DID YOU ever read Kurt Vonnegut’s short story “Harrison Bergeron”? It was originally published in 1961 in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and was reprinted in the Vonnegut collection *Welcome to the Monkey House* (Delacorte, 1968). It’s a compelling story set in the not-so-distant future when each member of society is finally the same. No more worries about competition, no more worries about what others think of you, no more worries about worries. Choices and free will have been eliminated. Laws and amendments have been passed ensuring that everyone is the same.

The HG (Handicapper-General) has complete control. Those who are beautiful must wear masks to disguise their stunning features. Graceful members of society drag around heavy bags of bird shot tied to their ankles and endure plates of scrap metal bound to their bodies. Those with pleasing voices are required to squawk and cackle. The strong have their ankles shackled and heavy burdens hung around their necks. The intelligent have radio transmitters placed in their ears that routinely blast unbearable sounds of shattering glass,

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**Vonnegut Warned Us**

Ms. Fugate finds a disturbing resonance between a Kurt Vonnegut science fiction story and certain recent developments in U.S. education policy.

**BY CLARE FUGATE**

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sirens, jackhammers, and other intolerable noises designed to destroy any semblance of creative thought. Utopia has finally been achieved. The story opens:

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren’t only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else.

Any of this science fiction sound familiar? Currently, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) decrees that by the school year 2013-14, all students must be proficient for their grade level in reading and math. Who among us thinks that this is a reasonable, logical expectation? Who among us believes that each student has the same intellectual capabilities? Who among us believes that a one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter test actually measures an individual student’s academic achievement? Is it rational to think that every child in America will score 100% on the same reading and math assessment? Now? Or seven years from now?

While it is absolutely suitable and morally crucial to hold schools, teachers, and students accountable for continued achievement, it is absurd to require every student, no matter his or her intellectual capabilities, to take the same high-stakes tests. Let’s look at this realistically for a change. Student A has an I.Q. of 135, and Student B has an I.Q. of 85. As NCLB now stands, both of these students must take the very same test in order to earn a standard high school diploma. For Student A, this will be the easiest test ever, while for Student B (who has but a slim possibility of passing), this will be just one more painful reminder from the school system that he is a failure.

We are told that the purpose of NCLB is to level the playing field. However, NCLB is tremendously underfunded. Schools that serve students in poverty lack the resources needed to provide even for day-to-day instruction and enrichment, to say nothing of preschool intervention and family and community outreach.

Instead of allotting sufficient funds to failing schools to undertake extraordinary interventions, NCLB has hit these struggling schools with demoralizing high-stakes consequences and sanctions. Rather than focus on the bigger picture of providing critical community and family support, NCLB places the burden of success or failure solely on the school.

It is imperative that schools be held accountable for high standards, for providing well-trained teachers, and for creating a safe environment. I certainly agree with Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings that “all children in America can learn and achieve.” However, we fool ourselves and damage our children when we try to convince ourselves that “proficiency” can ever be the same for all students.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when many of our lawmakers were in school themselves, not every child remained in school until graduation. Many students dropped out to go to work, to join the service, or to get married. Most of the students who remained in school were college-bound or had a clear vocational interest. Today, we subject all students to the same education, whether they want it or not, whether they need it or not.

There are logical, commonsense improvements that could serve to make NCLB more effective. For example, the “growth models” that some have proposed for the reauthorization of NCLB would judge a school’s success by evaluating the improvement students make over a period of time, rather than by using the “snapshot” approach of measuring student achievement at a single time.

To cultivate continued student progress, schools and legislators need to realize that we must add additional resources and opportunities to the traditional school day. Many schools now reach out to their communities after the school day is over and provide not just the customary enrichment opportunities for students but also parent and community education. Adults learn alongside their children, and they don’t just learn the traditional adult basic academic programs. Instead, they are offered instruction in technology, child care, nutrition, and health care and can take part in numerous other programs designed with the aim of improving the school community as a whole. Such outreach programs directly support our efforts to bridge the achievement gap.

We must understand, once and for all, that one size does not fit all. One high-stakes test does not accurately measure individual achievement. And unlike those folks in Vonnegut’s dystopia, not every student is the same. We must realize that student achievement is individual, and we must create appropriate benchmarks to measure student progress over time. Until then, America’s students will continue to drag with them their own burdens, the ones provided by their schools.