



## **Interview with Linda Darling-Hammond**

High-Stakes Testing and Accountability Webinar

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**Linda Darling-Hammond** is the President and CEO of the Learning Policy Institute. She is also the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University where she founded the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education and served as the faculty sponsor of the Stanford Teacher Education Program, which she helped to redesign.

Darling-Hammond is past president of the American Educational Research Association and recipient of its awards for Distinguished Contributions to Research, Lifetime Achievement, and Research-to-Policy. She is also a member of the American Association of Arts and Sciences and of the National Academy of Education. From 1994–2001, she was executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, whose 1996 report *What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future* was named one of the most influential reports affecting U.S. education in that decade. In 2006, Darling-Hammond was named one of the nation’s ten most influential people affecting educational policy. She led the Obama education policy transition team in 2008 and the Biden education transition team in 2020. In 2022, Darling-Hammond received the Yidan Prize for Education Research in recognition of her work that has shaped education policy and practice around the most equitable and effective ways to teach and learn.

Darling-Hammond began her career as a public school teacher and co-founded both a preschool and a public high school. She served as Director of the RAND Corporation’s education program and as an endowed professor at Columbia University, Teachers College. She has consulted widely with federal, state and local officials and educators on strategies for improving education policies and practices. Among her more than 500 publications are a number of award-winning books, including *The Right to Learn*, *Teaching as the Learning Profession*, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World*, and *The Flat World and Education*. She received an Ed.D. from Temple University (with highest distinction) and a B.A. from Yale University (magna cum laude).

**Facilitator:** Linda, thank you so much for being part of our webinar. And so we just like to start out, tell a little bit about your background and how you got into thinking about testing and accountability and equity issues.

**LDH:** Well, I came into teaching many years ago, as a high school English teacher, I taught in big factory model schools, on the east coast in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. And I realized very quickly that there were some significant problems that were the I couldn't overcome as the single teacher in the school, I recognized that the factory model school was not designed for me to care effectively for the 180 kids who would march by six periods a day 30 at a time, you know, without other, you know, teaming and resources and, you know, structures that can allow the collective faculty to do its work, I recognized that I wasn't adequately prepared to teach for all the things I needed and wanted to be able to do, which has led me to do a lot of work on teacher education. And I also recognize that there were huge disparities in funding. One of the

places I taught was in Camden, New Jersey, which was before the school finance reforms, more recently, Camden, like other predominantly black districts in New Jersey was resource that about half the level of Princeton and New Brunswick and other places, we did not have books in the book room, we did not have, you know, the resources that were needed for the students who were there. So I've been working on these issues and others for a very long time. More recently, the issues of assessment and accountability have come to the fore, really, as a function, especially of No Child Left Behind. And the damage that was done by that set of policies, we are still, you know, seeking to overcome in these days.

**Facilitator:** Why did we do high stakes testing and accountability in the beginning? What were we trying to achieve?

**LDH:** In the beginning of the Bush administration, right after 911, when there was an effort for the Congress to come together around something, the No Child Left Behind bill was on the table. It was based on what was going on at that time, thought to be the "Texas Miracle". You know, the idea that if you set test score targets and give, you know, punishments, that schools that don't meet the targets, somehow, you know, achievement would improve. Later, the Texas miracle was found to be a lot of blue smoke and mirrors, because many of the kids who would have scored low on the test were being kept out of testing were being pushed out of school, I did a study with a colleague on that, that demonstrated that, you know, the effect the effects were not what they were claimed to be. But the whole country adopted this policy, most people who voted for the bill hadn't read it. It was clear from the very beginning that there was no way that 100% of schools would become, quote, proficient on a test. And then it would cause a process by which public schools would be declared failing over time. And one of the ideas of the Bush administration at the time was that in any school that was declared failing, parents would then be eligible for vouchers. So it's actually a precursor of the conversation we're having now about vouchers for private school.

**Facilitator:** What are some of the problems with the way we test today?

**LDH:** You know, I think in the United States, we have two major areas of problems around testing. One is the nature of the tests. And the other is the uses of the test. So with respect to the nature of the test, first of all, American testing came from a bell curve framing, which was applied to assessments that came across the ocean, and we change the underpinnings. So Binet and France was doing assessments of students, to see if they, if any students would be unable to benefit from the public schools that were being created at that time. And his conclusion was that most of the kids could do most of the things.

