

## Shaping Children and Building Society: A Response

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Kathy Dawson's fine essay takes on two vital questions. First, what are the appropriate ways to provide evaluation in public (secular) education and second, what are the appropriate ways to provide evaluation in Christian education.

We want to look briefly at the first question and then to respond at greater length to Professor Dawson's suggestions about evaluation and church education. Our skepticism about No Child Left Behind is based in part on the conversations we have had with public school teachers seeking to teach under the program and partly on our suspicion of any educational program that suggests that closing our poorest (in both senses of the word) schools is a solution to the acknowledged weaknesses in the public system.

As Kathy Dawson points out the tests used to evaluate public school students seem inadequate in two ways. First, the subject matters they evaluate are themselves too narrow. The demise of music, the arts, physical education in our schools is indicative of an inability to think about the schools as educating citizens not just quiz-takers, and certainly not just quiz takers whose knowledge is limited to vocabulary and arithmetic. Second, the testing methods are woefully narrow. No one who has taught public school or church school or led a YMCA group or a scout troop can believe that the best way to assess even verbal and mathematical skills is by using the kind of tests that are easily graded but do not themselves begin to tell us whether students are meeting the grade we should expect in a democratic society.

As we listen to the discussion about No Child Left Behind what seems clear is that advocates of the program want to educate our children using a “free market” system. If a school does well, there is a reward. If the school does not do well, the chances are the school will be closed. This market approach makes sense if the goal of education is focused on educating our children to be “earners and consumers” in a global market. Such an approach gives us permission not to look at individual differences among children and helps us ignore the undeniable reality that our children do not play on a “level playing field.” Whether you have a learning disability, or you are a child who speaks another language or have issues of mental or physical health that affect your learning, whether you live in the kind of violent neighborhood that puts your life under constant stress (and all of these affect learning and test taking) you are held to the same standards.

If our goal as educators and parents is to build a strong nation by developing an educated citizenry with a range of interests and gifts, we will not punish the schools that do not do well but will find strategies to meet all our children’s needs, whatever school they attend. We will not be as concerned to make sure our children find their slots in the economy as to make sure they find their place as members of an educated citizenry.

When Dr. Dawson moves to her queries about assessment in church school, she quite rightly points toward a richer range of teaching goals and to a more nuanced set of assessment methods. Whether we take Aristotle, Noddings, or Osmer as our guide we are encouraged to think about human education as something far richer than the ability to regurgitate the material force fed to prepare the student to pass some standardized test.

Furthermore, all of us in church and educational institutions as well as in business are being reminded that assessment is a useful tool toward the goal of self-knowledge and enhanced effectiveness. We will teach better when we have some sense of how we have done.

Having said all that, we would also confess our suspicion that the goals of Christian education are particularly resistant to even the most subtle forms of assessment. Assessment is useful, perhaps even necessary, but it is hardly sufficient.

The paper's references to the way Jesus deals with his disciples and to the assessment of the church in the book of Acts are very helpful. We would want to look also at church life as described and prescribed by the apostle Paul. The goals of education that Osmer advocates—faith, hope, and love—are explicitly described by Paul as “gifts” and not as “accomplishments.” In Galatians 5 where Paul thinks most about the shape of the Christian life he contrasts the “works” of the flesh—all the achievements we can measure—with the “gifts” of the Spirit. Measurable works can lead to boasting and competition (see tests and failing schools, above). Immeasurable gifts lead to community and mutual celebration. In light of Paul's words Christian assessment has more to do with rejoicing than with measuring and more to do with community than with individual “achievement.”

Nonetheless we also know that even in the public sphere educators talk about “gifted” students, and we find Kathy Dawson's description of “formative” assessment especially rich in helping Christian educators in the task of discerning the particular gifts God has given to each student and in the ministry of helping the student cultivate those gifts. The great advantage of this kind of assessment, as the essay makes clear is that unlike standardized tests (presumably

intended for standardized people) this kind of assessment acknowledges individuality and growth.

Furthermore, as Prof. Dawson would affirm, in many ways the richest component of Christian education is relational at least as much as conceptual. Any evaluation of Christian education at its best needs to leave room for the complex interaction between teacher and student. What counts in the classroom is as much the character and faithfulness of the teacher as it is the content of the lesson.

Put in other words, sometimes it is far more formative for a student to see what a teacher does, who a teacher is, than to learn what a teacher insists is the necessary knowledge of the faith.

Assessment is also complicated by the fact that in congregations where we have belonged, our mobile society makes it difficult and sometimes impossible to trace the Christian journey of the children who come for awhile and then are on their way.

Finally as we reflect on the life of the churches and the lives of our own children we rejoice in those teachers who did not so much inculcate knowledge as plant seeds. As in so many of Jesus' parables we do not really know how to measure what a teacher is doing until much later in the story, when the fruits begin to appear. Of course that does not mean that we can rejoice in bad teaching because God can do exceedingly abundantly beyond anything we ask or think. We can ask many pertinent questions, but we cannot easily assess what seeds will bear fruit and what will not. We doubt that at any moment in their early lives our sons would have manifested many measurable check points in their progress toward acknowledged faith. Yet now

that they are adults we can see how faith has shaped them, and we can name some of those teachers whom the Spirit has used on the way.

Questions:

1. We name several possible reasons to teach students, among them the goals of helping them be “slots in the economy” or “members of an educated citizenry.” What do you think the social purpose of education is? And why do you think this?
2. How do you think about the relation between celebrating the particular gifts that God gives to each of us and training the particular talents to which God has entrusted us?
3. Many things that Christians teach their children only bear fruit years later. With such a significant lag time between the “teaching moment” and the time when that moment becomes meaningful, what can motivate us to continue teaching? And how does this shape how we might think about assessment?