

The Growing Divide of Soft Skills and the Workplace

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As America's students are being held more accountable to national and global standards in education, the concentration on standardized, high-stakes test scores, focused on a handful of subjects, has led to an ever-widening divide between what (and how) students are being taught in the educational systems of American classrooms and what they need to succeed in today's workplace. This has been documented as far back as 1983's *A Nation At Risk*; "More and more young people emerge from high school ready neither for college nor for work" (p. 13). Twenty-five years after this landmark report, *A Nation Accountable* (2008) reported that, "nearly a third of our high school students still do not take the rigorous program of study recommended in 1983 for all students" (p. 3), and many of the classes taken were simply "diluted content now hiding behind inflated course names" (p.4).

By focusing on a handful of tested subjects, we are witnessing a decline of common soft skills and workplace educational needs in the applicants for nearly all industries. As part of a hiring team in my office, I have witnessed this first-hand. It is my intention to discuss the path of this divide and how, even though with the best of intentions, educational reform put forth by programs such as *No Child Left Behind*, *A Race to the Top*, and *Common Core Standards* have played a vital part in this loss of soft skills and needed education that had, at one point, existed prior to their implementation.

Purpose

The Purpose of this Independent Study is to look at the curriculum expectations and standards, the testing of those standards, and the resulting loss of student's basic soft skills needed to succeed in college and the workforce. Three specific questions will be discussed:

- How have curriculum standards and expectations over the last thirty-five years influenced what students are *expected* to learn?
- How has the focus on high-stakes and standardized testing affected the *soft skills* requirements as included in curriculum standards?
- And finally, what are the students bringing into the workplace compared to those expectations and standards as outlined in the curriculum?

Research Foundation

With the release of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983, we were given a stark wake-up call as to the state of our educational system. Not only that, we were also informed about how this deteriorating system was affecting the future employees of America's workforce. While this report clearly showed what was needed to prevent this from occurring, educational reforms over the last thirty-five years have done little to truly address this issue.

While college and vocational graduates may graduate with technical skills and knowledge, we are seeing a lack of *soft skills* from K-12 graduates as well as higher education graduates moving into the workforce of today. *Soft skills* have been defined by various experts and researchers over the years, but all refer to those skills that are based on personality and non-cognitive learning. While there is no common agreement as to what soft skills are most important, those that are repeatedly mentioned as lacking include integrity/honesty, listening,

responsibility, participating as a team player, and sociability (Texas Workforce Commission, 2015, p. 2) with critical thinking skills being in the top five of almost all surveys. This is not just centered on American businesses; businesses world-wide have all noticed this decline in soft skills in new graduates as well as adults graduating in the previous two decades..

There are many theories as to where the issue originates. However, research and professional journals generally point in one direction—educational curriculum and practices at the K-12 as well as post-secondary levels. With the focus on standardized and high-stakes testing, this comes as no surprise.

Curriculum Standards and Educational Reform

In 1983, *A Nation At Risk* provided a grim realization; our educational system was faltering if not outright failing. But, it also provided a plan to prevent this predicted disaster from occurring; a “movement...directed toward reform and excellence throughout education” (p. 13). Because of the report, two notable things have taken place. Teacher qualifications and professional education have risen dramatically, and curriculum across the country has changed. The report noted that secondary school curricula had become “homogenized, diluted, and diffused” (p. 17), minimum expectations and competencies tended to become the maximum, lowering standards for everyone, and nearly 20% of all 4-year colleges accepted every high school graduate, regardless of grades (p. 19).

