

For America's Schools, Is This the Beginning of the End of Average?



One year, early in my teaching career, I got reprimanded for giving too many “A’s.”

“You can’t give everyone the same grade,” I was instructed. “Give a few A’s and F’s, and a lot of B’s and C’s. Otherwise, everyone will know that your class is either too easy or too hard.”

This was unremarkable advice; indeed, it was as close to the educational Gospel as you could find. It was human nature in action.

And, according to a new book, it was completely wrong.

“We have all come to believe that the average is a reliable index of normality,” writes Todd Rose, a professor at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education and the author of *The End of Average: How We Succeed in a World That Values Sameness*. “We have also come to believe that an individual’s rank on narrow metrics of achievement can be used to judge their talent. These two ideas serve as the organizing principles behind our current system of education.”

And yet, Rose suggests, “when it comes to understanding individuals, the average is most likely to give incorrect and misleading results.”

In fact, the origins of what Rose calls “averagarian thinking” had nothing to do with people; they were adaptations of a core method in astronomy—the Method of Averages, in which you aggregate different measurements of the speed of an object to better determine its true value—that first got applied to the study of people in the early 19th century.

Since then, however, this misguided use of statistics—by definition, the mathematics of “static” values—has reduced the whims and caprices of human behavior to predictable patterns in ways that have proven almost impossible to resist.

Consider the ways it shaped the advice I got as a teacher, which was to let [the Bell Curve](#), not the uniqueness of my students, be my guide. Or consider the ways it has shaped the entire system of American public education in the Industrial Era—an influence best summed up by one of its chief architects, Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose applications of [scientific management](#) to the classroom gave birth to everything from bells to age-based cohorts to the industrial efficiency of the typical school lunchroom. “In the past,” Taylor said, “the man was first. In the future, the system must be first.”

Uh, yeah. No.

Of course, anyone who is paying attention knows that the end of the Taylorian line of thinking is upon us—and Rose’s book might be a way to expedite its demise. “We are on the brink of a new way of seeing the world,” Rose predicts, and “a change driven by one big idea: individuality matters.”

In systems thinking, there’s a word for this approach: *equifinality*—or the idea that in any multidimensional system that involves changes over time, there are always multiple pathways to get from point A to point B.

But if that’s true—and *The End of Average* paints a very compelling picture that it is—what are the implications for our public schools?

To seek two variations of the myriad ways we could answer that question, I visited two very different schools—one, a neighborhood elementary school in suburban Maryland, and the other, an urban charter school in Washington, D.C.—to see what the principle of equifinality, and the mission of uncovering the uniqueness of every child, actually looks like in action.

Ducketts Lane Elementary School: Creating A Strengths-Based School

Ducketts Lane is a big, brand-new K-5 elementary school in Howard County, Maryland—about an hour outside of D.C. The school, whose 800 students reflect the diversity of the surrounding community, with significant amounts of Black, White, Asian and Latino students, opened just three years ago in response to rising enrollment in the district. And as principal Heidi Balter explains, it, “the fact that we all started the school together and built it together has made a big difference in the culture you’ll find here. And the core of that culture flows from our decision to see one another through our strengths.”

What Balter means is the school’s decision to utilize the [Gallup Strengths Finder tool](#), an evaluative instrument that has been used by more than 12 million people, and which is finding a growing audience among the nation’s public schools. Similar to the more widely known Myers-Briggs tool, respondents answer a series of questions, which then reveal one’s top five strengths (there are 34 in total).

At Ducketts Lane, the process of placing strengths at the center has been a slow and deliberate process across the school’s first three years of existence. “Year one was about ensuring that every faculty member knew their strengths,” she explained to me amid the din of several hundred schoolchildren. “Year two was about making sure that all of the adults were familiar with their colleagues’ strengths. And this year has been about extending that awareness to the students—specifically, to the 4th and 5th graders.”

The school’s emphasis on strengths is impossible to miss; its imprint is ubiquitous, from the sign I saw in the front door as I entered (“Kindness is caring—show your caring strength”) to the conversations I had with adults and children alike, almost all of which began with people sharing their “top fives.”

For Balter, a thirty-year veteran with the cheerful, focused air of an elementary school principal, that common language has been revelatory to the way she approaches her work.

“One thing I hadn’t thought about before in my career was focusing on strengths, not weaknesses. This is the piece that’s different. But what we’ve found is it helps you understand why someone is doing what they’re doing. Our teachers have started to see that student behavior that in the past would have been described as combative or disruptive is usually just something a child is doing because it’s what the learner in them needs. So we feel like we’re starting to get the language we need to identify the positives in kids, and to help them see what makes them uniquely special. And that’s helped us all see qualities in our kids that we might have missed before.”

Derek Anderson, Balter’s Assistant Principal, agrees. “Before we started using this assessment, we all had our habits

and preferences—but this gave us a language to talk about the ways in which we were all different. As an educator, we're used to asking what we can do better. But now, we're talking about what's going well and what people do well."

To be sure, that doesn't mean everything at Ducketts Lane looks and feels different from the classrooms of our youth. In fact, much of the school feels joyfully traditional. Kids aren't doing asynchronous learning on computers, or self-directing their own time; they're still in English or Art or History class (in age-based cohorts), and they still have bells and passing periods and grades. Yet it's clear that the school's emphasis on identifying each student's strengths can only lead in one direction: the days for all those averagarian features are numbered. And it's clear that, even at this early stage, the school is giving its students something precious. As one 5th grader put it—a sweet, self-possessed girl named Izetta—"I feel like I'm understanding myself more now, and that feels good."

