system does not know how to measure them. So it mostly ignores them, except when it needs their observations to fill out an evaluation form.

The Principal's View

When I became a principal, I understood for the first time the full architecture of what I was inside.

The principal is the hinge. Everything the district requires flows through the principal to the teachers and students. Every mandate, every initiative, every vendor product adopted at the district level arrives in the building with the principal responsible for implementation. And every result — every test score, every discipline rate, every attendance number — flows back through the principal to the district office, where it is entered into a system and compared against other buildings.

I gave the state of the school address every year. I stood in front of parents and explained the Illinois Report Card. I showed them the scores. I explained the growth measures. I talked about what we were doing to address areas of concern.

I hated every minute of it.

Not because the parents were bad. Because I knew that what I was presenting was a performance of accountability, not accountability itself. The scores I was showing them measured things the school barely controlled. The interventions I was describing were purchased from vendors who had designed them to produce documentation more reliably than results. The language I was using was the language of the system — and the system's language is designed to sound like information while conveying very little of it.

What I wanted to say was: your child is fine. The school is doing its best. The teachers in this building care about your kids and know more about them than any score can show. Go home and let them read what they want. Let them be bored sometimes. Stop checking the portal. Trust the teacher who has been doing this for

twenty years more than you trust the dashboard that updates every Tuesday.

I was not allowed to say that. So I said what the system required, and I went home, and eventually I left.

The Superintendent Play

The accountability campaign I began running when I left education was not aimed at teachers. It was not aimed at principals.

It was aimed at superintendents. Because superintendents are where the money actually moves.

A teacher does not decide to adopt a reading intervention program. A principal does not sign the contract with the assessment vendor. Those decisions happen at the district level, and the person who sits at the top of the district — who fields the vendor calls, who attends the state conferences where vendors sponsor the lunches, who manages the board relationship that ultimately approves the budget — is the superintendent.

I began submitting public records requests. I began requesting suspension disparity data, special education exit rates, and vendor contract information across suburban Chicago districts. I began reaching out to superintendents directly — not as a hostile actor, not as a journalist, but as a former administrator who knew what the numbers meant and wanted to talk about them publicly.

The responses were revealing. Not because most superintendents pushed back. Because most of them didn't. They knew. They've always known. The system they are running is producing the outcomes it is designed to produce, and the outcomes are not primarily good test scores. The outcomes are compliant districts, documented procedures, and continued funding.

Some of them were relieved someone was finally saying it out loud.

The play is not to destroy superintendents. The play is to make the case so clearly and so publicly that the superintendent who brings in a speaker to tell parents the truth about measurement is the superintendent who is actually serving his community. That is the talk I am now building. The same content I delivered as the state of the school address, inverted. Honest frame. Same room. Completely different message.

If your district has the confidence to bring that talk to parents, it is because they trust their teachers, trust their students, and do not need the score to feel legitimate. That is a powerful thing for a superintendent to signal.

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I want to tell you about a meeting I sat in early in my career as an administrator. A respected superintendent — someone who had built schools, who had the credentials, who had the room — stood in front of a group of principals and directors and made a comment I have never forgotten.

He was responding, with visible impatience, to the idea that some of us in the room might trust our own judgment over the recommendations of the curriculum vendors. He made clear that the companies had done the research. They had the data. The idea that we — the people actually in the buildings, actually watching children every day — might know something the vendors didn't was, in his framing, the problem.

He was not a bad person. He was not corrupt. He was a product of a system that had spent forty years telling administrators that expertise lives in the vendor's binder, not in the teacher's classroom. He believed it. A lot of superintendents believe it. It is one of the most quietly damaging beliefs in American education.

Because the people in the buildings do know. They know which child is struggling and why. They know which program is theater and which one is actually helping. They know the difference between a score that means something and a score that happened

on a bad Tuesday. And they have been systematically trained to distrust that knowledge in favor of a dashboard.

That is not an accident. A system that trusts its own teachers doesn't need to keep buying products to tell it what its teachers already know.

What Parents Actually Want

Parents do not want bad schools. They do not want their children to struggle. They do not want to be lied to.

