

Defying Standardization: Creating Curriculum for an Uncertain Future

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Public schools across the United States are faced with seismic challenges. The needs of our students have out-paced the reform agenda, and there is a clearly identifiable gap between policy-driven reform and the daily practices needed to ensure all students thrive. Every leader and learner has felt the impact of standardization. In the local and national news and in social media, the issue of school failure is front and center, and the answer of standardization and accountability has become commonplace.

In his most recent book, *Defying Standardization Creating Curriculum for an Uncertain Future*, Christopher Tienken outlines from multiple views how standardization became the overarching mandate for public schools and provides an alternate view of how teachers and leaders can build curriculum that is recommitted to a democratic life. He carefully unpacks the assumptions and drivers that underlie a false belief in standardization as the holy grail of school reform.

How did we get here and what is the cost?

The book includes a comprehensive review of the key documents, historical references, and

political messages that drive the prevailing beliefs, mandates, and practices that result in standardization as the solution to improving schools. Tienken outlines the negative impact this perilous journey is having on equity, equality, and access, and the promise of public education in a democratic society. He shows how public opinion, driven by the unfounded rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk*, *Goals 2000*, and *No Child Left Behind*, oversimplifies the issues and drives all solutions towards a one-size fits all education.

The author unpacks the misuse of international data and the comparison of student performance and summarizes the danger of selecting certain data to prove a point and to drive an agenda. He also provides a competing data set that tells a different story about the success of learning in schools that includes measures of creativity and innovation.

The misuse of data and the creation of an illusion of failure have created external pressure on the education system.

That pressure has systematically influenced the work of researchers, leaders, and educators and muted their voices.

Tienken reveals the critical impact of policies that are the result of blame and punishment and the sacrifices made when education is limited to a forced choice between subject-centered curriculum and student-centered curriculum.

Understanding how public schools have accepted without substantive evidence that standardization is a necessary evil for improving schools is only one part of the commentary. Tienken also outlines the cost to our children and how curriculum and learning are impacted.

What is another option?

Tienken suggests an alternative. What does curriculum look like if the ideals of democracy prevail? He repositions the conversation from a different entry point.

Instead of focusing on a one-size-fits all education where students are easily compared, and the curricular outcomes become micromanaged for every child, he promotes and describes a different curricular paradigm founded on a progressive-experimentalist philosophy. This paradigm provides a way of navigating student-centered curriculum with a focus on the processes and the agency of the learner.

Grounding the work in cognitive research and Deweyan theories, Tienken reminds us that student learning must recognize the talents and interests of the learner. The learning process requires the student to actively construct new knowledge and understandings in a meaningful way, given an authentic context.

Tienken builds a comprehensive argument that we are at a critical juncture and must choose a different path for the future of our children, their families, and our communities. Coupling our understanding of

the progressive-experimentalist philosophy with the skills and dispositions needed for the future and the true purpose of schools to develop members of a global community, it is clearly apparent that an “unstandardized” curricular paradigm is required. The demands of the 21st century require a rapid departure from the current policies and a redirection of school reform toward student-centered instruction.

The author provides a curriculum planning model and references the principles that guide “unstandardizing” the system.

He opens the window to a sample of authentic curriculum designs that situates the learning and the learner in an authentic context. Skills and dispositions like creativity, courage, and critical thinking become the hallmarks of our expectations and the foci of our redesign. Tienken clearly unpacks how we got into to the cycle of standardization and outlines a solution for reconceptualizing our purpose and programs.

What are the Challenges for School Leaders?

Our challenge as school leaders will be operationalizing the changes outlined, especially given the need for expediency. We have lost years of teacher development and community partnerships.

The messages, narrative, and beliefs around the purpose of public schools will need to be redeveloped so that the expectations of student-centered curriculum will be valued.

Multiple pathways exist to develop learning opportunities that engage students, but without building a new reality and common understandings of the purpose of public schools, it will be impossible to chart a new direction.

Tienken's book sets a clear direction, but we will need a community of thinkers working together to operationalize the ideals and practices needed for all children to

experience a public education where they develop behaviors, knowledge, and skills to thrive in this ever-changing and complex world.

Reviewer Biography

Brenda Myers is superintendent of the Valhalla Union Free School District. She has thirty-three years of experience in public schools and served as superintendent of the Groton Central School District and the deputy superintendent of Broome-Tioga BOCES. She has also taught primary school in England, grades 3-6, K-12 literacy and high school social studies. Myers is known for her work across New York State in the areas of leadership development, instructional theory, and assessment design. E-mail: bmyers@valhallaschools.org

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Mission and Scope, Copyright, Privacy, Ethics, Upcoming Themes, Author Guidelines, Submissions, Publication Rates & Publication Timeline

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