

**The Way Out Is Not The Way In**  
*Grab a Hammer*

By Brian P. Cory

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*Last in, first out.*

This phrase has become a primary focus as the crisis in education continues. The phrase is at the center of reform efforts from evaluation practices to budget considerations to fifty year-old union protections. If you have not heard this phrase, give it time and you will hear it more than *the new normal*.

But *last in, first out* is receiving more attention than it deserves.

We have a crisis in education and the phrase's origin is at most a minor contributing factor. It does not begin to do the crisis justice.

Rush Limbaugh came closer to giving the crisis its due. On his radio program on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, Limbaugh stated: "By every and any measure, our public school graduates are as dumb as a bag of hammers."

Hammers. Therein lies the true crisis.

Limbaugh is not alone. Everyone seems to be talking about it. Educators have it banged over their heads wherever they go. Educators are forced to hide their professional identities when they step out from the shelter of their schoolhouses into the real world. When attending a dinner party, they go through excruciating pain to steer the table conversation away from the buzz regarding dropouts, tenure, health benefits, pensions, and so forth.

*What's in this marinade anyway?*

Educators secretly exhale when folks like Charlie Sheen come along and steal their limelight, only to once again double-over with anxiety as they know that his stint in the headlines will be short-lived. Like celebrities, educators cannot seem to stay out of the papers and off the headlines.

There is no escaping the crisis. Limbaugh captured it as only he could, but his assessment of our country's students and our teachers who teach them has become *the new normal*. Unfortunately *this new normal* is further distracting our country from sorting out real solutions from those which hold little promise for producing anything above or beyond *more of the*

*same*...in education and more importantly in our communities, on our campuses, and at our workplaces across the country.

I will go out on a limb and suggest that after all of the current rhetoric, movies and documentaries, and latest scribbles of reform, we are likely to get what we have always gotten. For example, if I had to choose one tool to begin building a new infrastructure for education, I think I would choose a hammer over the Common Core State Standards. While the aim of the Common Core State Standards is noble and overdue, the time and money being spent on it are more of a distraction than Limbaugh's comment.

The new standards also fail to do our crisis justice. They present a false façade of our real problems. And I am pretty confident how this will play out; following the wake of this latest reform effort, educators will scurry back into seclusion. Yes – if educators think they have a public relations problem now, just wait.

The mission on the homepage of The Common Core State Standards Initiative reads as follows: “The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy.”

Sounds good.

Two consortia of states, *Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)* and *SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium*, have been charged with developing common assessments to measure student learning of these new standards through the support of *Race to the Top* grants in the ballpark of \$360 million. The total investment does not include test administrations, scoring, revisions, etc. The total amount may only be surmounted by the anticipated windfall for the entrenched textbook publishers and software designers.

The new standards and assessments will do nothing more than affirm the gaps which we know already exist as well as identify new disparities in learning from coast to coast. The combination is destined to cast our students in an unflattering (if not unfair) light.

Mr. Limbaugh: *Gaps and all, our students are not hammers.* You see, students simply do not stand a chance given what we have created. We have essentially designed standards and requirements knowing that far too many students will not meet them. Plainly stated, we know some students stand more of a chance than others. We are missing the boat. Common standards and common assessments will not result in the necessary sea-change. Rather, they are virtually a case of *bait and switch; smoke and mirrors; i.e. more of the same.*

*How so you ask?*

Let's look at New Jersey. Standards do not exactly put the *new* in New Jersey. Prior to joining the Common Core movement, New Jersey suggested its students across the state were working towards the same standards and meeting the same graduation requirements. The following appeared on the New Jersey Department of Education website: "The New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards were first adopted by the State Board of Education in 1996. The standards describe what students should know and be able to do upon completion of a thirteen-year public education and provide local school districts with clear and specific benchmarks for student achievement in nine content areas."

The advertisement continued, "The 2009 standards reflect current research, exemplary practices, national and state standards and standards from other countries. They were drafted by taskforces consisting of educators and experts recognized for their content area expertise and for demonstration of excellence as practitioners in their respective fields. In each content area, standards and cumulative progress indicators align with the knowledge and skills needed for post-secondary education and the workplace."

Sounded good.

However, somehow glaring undeniable differences persisted from zip code to zip code across the Garden State. I venture to say these differences were similar to the ones which were evident before 1996. The New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards essentially affirmed the gaps and disparities which we innately knew existed from Bergen County to Cape May County.

