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 Expecting Excellence Pages 14-19

Excellence for All

Robert J. Sternberg

There's more to excellence than reading, writing, and arithmetic.

What does it mean for a school to be "excellent"? Is it excellent if no one fails but no one does terrifically well either? Is it excellent if the best, but only the best, do superbly? This question is important because the way we define excellence dictates the way we achieve it.



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Common Models of Excellence

Let's look at four models of excellence that operate in our schools today. The following portraits are based on real schools that I have observed, although the names are pseudonyms.

Looking Only at the Bottom

Administrators at Shadyside School know which side their bread is buttered on. The district's rewards go to the schools that best meet the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). So Shadyside has put its resources into ensuring that it looks as good as possible under NCLB's definition of excellence.

The school places heavy emphasis on reading and math. Several other subjects get some attention, but less. The school has dropped physical education and minimized music and art. It has discontinued its gifted program, which, the administration believed, always consumed more resources than it was worth for students who need special services the least.

Heavy spending goes into ensuring that students in the bottom half of the class perform well enough to meet minimum-competency standards. Because many of these low-performing students come from one section of town, some Shadyside administrators have been quietly lobbying for a redistricting plan that would reassign that area to a different school, thus raising Shadyside's test scores.

So far, the result of all these efforts has been modest but noticeable success in enhancing compliance with the federal law.

No Child Left Behind was advocated as a national model for achieving excellence in our schools. But this model is problematic because it focuses attention on only the bottom of the distribution. Imagine a hypothetical school in which, indeed, no child is left behind, but all children are achieving barely passing grades—in letter terms, *D*-. Would anyone call such a school excellent?


Further, No Child Left Behind encourages schools to drop or minimize important programs that are essential to truly excellent education—such as music, arts, and physical education—because these programs do not boost passing rates on particular tests. Even social studies may get short shrift. Do we really want our schools to resemble the test-preparation cram courses given by private tutoring organizations?

The law discourages schools from providing special services for gifted students because they will pass the tests anyway. It has even motivated some schools to stoop to such dubious practices as encouraging

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weaker students to drop out. Is this any way to achieve excellence?

Looking Only at the Top

Sunnyvale School is in one of the most economically advantaged sections of a wealthy suburb. The school is considered “la crème de la crème” in the district. To be admitted to Sunnyvale’s gifted program, students need to have IQs in the top 1 percent of the general population. The school boasts of the number of its graduates who end up going to Ivy League schools and has a Hall of Fame for its most illustrious graduates.

Sunnyvale puts relatively few resources into students at the academic low end. Because few of these students are actually at risk for failing to meet minimum-competency standards, the administration believes it can afford to focus on stronger students who are likely to succeed in gaining admission to the most prestigious colleges.

The administration’s general view is that weaker students do not really belong in the school. In many different, often not-so-subtle ways, the school sends the message to these students that they are a drag on its reputation. For example, academically challenged students tend to get the weakest teachers and diluted courses. Although the school is careful to meet its legal obligations to students with special needs, any parents who demand more are told that they always have the option of a private school.

Sunnyvale’s model is the opposite of Shadyside’s. Sunnyvale lavishes its attention on the top end, and the result is a *Matthew effect*—the intellectually rich get richer, and the intellectually poor get poorer. Can we really consider a school excellent if it settles for mediocrity for a large portion of its students and gives only the academic superstars the opportunity to flourish?

Looking Only at the Middle

Brookdale School believes that one size fits all. It does not group students by ability or achievement, nor does it recognize or celebrate any kind of diversity within the heterogeneous groups. The teachers are not sure what to do for students with special needs; some teachers wish that such students would just go away. The school has no gifted program, and it provides the minimum service mandated by law, if that, to students with developmental disabilities.

The school reflects its community, which celebrates social and intellectual conformity. Many of the residents have similar belief structures, which they want to pass on to their children. Excellence, they believe, is a well-rounded child who does what he or she is told and does not stick out through exceptionally weak or strong academic performance. Being popular is good, but being intellectually excellent is suspect. People know that “tall poppies” tend to be cut down.