Since the report was released, America has seen several across-the-board changes to state and national educational standards and curricula. Of those, *No Child Left Behind* (2001), *Race to the Top* (2009), and *Common Core State Standards Initiative* (2009-2010) are most notable. All



of these emphasized changes in curriculum that were meant to increase student's academic achievements as well as increasing their cognitive abilities and soft skills.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has been reviewed with much criticism. While *NCLB* noted that “despite hundreds of programs and hundreds of billions of dollars invested during the last generation, American students still lag behind many of their fellow foreign students” (U.S. Department of Education. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, p. 9), it did little more than scare schools and teachers into passing students or face restructuring and termination. As Paul Houston (2007) stated:

Schools haven't failed at their mission. The mission has changed. Some might argue that NCLB will lead to the retooling needed in education. But that is true only if you believe that the road to the future is paved with low-level tests that measure discrete bits of knowledge. The reality is that anyone in business will tell you that successful workers in the new global economy must have skills of collaboration, ingenuity, problem solving, comfort with ambiguity, and a dozen other things — none of which are tested for and subsequently taught as a result of NCLB. (p. 745)

The emphasis on English and math, and holding schools and teachers responsible for the success, or failure, of students passing national standardized test created a push to pass as many students as possible, pushing the other subjects and cognitive/soft skills to the side. “By using fear and coercion as a change strategy, NCLB ensures compliance but blocks the pursuit of excellence for teachers and children” (p. 747).

Not to be outdone, 2009's *A Race to the Top* created even more of a divide. As Onosko (2011, p. 1) noted, “Annual high-stakes national testing...in only mathematics and language arts

will perpetuate *NCLB*'s financial and human resource hyperfocus on two curricular areas at the expense of all other subjects, including students' academic aptitudes and interests." Today's *Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI)* furthers the divide by, again, focusing on standardized testing in specific subject areas (English, math, and science) at the neglect of those cognitive and soft skills even though they are mentioned throughout.

Results of High-Stakes and Standardized Testing

Now, nearly into the second decade of the 21st century, American students do not significantly rank any higher in educational status than they did thirty-five years ago. A search for national scores over the past three-and-a-half decades will confirm this. Not only have the educational reforms of the past thirty-five years resulted in less than desired expectations in student academic achievement, the result of focusing on specific subject content has created a widening soft skills gap in both graduating students and those that are already in the workforce.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's 2017 report *Bridging the Soft Skills Gap* sums up what numerous articles and reports have stated. "Despite U.S. high school graduation rates reaching all-time highs, a growing number of employers across industries are reporting that job applicants lack the basic skills needed to succeed in the workforce" (p. 3). Soft skills such as communication, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity, interpersonal skills, leadership, organizational skills, teamwork, and even basic work ethics are lacking in many new and recent graduates (p. 3).

How far-reaching is this lack of soft skills in the workplace? According to the report: 92% of nearly 900 surveyed executives said soft skills were equally important or more important than technical skills, yet 89% said they have a "very or somewhat difficult" time finding

employees with those soft skills; 77% of surveyed employers rate soft skills as being of equal importance to cognitive skills (e.g. reading, mathematics, science); (and) only half of managers surveyed believe that recent graduates are adequately prepared for the workforce (p. 4).

Furthermore, the research points the finger directly mandated curriculum changes. “On top of this, no matter how much employers lament the soft skills gap, the system-wide incentives (e.g., embedded in targets mandated at the local, state, and federal levels) for educators to teach soft skills are not universally aligned” (p. 5). As Rothstein and Jacobsen (2009) noted, “...teachers and schools have cut back on developing...skills because accountability sanctions now rely solely on academic test scores” (p. 14).

Curriculum Expectations and Workplace Skills Gap

While younger men and women may hold more degrees overall than previous generations, they are still performing no better than high-school graduates and degree holders in other countries as well as lacking the basic skills needed to succeed. According to The ETS Center for Research on Human Capital and Education’s 2015 report *America's skill challenge: Millennials and the future*, students and young adults today “...may be on track to be our most educated generation ever, but they consistently score below many of their international peers in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments” (p.4).

Along with the lack of basic soft skills, the next generation of employable adults, and those currently in the workforce, are still somewhere in the middle when compared to other industrialized countries, countries that we are consistently competing with. Loveless (2017) points out in the latest *Brown Center Report on American Education* that, since 2000, scores in literacy and math have been trending downwards. In 2000, the Program for International Student

Assessment (PISA) reported that scores in literacy for 15-year olds was 504 and numeracy (mathematics) was 483 (in 2003); in 2015, those scores had dropped to 497 and 470 respectively (p. 7). So, not only are American students not learning the valuable soft skills needed in order to succeed in higher education and work, the subjects that they are being tested on, the very material that is taking away from the soft skills practice, are showing signs of decreasing.