Do not blame Limbaugh for this crisis. Limbaugh may not be helping our cause but he did not write the standards. Nor did Limbaugh establish the graduation requirements. For the most part, educators did. We need to stop meddling with ill-fated solutions to non-primary problems. It is time to take control of our profession and navigate our way out of this crisis. Our way out of the crisis will not be the same way we got into it.

The fact remains that unless a miraculous overnight sea-change emerges, my four-year-old and two-year-old sons will experience an eerily similar K-12 education as graduates of 2024 and 2026, respectively, as I experienced. My K-12 experience did not differ greatly from my parents' K-12 experience. The storyline could be traced back nearly one hundred years. Maybe I am not being completely fair. Maybe I will be accused of being as sensational as Limbaugh. After all, Brendan and Danny will be required to complete 2.5 credits of Personal Financial Literacy which New Jersey added to their graduation requirements last year. *Whew*. As a result, they and their classmates will undoubtedly be ready to right the ship of our economy.

Seriously? We are missing the boat.

K-12 Education campuses are not the only grounds in need of new infrastructure to realize just how fertile they could be. Who does not know a college graduate with a degree in-hand but without a job? Higher Education needs to take inventory. Their programs are positioning many graduates as candidates for jobs that have been replaced, reduced or eliminated, and out-sourced.

What should K-16 Education be preparing students for? Some insights to the future workplace are posted by Lee Graham on GetDegrees.com in a feature titled, "Top 60 Jobs That Will Rock the Future." The projected jobs appear in five categories: *Health Care*, *Science and Engineering*, *Environmentalism*, *Digital*, and *...And Beyond!* Examples from each category are below:

*Health Care*: Medical Roboticist, Genetic Counselor, Respiratory Therapist, Bioinformatician, Custom Implant Organ Designer

*Science and Engineering*: Nanotechnologist, Simulation Engineer, Biorefinery Plant Manager, Seed Production Technician

*Environmentalism*: Sustainability Officer, Waste Management Consultant, Food Scientist, LEED Certified Architect, Hydrologist

*Digital*: Interface Designer, Computer Forensics Analyst, Cloud Computing Engineer, Casual Game Developer

*...And Beyond!*: Sarbanes-Oxley Specialist, Welding Technologist, Quantitative Finance Analyst, Virtual Services Worker

Visit <http://www.getdegrees.com/careers/tips/top-60-jobs-that-will-rock-the-future/> for a description of each as well as for the complete list. Then ask yourself: *What chance are we giving our students?*

As high schools convene their typical commencement ceremonies in June, they will certify that their graduates met the current standards and completed the graduation requirements. Will they also be able to certify that their graduates are prepared for these jobs of the future? At the very least, did they educate their graduates on the ideas behind these jobs, let alone the skills required for them?

My concern is not limited to the lack of direct preparation for the projected jobs listed here. Will schools be able to certify that their graduates are prepared to fill the jobs which I needed to personally access during the past two weeks?: automobile mechanic, appliance repair person, home contractor/carpenter, dentist, computer technician, and nutritionist. As I contacted these experts or dropped by their businesses/offices, I never stopped to verify that they passed Algebra 1, completed five credits in Visual and Performing Arts, or fulfilled their World History requirement.

Is there really any wonder why domestic unemployment rates have increased while manufacturing, production, and innovation have decreased?

We need to build new. We need to create a new infrastructure for education. It is time to give our school and classroom leaders new freedoms in practicing their craft.

Give educators academic freedom to create an a la carte menu of authentic programs which celebrate student passions and strengths. Through these programs, educators will be preparing students for their new world instead of serving as conduits of old world requirements. The encouragement of this professional latitude would energize educators, rookies and veterans alike. The push-out (aka dropout) problem facing our schools would be eradicated. Students would find a new purpose for attending classes, being on-time, taking notes, and applying their knowledge and skills beyond the classroom. Students would be and would feel honored. *Graduation Requirements* would be replaced by *Graduate Opportunities*. Graduates would seize control of the future rather than being the next wave of victims.

Students would be the sea-change.

Students would prove to us that the way out is not the way in.

And, after all of this, we would discover that the standards were achieved in the process – if anybody cares to take inventory.

Limbaugh would have something else to talk about.

Grab a hammer and let's get to work.