The administrators and parents of children at Brookdale believe they have created an excellent school and a superb environment for learning. Students and faculty are comfortable with one another, having similar ways of thinking, beliefs, and values.

Brookdale defines academic excellence as intellectual conformity. But Brookdale students are being educated for a world that does not exist—a world in which everyone thinks like they do. Some may be afraid to leave the community because they are unprepared to cope. Those who do leave may be bewildered by and perhaps resentful and intolerant of the astonishing diversity of people, values, ideologies, and worldviews they will encounter. This model of education poorly serves its students and their community because it isolates them from a rapidly changing world. We can hardly view Brookdale as providing an excellent education.

Looking Only at the Statistical Average

Every year, the *Riverside Observer* publishes the average test scores of the five elementary schools in the Riverside School District as well as those of other districts in the state. The newspaper does a detailed analysis comparing the local schools to one another and comparing the district as a whole to other districts. Parents are well aware that real estate prices coincide closely with the test scores, and the board of education has exerted pressure on district administrators to raise the statistical averages. The five schools in the district engage in a not-always-friendly competition to have the highest average scores. In one school, a principal was reprimanded for engaging in shady practices to enhance his school’s ranking: Certain students’ scores were “overlooked” when the averages were computed.

Currently, there is a national craze in the United States to raise statistical averages. Such averages are reported in the media and play a prominent role in *U.S. News and World Report*’s ranking of colleges and graduate schools.

Riverside’s model looks for excellence in high average scores. Individual students become cogs in a machine that operates like a huge calculator. Students are valued only to the extent that they raise the average scores. The model ignores students at both the upper and lower end—and it dehumanizes all students, including those in the middle.

An Alternative: The Three Rs and the Other Three Rs

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A better model for defining and achieving excellence is to focus on excellence in education for *all* students and let the numbers emerge as a result of seeking excellence, rather than the main goal. Actually, this is what many schools once did before testing mania co-opted education.

The criteria for excellence are neither arcane nor complicated. I propose a simple model that focuses on the traditional three *Rs* plus what I call the other three *Rs* (Cogan, Sternberg, & Subotnik, 2006; Sternberg, 2006; Sternberg & Subotnik, 2006). You are probably familiar with the first three *Rs*: *reading*, *riting*, and *rithmetic*. So let me focus on the other three: *reasoning*, *resilience*, and *responsibility*. These latter three *Rs* complement and enhance the first three: It's not either/or, but rather, both/and.

Reasoning

Reasoning is a broad term that encompasses the comprehensive set of thinking skills that a person needs to be an engaged, active citizen of the world. These skills include

- Creative thinking to generate new and powerful ideas.
- Critical and analytical thinking to ensure that the ideas (your own and those of others) are good ones.
- Practical thinking to implement the ideas and persuade others of their value.
- Wise thinking to ensure that the ideas help build a common good.

Schools can teach reasoning in a number of ways, either through the disciplines (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2007) or through a separate course (Sternberg, Kaufman, & Grigorenko, 2008). Either way, good reasoning complements knowledge by enabling students to use that knowledge well.

For example, presenting stories like the following can introduce students to scientific reasoning:

Professor Flowers believes that his special plant food, Proflower, helps plants grow to their full potential. He wishes to design an experiment to show that Proflower really does help plants grow. He takes five individual plant stems of each of three types of plants—orchids, tulips, and roses—and carefully places them in his special experimental room. He measures the height of each plant. Then, each day, he places in the soil for each plant exactly 15 drops of Proflower. All plants are watered the exact same amount and receive the same amount of sunshine. After 20 days, he compares the height of each plant to its height 20 days before. He finds that *all* of the plants have grown by at least 10 percent, and some by more than 20 percent. He then prepares a speech in which he argues that he has scientifically proven that Proflower really does help plants grow.

Is Professor Flowers' reasoning correct? Why or why not?

The answer is that Professor Flowers is not correct. The problem is that there is no control group that received equal amounts of water and light—and no Proflower at all. It is possible that all of the plants in the sample would have grown by the same amount (or more!) if they had not been given Proflower. Hence, Professor Flowers' reasoning is flawed.

