

**Deborah Meier**

## BUSH & THE SCHOOLS: A HARD LOOK

**T**

*his conversation on President Bush's "bold new plan" for American education was conducted between Brian Morton, asking questions, and our co-editor Deborah Meier, who has gained nationwide praise as founder and director of the Central Park East public schools in New York City.—Eds.*

**B:** The new education plan that President Bush unveiled this spring has three main features. The first involves what he calls greater choice: parents could choose to send their children to any schools they like, public or private, and federal money would follow the students to their schools. The second is that private industry has pledged to come up with \$150 million to design 535 innovative new schools—one new school for each congressional district. The third involves standardized national testing: the country would draw up national standards in five subjects, and students would be tested in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. These tests would be voluntary—but they might also be used for college and job applications.

To begin with, what do you think of the president's plan to let federal money follow children to private schools? You're known as an advocate of choice in education—is the president's version of choice what you had in mind?

**D:** The first thing to say is that I don't think there's any field other than education in which the president could announce a bold new plan for solving an age-old problem—and put no money behind it. "We're going to do away with heart disease by the year 2000, and this is our plan: we're going to ask doctors to work harder and more imaginatively!"

Not only doesn't the plan involve putting money into the public sector but it actually would remove funds from the public schools. And this at a time when forty-one out of fifty states are reducing their funding for education! It's an abandonment of public education—financially and politically.

Bush talks about his plan as a way of supporting

"choice" in education. But what he's advocating isn't choice but privatization—the idea that schools would be better off if they were operated in a "free" private market. He's prepared to abandon public education, except as one "choice" among many on the market. If public schools were gutted in that fashion, their only value would be that they would still accept kids whom no private schools would take—a so-called "safety net." This would particularly be the case in economically and racially mixed communities, especially urban centers. The poorest members of society would find it impossible to get a good education in those circumstances; and *no one* would be able to get a democratic education—an education in which students of different backgrounds learned to understand each other, think about their differences, think about what they share; an education in which the society as a whole had a voice in shaping its future citizens.

The issue of "choice" has become so confused that I sometimes wish we could scrap the word entirely. It really refers to two different issues. For Bush and others, choice means competition, the "free market." When I've argued for choice, I've been arguing against the standardization, factory model of education, in which schools are ruled by a hierarchical bureaucratic system. This has nothing to do with abandoning public education. Choice, for me, is a strategy for creating more diverse and coherent educational communities, so that parents and teachers have a voice in the design of the community they want to join. It's a strategy for invention and innovation.

**B:** What do you think of Bush's plan to have private industry finance teams that would develop 535 new, experimental schools?

**D:** The idea that we need to have experimental schools seems to me a good one. When I heard Bush's slogan about "reinventing schools"—for a moment I thought, "He stole my line." But in Bush's version the reinvention of schools is tied to a

political gimmick. None of the money is coming from the federal government—rather, corporations have “pledged” to raise it—so it’s anybody’s guess as to whether the money will actually come. How can the federal government announce a “bold new program” that depends on someone else’s coming up with the money? And second, it’s not the schools that will do the inventing. Instead, the prototypes will be the creation of “labs,” removed from practice. School people, at best, will pick their model.

And if these new schools are created, how can other schools be expected to emulate them without a similar level of funding? The one contribution the feds are promising is a million dollars for each of the 535 schools. And remember that, according to Bush’s plan, already existing schools would have even fewer funds than they do now—because students will have moved into private schools, and tax dollars will have followed them. Changing existing schools is more, not less, expensive than starting from scratch.

But that said, I don’t want to give a purely negative view of this aspect of the plan. If they actually do stimulate the creation of 535 innovative schools, I would applaud that. It could have a powerful impact. Central Park East is always singled out as a rare example of a successful innovative school—but there are *many* good experimental schools, which aren’t well enough known. So if these new schools were well publicized, people might think: if it could happen there, it could happen here. That’s a best-case scenario; it assumes that we’re not just rewarding 535 congressmen.

**B:** The third main feature of Bush’s proposal is standardized national testing.

**D:** There are so many different things wrong with this idea that I don’t know where to start. The reliance on standardized testing has driven education in a bad direction in the past, and to rely on it on a grander scale would only do more harm.

A great many people who understand that there’s *something* wrong with standardized tests think that they do measure achievement but don’t measure other important things—self-confidence, ethics, social development, and so on. Clearly they *don’t* measure those things, but in fact they *don’t* measure achievement either.

**B:** What’s wrong with, say, a standardized reading test?

**D:** Standardized reading tests measure a variety of things, but reading is not among them. Students are given a sentence with one word missing, and they’re asked to supply the word. Or they’re given a

paragraph, completely out of any context, and asked questions about that paragraph. Some students do well at such tests and some don’t; there may or may not be a correlation between these results and students’ ability to read. These test results certainly don’t necessarily correspond with people who find the written word powerful, important, interesting, and accessible.

