

AS Stakes speech at Brookings, 5-18-94

[Poor quality tape for the first few minutes. AS introduces book: What are students abroad expected to know about biology? Enumerates the various exams covered in the book. Also mentions that AP included.]

If you look at these exams what I think would come to mind is, first of all is, wouldn't it be great if large numbers of youngsters, not only in biology but in other subjects could reach this kind of level before going to college. Of course then you'd start thinking that doesn't happen by just putting an examination out there. A curriculum, either within a state or states or a whole country, requires standards, an assessment system and something else that is not part of the debate in the United States. All of the standards and all of the other devices that we have--curriculum development and assessment--will not mean a thing, without attaching some sort of stakes to the accomplishment of meeting the standards as represented by passing these assessments.

Now at the back of this booklet, there are several very revealing graphs. What percentage of students in each of these countries take the exam? Well in U.K. 31 percent take it. In France 43 percent take it. In Germany, 37 percent. In Japan, if you count first and second tries, 58 percent take it. In the U.S., 7 percent take the Advanced Placement. Now please note these figures going from the 30s up to the 58 percent in each of those countries as opposed to 7 percent in the U.S. Passing at 25 percent in the U.K., 32 percent in France, 36 percent in Germany, 36 percent in Japan and 4 percent in the U.S. Now if I were to ask you which nation is elitist, which nation has an elitist system of education, which nation has a system of education where the only youngsters likely to pass an examination like this are youngsters whose parents graduated from college and who are sending them to elite institutions and which nations have a broad representative sample of youngsters who are able to reach this level, what would be the answer? The failure to have standards and stakes leads to elitism. What we have is a small group of youngsters who have got lots going for them. They're the ones who are making it. There are not very many others.

There's one other chart here and that is how many exams like this are necessary to get into college. In the U.K. it takes 3 exams, in France 7 to 8, in Germany 4, in Japan 3 to 4, in the United States 0.

Now what do you think would happen in Japan or Germany or any other of these countries if they announced next year that youngsters could get into college without passing any of these examinations? Would that have any effect on the number of students who would take them and prepare for them and study for them? Would it have any effect on how much homework they would do leading up to these examinations? On whether they'd turn their television sets off. Any effect on whether teachers took their time in class seriously or spent some of it on other things that didn't lead to this?

* The absence of stakes makes the whole business trivial. Nobody has to take it seriously. Nobody has to be geared to doing anything. When I taught, whenever I gave an examination or a quiz or told kids to bring in an essay, the whole class shouted out, Does it count? Does it count. We have an educational system in this country in which nothing counts. As long it doesn't count, the kids are very smart. They will do the least that they need to do in order to get what does count. And what does count is a piece of paper, the diploma. Grades don't count, unless you want to go to an elite institution--those kids work hard.

So I think we can learn a lot ...Those at the Goals 2000 celebration the other day saw signs that said World Class Standards. That's very likely in the U.S. to become a slogan and every school district will be asked to come up with its own world class standards. And there will be committees that will come up with standards that are one slight peg above what they are doing now and call it a world class standard. We hope, with this series of booklets, to point out that when you talk about world class standards, there is a world out there. It is possible and not too difficult to find out what these world class standards are. And if we mean it, we would end up with examinations that are something like this.

I know we're involved in trying to get all sorts of new and

creative things. Perhaps the greatest problem I have with reform as we try to bring it about in the United States....This is the one and only country that ever developed the philosophy called pragmatism. Europeans and Asians don't really understand it. John Dewey and William James and Charles Sanders Pierce were never popular anywhere else. And yet when it comes to trying to change our schools, we are the most unpragmatic and I would say the most unintelligentThere are other school systems in the world in other democratic industrial countries, with very substantially diverse populations now. Countries that have problems that are not identical to each other, nor do they have school systems that are identical to each other. Countries that we can look at and say, Well, we're not that far away from them. And if they can produce a system where 35 to 40 percent of the youngsters can go to college not because 95 percent of the colleges have no standards but they can get 40 percent of the kids to meet the standards, and not only that 40 percent.

If you look at these countries, you'll find they're doing something for their next 60 percent, those that aren't going to college as well. As Warren [?] pointed out here in terms of not Track 1 but Other Track, these countries that...Having other tracks doesn't mean that other tracks have to be given garbage or nothing to do. It isn't tracking that's evil; it's what you do with kids once they are on track. It can be evil or it can be good.