Resilience

Resilience refers to persistence in achieving goals despite the obstacles life places in our way. Some children grow up with many obstacles strewn across their paths; others have relatively smooth roads to travel. Either way, everyone encounters roadblocks sooner or later; the question is how you surmount them. Resilience involves

- Willingness to defy the crowd in your thinking and actions—to take the road less traveled.
- Willingness to surmount obstacles in trying to achieve your goals.
- Passion in your pursuits—going for your goals with drive, motivation, and personal involvement.
- Self-efficacy—belief in your ability to achieve your goals.

Schools can build students' resilience by modeling it; by implementing programs designed to develop it (see Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, Walberg, & Anderson, 2005); and by creating challenging experiences for students that require resilience to see them through.

One way of developing resilience is to tell students about a challenging experience you have had in your own life, preferably when you were about the students' age, and how you got through the challenge. You can then encourage students to share their own challenges and how they have coped with them. The class can discuss what constitutes better and worse coping mechanisms, and how people can decide to employ better ones. (In my own case, when I talk to elementary school students I often tell them of how I used to do poorly on standardized intelligence tests as a child, and nevertheless, when I was 22, I was graduated with highest honors from Yale. Resilience pays off!)

Resilience is an important component of academic excellence. For example, Dweck (1999) found that

students who have an incremental view of intelligence—who believe they can modify their intelligence—perform better when faced with challenging courses than do students who believe that intelligence is a stable, fixed entity.

Responsibility

Responsibility covers the ethical and moral dimension of development. Four components are particularly important:

- Ethics—distinguishing right from wrong.
- Wisdom—forging or following a path that represents a common good and balances your own interests with those of others.
- Care—genuine understanding of and empathy for others' well-being that goes beyond an intellectual sense that you *should* care.
- Right action—not only knowing the right thing to do, but doing it.

Schools can teach responsibility by modeling it, by providing case studies, and by challenging students with situations that require them to develop their own unique and personal sense of responsibility.

One way to learn about personal responsibility is by reading biographies of people who have shown wisdom and positive ethical values in their own lives. Examples might be Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, both of whom made many personal sacrifices to help others. Mandela spent much of his life in prison before becoming the first president of South Africa in an election with broad participation from South Africans. King led civil rights marches at great personal risk to his life, which he eventually forfeited in the cause of justice for all.

Students can contemplate their own lives and how they have taken opportunities either to work for a common good or to be selfish and look out only for their self-interest. The great leaders of society, and of communities and families, are inevitably those who care about and for others and not just about and for themselves.

Changing Direction

Our society is moving in the wrong direction. If we continue to turn our schools into test-preparation centers, we are neglecting the important three *Rs* of reasoning, resilience, and responsibility. What's more, test prep is not even an adequate way of teaching the first three *Rs*.

We need to educate students, not merely prepare them for tests. We need to immerse them in the full range of curriculum, including music, the arts, and physical education. We also need special programs that meet the needs of gifted students and those with developmental disabilities.

If we return to education rather than test preparation, we may find that students improve in both the first three *Rs* and the other three *Rs*. We must not just concentrate on the top, bottom, middle, or statistical average of the distribution. We must concentrate on *all* students and teach them how to be active, productive citizens in a rapidly changing world.

How to Teach for the Other 3 *Rs*

1. Emphasize excellence for all—not just those at the top, bottom, or middle of the distribution—and recognize diverse forms of excellence.
2. Provide students with opportunities to learn through multiple modalities.
3. Value subject matter not only as important in its own right but also as a vehicle for teaching students to think critically.
4. Value creative thinking applied to a knowledge base, recognizing that knowledge forms the backbone for creativity.
5. Teach students to apply their learning to practical, real-world problems.
6. Promote students' *dialogical thinking*—the ability to understand things from multiple viewpoints and to appreciate diversity.
7. Promote students' *dialectical thinking*—the understanding that what is “true” now may not be true in the future and may not have been true in the past.
8. Teach students to take personal responsibility for mistakes and learn

from them.

9. Teach students to care about people other than themselves and to think about the effects of their actions on others and on institutions, both in the present and in the future.
10. Teach students to use their knowledge ethically, promoting universal values like sincerity, integrity, honesty, reciprocity, and compassion.

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