And so it was really a criterion notion came across the ocean, into the hands of Charles Murray at Stanford who turned it into a bell curve, so that you could select items in a way that artificially array students along this bell curve, so that you can select and sort them. He had very strong ideas about who should be at the top and who should be at the bottom. He published extensively about the intellectual deficits of Eastern Europeans and as he put it, Indians, Mexicans and Negroes who could be siphoned off into menial tasks but could not learn from the traditional schooling curriculum and on and on.

So the girls outscore boys on the first test. He said, "Well, that's wrong." So he changed the test so the boys will be at the top and the girls not. The test was manufactured to create the bell curve, to create a way by which the items would select and stored in the ways that we considered, quote, appropriate at that time. So we still have the bell curve philosophy underpinning almost all our tests, even the ones that are supposed to be criterion-referenced. This idea that we can rank people on a single dimension from top to bottom and figure out who's better and who's worse.

The second thing that came into American testing was artificial methods, the idea that we could use multiple choice questions, and that those would be more efficient. We can score more tests faster on Scantrons. You know, where do you go in the world where any of the tasks you ever have to encounter require you to pick one answer out of five that somebody's already given you. It's just not a way that we actually learn and do work in the world. And then those were designed to have distractor questions that were intentionally to fool kids, and so on.

And then, of course, the tests are rooted in a view of what the experience base or the world would be. And again, there's lots of opportunity for bias there. And that has been demonstrated, in many, many ways. And then there's also this assumption that standardization gets you the most accurate answers about kids. But if you are, for example, on the SAT asking about a ship is to x as a fish is to a school, and the answer is regatta, you know, that's going to be known to Northeastern kids with privilege, and not to other kids. If you had asked a question about a piñata, rather than a regatta, you would have given more access to other students. So this notion that accurate measurement is somehow colorblind and can be standardized is another problem that we have. So we have a lot of problems with these tests, and they've been talked about for many years.

But the other big problem that makes those problems more problematic is that we're using the tests for selecting and sorting and punishing and sanctioning. And that means that there's a lot more attention to trying to replicate in the school, in the classroom, what's on the test in the way that it's on the test. Furthermore, it's a misuse of testing, as the psychological standards for testing make clear that we should not be making decisions about anything based exclusively on a test score, and even primarily, on a test score. So I think we're in a situation where we've got inadequate tests being used for inappropriate purposes.

And so when we think about where we have to be moving, we need to take into account what we now know from the science of learning and development, that people actually have multiple talents and multiple ways of learning and multiple ways of demonstrating their learning. We see that in Universal Design for Learning and other areas that are coming into consciousness about how to maximize the learning that people do, how to get back to where Binet was, you know, where almost all the kids can do almost all the things because we've taught and assessed in ways that demonstrate and enable that kind of learning. So if we really want to get to instructionally useful assessments that are also supportive of equity, we need to first of all move past the bell curve. We need to really design assessments that are based on the things we want kids to actually know and be able to do, and then assess those in more authentic ways that allow students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do and that actually better test and better evaluate higher order thinking skills and problem solving skills and collaboration

skills, and all the things that people really need in the real world that also allow choices, you know, and contextualization of the tasks.

So, for example, in a number of countries . . . First of all, they assess less frequently than we do. The sort of assessments for public reporting and management of decision making in the policy world happen at most once in elementary school, once in middle school and then again in the high school. The assessments are often very authentic, where, for example, in the UK for the English exams in high school, there's a whole set of activities kids are going to do. They're going to write a persuasive essay, they're going to develop a narrative, they're gonna do some kind of fictional and non-fictional writing. All of those things like in the International Baccalaureate program are evaluated by teachers, and they're rolled up together into an assessment. Kentucky used to have a writing portfolio before the Bush administration made all of the states get rid of their performance assessments. And basically teachers were part of designing it. Kids could choose the topics about which they would write their persuasive essay or whatever their task was, there was a common standardized rubric that could be scored in a reliable way. And teachers got to a place where they could score these with 99% reliability. It was embedded in the work, the kids didn't feel like they're taking a test, they were writing a paper. And then their products were, you know, evaluated. There were scientific investigations in states like Connecticut and Vermont, which is like what we see in Singapore and Australia in the UK today, where kids would design a scientific undertaking, and they would use the scientific method and be evaluated. There were common tasks that would engage students, often together in doing an inquiry around . . . I remember one from Connecticut, where they had to figure out how to build a statue in the town square that would withstand acid rain, because that was a big deal at that time, and they had to test the materials and come up with their evaluation, collect data and evaluate the data. Those are the kinds of things that kids are going to need to do in the real world outside of school. They're going to actually prepare them for college. We actually have evidence that in schools that use these kinds of assessments, often in a portfolio for graduation, that students are better prepared, and do better in college, than students who have grown up without that kind of opportunity to learn in ways that are engaging, that allow them to engage in deep learning, that allow them to learn the skills that they're going to need to use to be efficacious themselves. So we need assessment systems that are reinforcing those things that are part of the teaching and learning process. We need teachers to be part of the design and evaluation of the assessments with time set aside for that to happen as part of what is the teacher's work, and then we need to use the assessments for information and improvement, not for punishment and sanctions.