Now what would be the behavior of each and every one of us if we were in some business or enterprise--something we had been in for some number of years--and we had some other competitors who were in that business. And for years we had done pretty well. We were satisfied. And all of a sudden, we dropped down in sales and the others were very far ahead....

Just imagine having [?] people in the United States take a look at some of these exams in other countries. Show these exams to principals and teachers and policymakers and say, What would you think about 38 percent of the kids in the U.S. being able to pass this examination? I think the first thing we'd do is to look at what are these other people

doing and we would try to copy it. That's what industries would do. They'd hire people from another business; they'd engage in some industrial espionage--we don't engage in educational espionage. We wouldn't copy exactly what they were doing because our system is a little different, but we would do it pretty close.

What is it that they have? Well, first, they have a common curriculum. And I think that one of these days we're going to have to revisit the idea of a common curriculum. There is a big difference between our country and these other industrial countries and that's the mobility of our citizens. You don't prepare a student to pass an exam at this level without using every minute in school and out of school to prepare. This is serious stuff. If you have fifty different systems and if each of these systems is so different that, as your kids move from one to another, the teachers can never be sure of what they've had before, the teachers will do exactly what they're doing now, which is to spend about 30 percent of the time going over everything the student should have learned before entering the class because they are not sure what the students have accomplished. So you have a 30 percent waste right there. Unless you can change mobility patterns in the U.S....Now it doesn't mean you have to have one curriculum; you could have three. You could have one teacher teaching curriculum one; one teaching curriculum two and one teaching curriculum three. To some extent education involves building blocks and continuity and articulation. And if we already have less time than other countries do, and we waste a tremendous amount of time because we we don't have a system of continuity....We have to deal with that issue or we will never get there.

I strongly supported Goals 2000 because I thought it was the best we could get and it would at least get people talking about standards and assessments. That's part of it although, without the stakes, you can throw out the standards and assessments because they won't mean anything.

So the first piece is that I think we need to rethink the diverse

curriculum. One other little thing. We've had a system that, by and large, does not have a curriculum that's very descriptive. Most states....When I was teaching in New York City, I got big fat books of 30 or 50 or 60 different topics and was told, Take whatever topics the kids like or you like and if you don't like any of them, make up your own. That was the curriculum. Now it's going to be very very difficult to get teachers who are accustomed to this freedom....Now we come in and say, there are building blocks and these things have to be done. There is no way those teachers will take the building blocks seriously if there are no stakes. If it doesn't make any difference, why should I change my habits? I've been teaching successfully all these years.

There are basically two kinds of stakes. If you want to get people to do certain things, you connect them to things that they want. The last great experiment as to whether you could run a system without any incentives on the basis of goodness and people's instincts went down in flames recently in a good part of the world. And they're trying now toIf anybody had any doubts....I at one time hoped you could get a system that didn't have crass incentives. I think I would prefer a world where you didn't have to force people to do things. Where they'd pick up a book by Shakespeare and say, Gee, I'd love to get into this instead of being forced to because it's on the final examination. But unfortunately, kids, unless they have to do it, won't do it, which is why kids aren't taking the AP exam and aren't reaching these levels.

What are we really saying to youngsters? It's the equivalent of saying to people, From now on you don't have to come to work. That's been a very oppressive system we've had and we realize that many of you have done this work and resented it. From now on you'll be paid and get your health insurance and pension whether or not you come. Well what would be the result? A few people who love their jobs--and there are such people and such jobs--would continue to come. And then there are a handful of compulsives; they would either come or they would seek psychiatric help. The rest of the system would go to hell. That's what we've done with youngsters. They can get their pay, their pension and

their health plan, but they don't have to show. They don't have to learn; they don't have to do anything.

And so how much they learn becomes how much the teacher is forcing them to learn. The onus is on the teacher. I assign kids homework; I give them a lot of work to do, [and their response is,] Mr. Shanker, you're mean. You give us this much work. My sister, down the hall in Miss So-and-So's class--she doesn't get any work at all. I have to negotiate with these youngsters because they know that no one in the outside world requires anything of them. It's the kids versus the teacher and it's a negotiation. Read The Shopping Mall High School. It's in there; it's very clear.