Two Rivers Public Charter School: Building a Culture of Metacognition

In the crowded landscape of public charter schools in the nation's capital, Two Rivers finds itself at the top of the list; last year, its waiting list for preschool ran 400 deep, and its traditional metrics (i.e., test scores) all trend upward. Like Ducketts Lane, it is also highly diverse. But whereas Ducketts Lane was founded to deal with overflow district enrollment, Two Rivers was founded by parents who wished to create something they hadn't seen elsewhere in the nascent DC educational marketplace.

"I remember one of our first meetings," said Jessica Wodatch, the school's principal and one of those founding parents. "There were a bunch of us in this crowded townhouse, trying to imagine the school we wanted to create and what it should say about learning. And the things we talked about fell into four buckets are still at the core of what we do today:

1. Learning must be joyful, hands-on, and relevant to life;
2. Kids must become good people;
3. The school must be welcoming to all; and
4. The education must be well-rounded.

Today, Two Rivers is at capacity—over 500 kids—and its classrooms feature children with a wide range of skills. Typically, this has led educators to apply a "method of averages" approach and teach to the middle. But at Two Rivers, it has led the leadership team to think more innovatively about staff development, and about what it will take to ensure that all kids—not just the ones who come to school most ready to learn—get to participate in all aspects of the learning experience, and not just remediation.

"What is core for us is that we're a community that comes together around rich and exciting problems in search of common solutions," said Wodatch. "That is the essence of what we are about. But that means we have to think differently about how we assess student learning, and how we prepare teachers to create classrooms that are able to meet each child's individual needs."

The way Two Rivers has done that is through a detailed deconstruction of the essential skills they want young people to develop—critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, character and communication—and a detailed evaluative rubric that describes what each of those skills look like in action. "This approach requires us to be thinking about learning in its totality," Wodatch explained. "That means we choose instructional foci that connects with our assessment priorities. And since we have to really invest in our own staff development, it means we spend a lot of time focusing on student work together, and looking at our instructional moves."

I saw this on display recently, at a staff development day in which teachers from different teams met up to share and respond to examples of student work from their classes. Two 4th-grade teachers, Ben Johnson and Anya Rosenberg, shared examples from a class project to clean up the Anacostia River, while 2nd-grade teacher Jessica Hall wanted feedback on some student essays about the trailblazing African-American female pilot Bessie Coleman.

The depth of their feedback for one another, and the extent to which each teacher was willing to open themselves up for a detailed examination of their own individual decisions (and hidden biases), was evident throughout the 90-

minute session.

"I wonder how we can help kids get better at discriminating between what's good to cite from the text and what's not," offered Johnson.

"I notice how well you've scaffolded this assignment," Rosenberg told Hall. "But I'm also realizing how this conversation has opened up a can of worms for me. We spend so much time thinking about complexity, and about how to help kids become more complex thinkers. But now I'm realizing that what matters more is examining the worth of the assignment. How can we start to gear our tasks in ways that connect more deeply to the *worth* of the material, and to the deeper epiphanies we want them to have?"

Creating space for those types of *adult* epiphanies, which are happening in service of the needs of kids, is precisely the point of work like this. "We're so used to boiling everything down to the aggregate or to trends or to quantifiable numbers," Johnson said afterwards. "But these sorts of exercises are reminders of how important qualitative data is, and how much we need to understand not just each individual child, but also our own individual habits and assumptions—the sorts of things we might not be able to see without the help of our colleagues.

"To be a great teacher, you have to be vulnerable with your practice. And that's what we're doing here."

The Beginning of the End of Average?

What schools like Ducketts Lane and Two Rivers show, I think, are the ways in which the principle of equifinality is already at work in more communities than you might imagine.

And that, too, is the point. The goal doesn't need to be to make all schools use evaluative rubrics or the StrengthsFinder tool; the goal is to ensure that all schools find ways to uncover each student's strengths, challenges, passions, and abilities while remembering that there are myriad ways to do so—and that all roads to transformation must pass through adult minds and bodies first.

"So much of being successful," said Wodatch, "is being innovative within the constraints of the current system so we can impact the lives of these kids. We're doing that now, as are lots of other schools. But if we could make more of those constraints go away—if we could stop sorting kids by the Bell Curve, and instead set each kid on their own individual "*J-curve*" trajectory—I think you'd see the beginning of something truly transformative for kids."

One of my favorite educators, Ron Berger, has been saying this for a long time. "To build a new culture, a new ethic," he writes in his book *An Ethic of Excellence*, "you need a focal point—a vision—to guide the direction for reform. The particular spark I try to share as a catalyst is a passion for beautiful student work and developing conditions that can make this work possible.

"Work of excellence is transformational," he writes. "Once a student sees that he or she is capable of excellence, that student is never quite the same. We can't first build the students' self-esteem and then focus on their work. *It is through their own work that their self-esteem will grow.*

"If schools assumed they were going to be assessed by the quality of student behavior and work evident in the hallways and classrooms—rather than on test scores—the enormous energy poured into test preparation would be directed instead toward improving student work, understanding, and behavior. And so," Berger and a growing number of educators have concluded, "instead of working to build clever test-takers, schools would feel compelled to spend time building thoughtful students and good citizens."

Imagine that.

The Age of the Individual is upon us.



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