What they want — what they have always wanted — is someone who will tell them the truth about what is happening with their child and what to do about it. Not a dashboard. Not a percentile. Not a growth trajectory. A real answer.

The measurement industry positioned itself as that answer. It said: here is the data. The data tells you how your child is doing. The data is neutral. The data is objective. Trust the data.

And parents, who were scared and who wanted to help their children and who did not have twenty-two years of institutional context to know better, trusted the data. They bought the apps. They hired the tutors. They asked the teachers about the reading level every conference. They checked the portal every week.

And the anxiety that produced all of that behavior transmitted directly to the children. And the children performed the anxiety. And the scores sometimes went up and sometimes went down and rarely changed in ways that mattered to the actual trajectory of the child's life.

* * *

I want to tell you about a girl I know.

A neighbor called me. Her daughter didn't want to go to school anymore. Not in the way kids sometimes don't want to go. She was done. She'd shut down. The family

didn't know what to do.

I sat down with them. And before anyone said much, I already had a pretty good idea what this was about. Because I've seen it before. More times than I can count.

She plays guitar. She's genuinely good — not 'pretty good for her age' good, actually good. Music is the thing for her. It is the reason she gets up.

The school pulled her out of music to sit in front of an intervention screen. Every day. Reading drills. And on Fridays, a diagnostic to see if the drills worked. She is not in art anymore either. Those periods are gone. The classes she looked forward to — the ones where she felt like herself — were converted into intervention time because her reading score was below a line.

She is in middle school. At lunch, her friends talk about the music concert coming up. About what happened in art that day. About the things they are working on together. She has nothing to say. She is not in those classes anymore. She has been sorted into a different group, and everyone at the table knows it even if nobody says it out loud. She is twelve years old and she already knows which category she is in. The school made sure of that.

The school is not evil. They knew this was a problem. They created an after-school music club specifically for kids like her — kids pulled from electives for intervention. It was a genuine attempt to give something back.

But her mom works. There is a little sister. The after-school bus doesn't work for their family. That door closed before it opened.

So here is where she is. The thing that made her want to be at school was taken away to make time for a screen that gives her a score on Fridays. She has lost her friend group's shared language. She is embarrassed about which room she goes to when her friends go to music. And the one solution the school offered requires resources her family does not have.

Her reading score may go up. Her world got smaller.

That is not an edge case. That is a fairly typical outcome of the system working exactly as designed.

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If you are reading this and thinking — that is not my kid — I want to push back on that gently.

This is your kid. You may not know it yet.

Maybe your child is not being pulled from music. Maybe your child is at the top of every list, hitting every benchmark, the one the teacher mentions at conferences as a bright spot. That child is in here too.

The highest-achieving kids in high-pressure districts are sometimes the most quietly damaged by the testing culture — not because they are failing but because they have organized their entire sense of themselves around a number. They are anxious in a way that doesn't have a clean name. They are not afraid of failing the test. They are afraid of becoming less than what the number says they are. That is a heavy thing to carry at fourteen.

The testing industry's strongest legitimate claim is that ACT and SAT scores correlate with first-year college GPA. That correlation is real. And first-year college GPA predicts almost nothing beyond itself — and the test score correlation disappears nearly entirely once you account for family income. So the chain still collapses. It just collapses one link later.

Wherever your child is on the curve, they are in this book.

* * *

Before I tell you what to do differently, I want to follow the test score all the way down. Because some of you are still not sure. And I want to show you where it leads.

A test score — if the test is well-designed, if the child slept, if they weren't fighting with someone on the bus that morning, if the timing was right and the room was quiet and nothing was wrong at home — is a reasonable indicator of that skill, in that format, on that day. Let's give it everything. Let's say it's a good test and it was a good day. That is the strongest version of the case for it.

Now. What is that an indicator of?

Probably how they will do on similar assessments in the near future. The research supports that. Test scores predict future test scores fairly well. We are already in a loop, but let's keep going.

What is that an indicator of? Academic performance, maybe. Grades. Staying on track. Okay.

What is that an indicator of? Possibly college. Possibly a degree. We are four steps removed from the original score now and every step has introduced more noise, more exceptions, more kids for whom the chain breaks entirely.