In none of these other nations do you have this. All the teachers are giving pretty much the same work because they are all heading for the same assessments. And when the kids say, You're mean, the answer is, Look, I'm just giving you what all the other teachers are giving their students throughout the state and throughout the country and I know you can do it. All the kids last year in the fifth grade did it and the year before they did it and the year before that. Besides, I'm here to help you. I'm your coach. That's an external standard: You want to get into the Olympics; I'm here to help you make it. Because you want that. It entirely changes the relationship of teachers and youngsters and it changes the relationship of children and parents.

When parents today tell their kids to work hard, they say, Why? I don't care if I go to Harvard. Most of the college will take me. What's bugging you? The school doesn't care. Why should I work. We have taken away parental authority; we've taken away teachers' authority; and we have to plead and beg. With a system of stakes you'd return that authority.

What are these things kids want? One of the things kids want is to go to college. And unless we return, over time, obviously....If we were to put in standards immediately, we'd shut down nearly all our institutions of higher education and turn them all into junior high schools and high schools. I'm not doing this to try to increase the size

of my organization--though it's not a bad idea. But is there any doubt that if 36 percent of kids in other countries could pass something like Advanced Placement, 36 percent of the kids in this country could. And is it worthwhile to have 36 percent who can? Would it make a difference to those youngsters and to the nation? Would it make a difference to higher education? There's no question that it would.

And what about the youngsters who are not going to college? This is very tough. Going to college is now an entitlement. Any effort to say that one needs any knowledge or skill or anything to get into college will be viewed as a way of cutting off access and opportunity. But you know there are more of those kids--the 36 percent who pass an examination like that--you don't have the 50 percent dropout rate in Germany that you have here. Or in France. You have a graduation rate in many of those countries that's higher than ours. And what are our youngsters getting out of a college education if they come with much less than this?

What about youngsters who are not headed for college? Well in other countries there are other certificates. And the kid who isn't going to college either wants to get a job or into some sort of further technical training. In other countries your grades count, there are certificates, there is access. Nobody is disconnected. Everybody is heading for this, this or this. And they're all difficult and all require effort. And the connections are very direct. Not only do we have a problem with higher ed because it's an entitlement, we have a very difficult problem with jobs.

Suppose Roy Rogers and McDonalds and every one of these places that hires high school kids said that from now on they're going to hire kids on the basis of some sort of standards. They are going to hire the best students first. Well first of all, right now they couldn't tell because every teacher marks differently. Unless you have some sort of national currency here, a grade doesn't mean anything. The other thing is of course that high schools are not accustomed to getting the transcript out in a few days--it would take about six months or

something like that.

But suppose we're able to solve those problems. Suppose every kid in high school knows that getting a job depends on being a good student. Would that have an effect on students' working hard in school. I don't think there's any question about it. But employers don't do it. Why don't they do it? For a couple of reasons. One of them is the civil rights laws. If you decide to hire a kid who has straight A's to work at McDonalds punching a cash register that has pictures of Big Macs on it and you deny a job to a poor kid or a minority kid, is that fair? That's something that none of these other countries grapple with. They just assume that an employer says, I'm going to reward....

By the way, in other countries employers deliberately seek [high-achieving students] because they feel that's part of the social responsibility of their business. It's part of making the school system work. The same thing when you graduate in these countries. Your grades, not the grades of the teacher alone, but the grades in some sort of a system that is constant.

Now in the U.S. these kids know that whether they do well or don't do well, no good company hires anybody who is 18 or 19 years of age. If you ask them they say, Why should we? These are young kids and they're irresponsible. Let somebody else hire them and when they're 24 or 25 we'll see how they've been doing with these other outfits. So the kids who work hard and really do well--they graduate and they end up getting the same poor jobs as kids who weren't doing any work at all. And then guess which kid looks at which kid and says, You're a sucker. And we expect to get something out of our system.

So that's my pitch. None of this is going to work; none of it's going to work unless we put stakes in. Stakes change everything. They change the teacher's relationship with the student, the parents relationship. It changes all this....School boards would be much less likely to go for fads if they knew that all this counted. And if people understood that my kid's ability to into college or get a job depends on how well this system does, there would be a lot more mobilization of

public concern and public support and participation. When you have a system that basically says, it doesn't count, it doesn't make any difference whether your kid passes or doesn't pass; he can go to college. And no employer's ever going to look at this. We've got it disconnected and as long as it's disconnected, it's not going to work.