But that’s not the biggest problem with these tests. To focus on, say, ability to answer multiple-choice questions as a *definition* of reading means that schools come to focus on it as a *method* of reading. Schools with children who tend to do well on these tests also expose the kids to real books, and have real discussions about the books; then maybe they also spend a day or two giving test practice. But schools with student bodies that don’t have as much exposure to literacy at home, whose students tend to score lower on such tests, aim exclusively at preparing kids for the tests. It’s precisely these children who most need to learn that the written word can have real power. They’re deprived of the opportunity to experience that power in part because of this reductive definition of reading. So the problem isn’t just that it’s a bad definition but that its impact on education is precisely to further deprive the kids who most need to be introduced to the pleasures and rewards of reading.

A lot of the people who advocate national testing are calling for different kinds of assessment tools, which presumably would measure more important intellectual habits—through the use of portfolios, essays, and so on. Although I would find such an effort considerably less objectionable, I think that trying to create these sophisticated tools, trying to develop a consensus about them, trying to figure out how to standardize them, will be extraordinarily difficult or even impossible—not to mention expensive—both to develop and implement. And in order to standardize the national exam, you would have to further standardize the curriculum. And that would be a mistake.

If you take the idea of choice seriously, I think you end up looking toward different kinds of assessments—assessments developed at the level of the school. When we worked out our own standards of assessment at our school, it required a great deal of discussion and a great deal of time, but the time wasn’t wasted, because through these discussions we were creating an educational community. It was a form of R&D, and a form of staff development. We were creating our own methods and values, thinking them through. And if some of our students disagree with our standards, they can argue about it with us, and we can either defend the standards or modify

them after hearing them out. It's not something that was developed somewhere else, and that we're stuck with. If you're trying to persuade kids about the power of human reasoning, then it's important that the standards by which they're judged be accessible to their own reason, and open to their appeal. They need to accept responsibility for their education and thus to "own" the tools by which they're measured.

If Bush were serious about choice, then federal policy could begin to offer resources to schools to help them develop their own assessments. They could encourage it, and they could encourage family interest. Instead of "It's Saturday night—do you know where your kid is?", the question could be "Do you know what your school expects of your child as a reader? Do you agree?"

B: You've already started to answer my next question. What sort of federal intervention for education would you favor . . . if you were president?

D: First, I would make a lot more resources available, particularly to those communities that are least able to raise them locally. We have to equalize resources. The United States is a low, not a high, spender when it comes to schooling. There are many areas where the government has to put money. For instance, the physical condition of New York City schools is simply an outrage. There's no way to have good education in terribly overcrowded schools, where classes are being held in hallways and gyms, where the bathrooms don't work and the ceilings are falling in. It's a delusion to think that these things don't matter—that you can teach well in any setting. People with a genius for teaching may be able to teach well anywhere, and children who are hungry to learn may be able to learn anywhere, but you won't build many powerful school *communities* in conditions like that.

The second thing is that if we agree—and even the federal government pretends to agree with this—that for a school to be successful it must be a powerful

community, with its own ethos, its own viewpoint, its own set of standards and expectations, many things follow. We need more choice *within public education*, and we need smaller schools. If you want to create a school-based community it's easiest to do so in a small setting. The optimum size, I think, is somewhere between two hundred and three hundred students. Federal policy can encourage smallness.

Federal policy could encourage deregulation in many areas. Not because the things being regulated are unimportant but because regulation doesn't often solve the problems. I think we could provide more money to low-income areas without all the paperwork to determine who is entitled to a free lunch and who isn't. We waste resources and complicate our lives by spending hours investigating our students' backgrounds to prove that our school is entitled to funds—when much grosser data can be used to decide where funds are needed. We'll make some mistakes that way, but we make at least as many mistakes as it is, and we pay more.

I think small schools, in which there is greater involvement of teachers and parents, tend to reduce the amount of waste and corruption—nothing can prevent it, but a face-to-face community can reduce it. Scale has something to do with accountability. So I think federal policy needs to sell the public on the idea of small institutions.

And, finally, the federal government could elevate the state of education by encouraging people to ask more interesting questions about their children's schools—and encouraging conditions in schools that would enable teachers to answer them. A true education president would use the bully pulpit to encourage parents, teachers, and students to become more thoughtful and intelligent decision-makers. But this requires more face-to-face involvement, more creativity on the school level—not more standardization. And it requires a spirit of financial commitment to education from the federal government—not a commitment to turn education over to the market. □

### Stop Buying *Dissent*!

Subscribe now. Use the enclosed card.