What is the degree an indicator of? Career, maybe. Income, maybe. Stability, maybe. Depending on the field. Depending on the economy. Depending on a hundred variables that have nothing to do with what your child scored on a reading screener in second grade.

What is the income an indicator of? A good life? That is where the whole thing falls apart. Because we do not agree on what a good life is. We never have. And the research on income and happiness levels off well below what parents in high-pressure districts are chasing. Beyond a certain threshold, more income does not produce more

wellbeing. That is not opinion. That is what the data shows.

You cannot give me a logical argument that a test score is a reliable indicator of anything that actually matters to a human life. Not because the tests are always bad. Because the chain is too long, too lossy, and terminates at a question nobody has answered.

* * *

Now let me ask you something different.

What is your kid good at?

There is something. Think about the thing your child does where you have watched them get genuinely better — not because you managed it, but because they wanted to.

Now think about how that happened.

My wife wanted to sign my son up for golf lessons. I play golf. I am a good golfer and I have been working with him myself. I have no issue with lessons. But I started thinking about what a standardized golf assessment would actually look like. They would build a template. They would model it on the best players in the world and score every kid against it.

The problem is that Scottie Scheffler doesn't swing like Tiger Woods. Rory McIlroy doesn't swing like either of them. Bubba Watson swings like nobody else alive. They are all among the best players in the world and none of them swing the same way — because their bodies are different, their joints move differently, their instincts are their own. There is no standardized golf swing. There are principles. There are fundamentals. But how you apply them will always look different because you are different.

A good teacher knows that. A good golf instructor watches your body and works with what you have. A standardized assessment cannot do that. It can only tell you how far you are from the template.

Think about basketball. Did you administer a dribbling assessment? Did you give your kid a free throw test and schedule intervention for the ones they missed? Did you rank them against every other kid in the district on a standardized shooting evaluation to identify who was below grade level?

No. You took them to the park. They played. They came back the next day and played again. At some point they were good. You didn't manage that. You just didn't stop it.

The game itself is the assessment. When your kid plays basketball you know exactly how they are doing. You do not need a separate instrument. The performance is the evidence. And what made them good was not the measurement of the performance — it was the practice, the repetition, the genuine engagement with something they actually wanted to do.

Think about piano lessons. You sent your kid to a teacher. There was probably a recital at some point. Did you put them in remedial piano afterward? Did you track their weekly progress in an app and show them where they ranked against other third-grade pianists?

No. You told them they did great. And they went back to lessons. Because the recital was not the point. The playing was the point.

Every parent reading this knows exactly what I am describing. You have watched your child get good at something. You know how it happened. It happened through time and interest and practice and someone who gave them real feedback in real time — not a standardized score six weeks after the fact.

And you know, without anyone telling you, that what would have slowed them down was pulling them off the court to sit in a room and fill out a basketball assessment. The time spent preparing for the test is time not spent playing. The anxiety about the test doesn't belong on the court. The ranking against other kids is information that has nothing to do with whether your kid is getting better.

So why do we accept that logic everywhere except school?

* * *

If you are still not convinced after everything in this book, I want to be direct with you about what the remaining options are.

Either you think I am wrong. That the chain holds. That the score leads somewhere that matters. If that is where you are, I genuinely want to hear it. Not sarcastically. My contact information is at the end of this book. Make the argument. I will read it.

Or you know I am right and you are going to keep measuring anyway. Because not knowing the number feels like too much risk. I understand that feeling. The system was designed to produce it. That feeling is not an accident. It is the product.

But before you put this book down, I want to ask you to do one thing.

Go ask your kid how school feels.

Not how they are doing. Not what their grade is. How it feels.

Listen to what they say. And then decide what you believe.

This is your kid. You may not know it yet.

How They Used You to Do It

Here is the part that should make you the most angry.

Not the testing. Not the labels. Not the vendors. Those are all bad enough.

The part that should make you the most angry is that they used you to do it.

They needed parents to demand accountability. So they manufactured the crisis that would make parents demand it. They sent home the scores. They published the report cards. They created the dashboards. They made sure every parent in America knew exactly where their child ranked against every other child in the country. And then they waited.

Scared parents did exactly what scared parents do. They showed up at board meetings. They called the principal. They asked about the reading level at every conference. They voted for politicians who promised to fix the failing schools. They joined the committees.

