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Rejoinder

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name of rigor and the continued belief that merit equals test scores.

These are not just public school issues. I think we are either determined to follow along with the public school agenda or do so unwittingly far too often. If this is the case, and I think it is, what happens to the responsibility of the Catholic school to assist the student to understand the present system enough to take a stand on matters of equality and justice? The imperative to analyze and remediate the existing social and institutional practices which reproduce existing class, race, and gender inequities is lost in the effort to conform. We educate, instead, for “what is” rather than educating for “what might be.”

Catholic educators have an excellent record in many inner cities serving those whom society has left out or left behind. We have success stories with students with potential and we have great success with those who at first seemed limited. My request is that in the midst of getting better, of paying attention and giving consideration to the policies of the reform agenda, we reflect on them with a critical mind and the heart of a follower of Jesus.

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Karen Ristau, who has served Catholic education in a variety of roles, has recently taken the position of vice president of academic affairs at St. Joseph College, 1678 Asylum Ave., West Hartford, CT 06117. Previously she served as director of programs in educational leadership at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN.

A REJOINDER TO KAREN RISTAU'S REMARKS

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Karen Ristau is “suspicious of the rhetoric of the reform agenda” (particularly the grammar of accountability) because “some of what passes for the reform movement is deeply embedded in the conservative agenda—often the conservative Christian agenda.” She follows this with a range of claims

about “religious intolerance,” “secret agendas,” AIDS, anti-Semitism, and other comments about the religious right. Finally, she believes “a strong conservative backlash is moving [us] toward...even more mandated state and national testing....”

I don’t claim that there aren’t fair questions to be raised about the standards/testing/consequences triad. They should be raised, and we should discuss and debate them. But it’s difficult to detect a fair question in all the verbiage about the conservative, religious right.

Linking attempts to make education more accountable for the results of student learning with the so-called conservative agenda of the religious right is a tactic that’s designed to head off open debate. More than anything else, the accountability triad I describe—standards, testing, and consequences—is embedded in sound common sense, something which many education discussions sorely lack.

As the late Albert Shanker, president of American Federation of Teachers, tirelessly preached, in order for kids to learn, our education system needs clear definitions of what knowledge and skills are to be learned (standards). It needs various ways to tell whether teachers are communicating and students are learning these knowledge and skills (testing). And for all this to work, kids, parents, and educators need to know that it *matters* whether kids learn what we expect of them—i.e., that there be consequences associated with achieving or not achieving these expectations.

Shanker is joined in this belief by a bipartisan group of policymakers: e.g., President Clinton, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley and former U.S. Secretaries of Education Bill Bennett and Lamar Alexander, numerous governors and state and local policymakers, etc. Moreover, by a strong majority, the American public in opinion polls endorses this view.

Can they all be wrong? Perhaps they are on to something that some educators just do not understand.

On the other hand, I agree with Ristau’s concern with standardized testing. The worst of it has resulted in what some have dubbed the “Lake Wobegon” effect in honor of the humorist Garrison Keillor and the mythical place he created where “all the children are above average.” Nearly 10 years ago, a West Virginia physician, John L. Cannell, sent a shock wave through the education community when he reported (among other things) that at the elementary level no state was below average on any of the six major national normed commercial tests. My article makes it clear that the tests we administer should not mimic these standardized tests of old but “blend...assessments of various types” including performance assessments.

The primary reason that Catholic schools succeed with our most disadvantaged kids where many others fail is that these schools create advantaged educational communities: institutions with high standards of intellect and behavior that all are expected to achieve; institutions that promote and nur-

ture intellect, virtue, and sound character; and institutions that provide intellectual, social, and religious capital to kids and families that are found nowhere else. Let's not lose that by claiming that this Catholic contribution to American educational reform is embedded in anything other than proven, effective practice.

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