Analysis of Research

It is apparent that this concentration on standardized testing, focusing on a handful of subjects, has had less than ideal results and have been accountable in the loss of teaching the needed soft skills that students need to succeed in higher education as well as the workplace. The lack of soft skills, coupled with the static literacy and numeracy scores globally, have resulted in young adults entering higher education or the workplace directly lacking in skills and education needed to succeed.

Research plainly shows that all of the educational reforms over the past thirty-five years have produced young adults who are no better off now than students in the 1980s when *A Nation At Risk* was released. While standards and curriculum were restructured to be more challenging and produce students who were better off academically than previous generations, “Teacher and administrator removal, retention...based, in part, on student test scores will undermine teacher/student relations, student-centered curriculum and engagement, and teacher recruitment and retention” (Onosko, 2011, p. 2). Proposed and produced with the best of intentions, educational reform, from *No Child Left Behind* to today’s *Common Core State Standards Initiative* have produced graduates ill-prepared for entering higher education and the workplace of the 21st century.

Implications and Conclusions

Implications

While the qualifications of educators have increased (perhaps due to *A Nation At Risk*), subsequent educational and curriculum reform since then has fallen short of expectations. The lack of soft skills in K-12 students is further exacerbated in post-secondary education where colleges and universities are more concerned with enrollment numbers and profits than actual higher education. All of this creates an ever-widening lack of needed soft skills.

The implications of this lack of soft skills, paired with the substandard performance in literacy and numeracy of the past two to three generations, are troubling. In an ever-changing world, now fully thrown into the technological era of the 21st century, what was foreshadowed in *A Nation At Risk* is now coming true. "We are raising a new generation of Americans that is scientifically and technologically illiterate...where the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents" (p. 12). While the rest of the world is seemingly leaving American students behind as they increase their global scores and effectiveness in the modern workplace, America is still lagging behind. By holding fast to the idea that centralized education is best, our national education system "...demonizes teachers, reduces the status of the profession, and ensures that many of our most talented and motivated young people will not become educators" (Onosko, 2011, p. 2).

Conclusion

Research has shown, without a doubt, that curriculum and educational reform have failed to produce the high-achieving students as intended. The focus on two or three subject areas has

actually resulted in a loss of soft skills and other necessary education that the student, as a whole, needs in order to be successful in higher education and the workplace.

While educators and school and campuses cannot be held responsible for the decline in the overall education of students due to the demands placed upon them at the federal level, it is there that this education and introduction to soft skills needs to take place. The reforms over the past thirty-five years have done little more than scare educators and K-12 schools into passing students no matter the educational outcome of those students. The scores on global tests in those areas of literacy, numeracy, and technical problem-solving indicate that the students entering the workforce of the 21st century are seriously lacking both the education and the soft skills needed in order to compete in the growing global economy. Rothstein and Jacobsen (2009) provide a very powerful quote from President Nixon; "...this system should pay as much heed to what are called the "immeasurables" of schooling...such as responsibility, wit, and humanity as it does to verbal and mathematical achievement" (p. 18).

It is clear that education and curriculum reform in America has not met the intended goals and outcomes as desired. Not only is there clear evidence of this, but the failure to address the teaching of soft skills in K-12 as well as higher education systems has created a workforce that is ill-prepared to succeed locally as well as compete globally. Graduating students and young adults of the previous two decades have shown a steady decline in both academic achievement as well as work-place etiquette, despite having more college degrees than the generations before them. If a true educational and curricular reform is not implemented, not only will American workers be outsmarted by our competitors, but they will be passed over time and again for initial employment as well as advancement for those employees who have both the education and the soft skills required to succeed.

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