And here is the part nobody told them: the law required it.

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In 2002, No Child Left Behind was signed into law. It required states to test every child in reading and math every year from third grade through eighth grade and report those results publicly. It mandated detailed report cards so parents could see exactly how their school ranked. It created a federal infrastructure specifically designed to put data about school failure in front of as many parents as possible.

And then — having manufactured the anxiety — it required schools to formally involve parents in fixing the problem.

Think about the sequence. Step one: terrify parents with data. Step two: write into federal law that schools must include those terrified parents in decisions about what to buy to fix the problem. Step three: be the company selling the fix.

Before No Child Left Behind passed, the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce formed a coalition of fifty business groups and companies to help shape the legislation. That coalition worked specifically to ensure the law required annual testing in reading and math. The same business ecosystem that would profit from the testing mandates helped write the testing mandates.

The Common Core standards — which districts are still essentially teaching to today — were drafted by a workgroup of twenty-four people. One of them was a classroom teacher. The rest were employees of testing companies, accountability organizations, and consulting firms with direct ties to Pearson.

In one documented case, McGraw-Hill lobbyists used results from the company's own California Achievement Tests to convince a state legislature to fund a curriculum program that the same company sold.

They wrote the standards. They designed the tests. They scored the tests. They sold the curriculum aligned to the tests. They sold the intervention for kids who failed the tests. And they made sure the law required schools to put frightened parents in the room while all of this was decided.

* * *

Let me be precise about what parent involvement actually means inside this system.

It does not mean parents decided anything. It means parents who had already been told their schools were failing, their children were behind, and that something needed to be done — those parents were placed on committees where every option presented to them was a product sold by the companies that had manufactured the crisis in the first place.

The school already knew what those parents were going to say. Because the school had watched those parents get the same report cards, the same dashboards, the same notifications. The parents arrived at the table pre-convinced. The vendors had done that work months earlier. The committee was not a decision-making body. It was a ratification ceremony.

And now it is written into law. Districts are legally required to involve parents. Which means they are legally required to involve people who have been systematically prepared to demand the products the law was written to sell.

That is not parent empowerment. That is the most elegant business model in the history of American public life. Create the fear. Mandate the audience. Sell the solution. Repeat.

* * *

Reading scores have been essentially flat since the early 1970s.

We have spent fifty years and hundreds of billions of dollars on this system. Test-related sales grew from \$211 million in 1992 to \$592 million in 2003. By 2006 the total value of tests, test prep, and testing services in the United States reached \$2.3 billion a year. Ninety percent of that went to fewer than five companies.

The scores did not move.

And every year the system needed new parents to terrify. So every year new kindergarteners entered the pipeline. Their parents received their first report card. Saw their child's first percentile. Felt the first wave of anxiety the system had been designed to produce. And the cycle started over.

You were not a victim of this system. You were the engine of it.

Not because you were foolish. Because you loved your kid. And they knew you would. And they built the whole thing around that.

* * *

Here is what I want you to do with that anger.

Not feel guilty. You did what every parent does when handed a number about their child and told it means something. You responded to the information you were given. The information was designed to produce that response. That is not your failure. That is the design.

But now you know the design. And knowing the design is how you stop being useful to it.

The parent who goes to the board meeting and demands more intervention spending is the system working perfectly. The parent who goes to the board meeting and asks how much the district has spent on vendor contracts over the last ten years — and what the reading scores looked like before and after — that parent is the system's worst nightmare.

Be that parent.

What We Owe Them

At the end of all of this — the data, the vendors, the mandates, the labels, the interventions, the dashboards — there are children.

Not data points. Not percentiles. Not growth trajectories. Children who woke up this morning and went to school and sat in rooms where adults made decisions about them based on instruments those same adults know are insufficient. Children who internalized what those decisions said about who they are. Children who stopped raising their hand somewhere along the way and never started again.

We did not do this to them on purpose. That is important to say. The teachers did not do this. Most of the administrators did not do this. Even most of the vendors probably believe they are helping. The road to this outcome was paved with genuine concern, political pressure, public anxiety, and forty years of institutional momentum that nobody had the leverage to stop.