**Facilitator:** Initially, when the system of testing was instituted, there was talk of inequities. There was talk of children who fell through the gaps of a low income schools where kids were far behind. And the idea was that we need to make sure that all third graders are on third grade reading level. I know you and your daughter have recently published a book that really thinks about education through an equity lens, and some of the some of the ways that schools continue to be inequitable. Have testing really reduced inequities? Can the kind of testing we've had do that? What are some other approaches to reducing inequities in education?

**LDH:** Testing may provide some measures that allow people to advocate for change, but it in and of itself does not produce change. And it's kind of like weighing the cow over and over

again, instead of feeding it. You're not going to get a healthier cow by just doing that. You have to really think about what is what in the environment. And really, if we think about what accountability should be . . . accountability should actually be the government as a whole thinking about what needs to happen so that kids can learn effectively, so that we enhance good practices, that we identify and eliminate bad practices, and that we have continuous improvement. So there are many things that actually go into learning.

Of course, we've had a highly inequitable society for many, many years. I mean, this is not a new thing, but also in part because of prior discrimination. We have areas of cities that are very toxic, where redlining used to keep investments out based on race and discrimination. And so there are places where kids are exposed to a variety of toxins and pollution. These actually undermine learning. The Flint water crisis of some years ago, we think of as how horrible that was that basically a whole town was being poisoned. And kids were, I mean, many, many students became lead poisoned and had, and still have, all kinds of cognitive needs that were caused by the environmental hazard. But that's not an uncommon story we have all across the country, kids getting lead in their water, getting all kinds of toxins that have not been handled. So the first thing is you need a healthy environment, you need an environment that is not only free of toxins, but also that is free of violence and stressors, because those all impact learning as well. Secondly, you need equitable resources for schools. 38 states still don't have that, and its often where the kids have the greatest needs, and who are societally disadvantaged in other ways, like those I just mentioned, and communities, in families with not enough resources. Most of our students in public school now are low income. But that's because we're not taking care of children adequately in this society. And then on top of that, we usually layer inadequate resources in schools. So the schools that serve the most needy kids are often getting the least resources to meet their needs. Then we need to be sure that in those schools, we have a very safe and inclusive environment, where students are being enabled to succeed. Community Schools are one of the things that can support that environment, because you have the wraparound services. And you also have ideally a design in the school that is paying attention to students needs and ensuring that they get what they need, and that educators have the resources to be sure that those needs are being met. Also, you know, reducing exclusionary discipline, for goodness sakes, physical discipline. Corporal punishment still goes on in a lot of schools. And replacing it with what we know to be very effective, like positive disciplinary practices, restorative practices, that in fact, reduce bullying, reduce violence, and vandalism in schools, and attach kids to a caring school community. And then we need, of course, high quality teaching, which means we have to support teachers well, in terms of both their preparation and the mentoring that they get and the supports they get for their professional learning, but also in terms of the compensation that they receive, which can keep them in a profession, that needs them to stay. And then finally, we need a very thoughtful, deeper learning curriculum, which often has been allocated to a very small minority of students through gifted and talented programs or advanced placement or other kinds of courses that kids get selected into. Those often also reveal the inequities in the system. Rather than recognizing that many of the things that are taught in those courses are appropriate for all kids, actually bring a thinking curriculum to everyone. That again, is part of the select and sort mentality that goes back to the factory model founding of our schools 100 years ago. We've got to design schools now for the next 100 years, around what we know about learning and development and what we know about the requirements for equity.