But good intentions do not change outcomes. And the outcome is this: we built a system that is better at producing permanent self-images than permanent skills. We took children who were different from each other in every way that matters and ran them through a machine designed to produce a single number. And then we told them — and their parents — that the number meant something.

It meant something. Just not what we said it meant.

* * *

Here is what I want parents to take from this book.

Not anger. Anger at the system is understandable but it does not help the child sitting at your dinner table tonight.

Not guilt. If you checked the portal every Tuesday, if you hired the tutor, if you asked the teacher about the reading level at every conference — you did what scared parents do. You were trying to help. The system was designed to make that feel like the responsible thing.

What I want you to take is permission. Permission to trust the teacher who has been watching your child every day. Permission to let your kid be bored, be curious, be bad at something and keep doing it anyway. Permission to read to them tonight because the book is good, not because it will move the score. Permission to put down the portal and pick up the conversation.

The parent who reads to their child because it is enjoyable is doing more for their child's literacy than the parent who tracks words per minute. The parent who lets their child be bored on a Saturday is doing more for their child's creativity than the parent who schedules enrichment every hour. The parent who talks to the teacher, listens to what the teacher actually says, and then gets out of the way — that parent is doing more than the parent who is checking data every week.

Restraint is a parenting strategy. It is not indifference. It is the recognition that your child is not a project to be optimized. They are a person who is becoming something. That process does not need to be managed. It needs to be protected.

* * *

The teachers know what to do. Let them do it.

The kids know how to learn. Get out of their way.

And the girl who plays guitar — she is not behind. She is exactly where she is supposed to be. The system told her otherwise. The system was wrong.

Go ask your kid how school feels.

Then trust what they tell you.

Afterword: What We Built

I did not leave education to build a company.

I left because I had spent twenty-two years watching a system do real damage to real children while calling it accountability, and I could not keep participating in it. Leaving felt necessary. What came next, I figured I would sort out.

What came next was a conversation with my neighbor. He is a software engineer. His kids go to the same school as mine. We live on the same street. We had the kind of conversation that happens when a former principal and a father who has been watching his own kids come home from school with a particular look on their faces finally say out loud what they have both been thinking.

The problem was not that kids couldn't read. The problem was that we had taken everything that makes a child want to read — stories that go somewhere, characters that feel real, the experience of getting lost in something — and replaced it with a system optimized for producing a score. The joy had been extracted from the thing, and then we were surprised when kids didn't want to do the thing.

We did not set out to compete with Pearson. We set out to build the thing we wished existed for our own kids. Something safe. Something real. Stories set in a small Midwestern town — quiet, grounded, the kind of place where things actually happen to people who feel like people. Mysteries. Adventures. Characters who navigate hard things without being told how to feel about them. No endless scroll. No algorithm deciding what comes next. No test at the end.

Just reading. And then writing. Because eventually the library will not just be our stories. It will be stories written by kids and families. A parent writing something with a message tucked inside because their child is going through something that week. A kid finishing one mystery and starting another because they had an idea. The social and

emotional learning is not a module bolted onto the side. It is in the story, the way it has always been — through narrative, through character, through recognizing yourself in someone who is navigating something hard.

We called it Maroa. The app lives at pope-studios.com.

The institutional work — the advocacy, the FOIA requests, the parent and educator resources, the accountability campaign, the speaking — lives at disagreelearning.com. That is where you go if you want to understand the system well enough to stop being afraid of it. That is where you go if you want to push back on your district and need to know what questions to ask.

Two dads. Two websites. One argument.

The argument is that children are not the problem. The measurement of children is the problem. And the answer is not better measurement. The answer is more trust, better stories, and adults who remember that the goal was never the score.

It was always the kid.

About the Author

Mike Pope spent twenty-two years in Illinois public education — eight as a teacher, fourteen as an administrator, including four years as a middle school principal. He is the founder of Disagree Learning and Pope Studios. He writes and speaks for parents, educators, and school leaders who want to understand how institutions actually work, and what to do about it. He lives in the Chicago suburbs with his family.

disagreelearning.com | pope-studios.com

This book is free. Read it. Share it. Give it to every parent you know.