

No Politician Left Behind

By Deborah Meier, Deborah

Education is always about politics--in the best and worst senses. In the best sense what happens in our schools is an expression of our beliefs and values, what we want the next generation to be like. But education is also political in the partisan sense--as politicians of all stripes seek to rally their troops around schooling practices, to tie other political agendas into our agendas for schools. Social promotion, bilingual education, phonics, "new math"--all are issues that resonate with different audiences for reasons other than those that directly concern teachers, parents and kids. Phonics is seen as "right-wing authoritarianism," social promotion as "permissive liberalism" (and depicted as the scourge of New York City schools, despite the fact that almost half the city's children have been entering high school at least a year over-age for decades) and so forth. Reality often gets lost, and kids suffer in ways neither opponents nor proponents had in mind.

So along comes No Child Left Behind, and from right to left, everyone climbs aboard. It was, after all, an extension of a policy idea hatched under Bush Senior, pursued under Clinton and replicated in many states--the premise of which is that frequent testing will solve educational problems. And in fact the focus on "results," not "opportunities," echoes older liberal, not conservative, themes. Yet had anyone read the bill with care, it would have been hard not to fault it on almost every ground, except perhaps the high aspirations embedded in the title.

NCLB proposes to accomplish a statistical impossibility (that all children score in the top twenty-fifth percentile); it raises false expectations; it's built on an illusion that tests alone can--and should--measure worthwhile standards; that schools can do it all; that progress comes in steady increments; that penalties will motivate children and teachers; that lack of money is a mere excuse; that a single nationwide system is part of the American dream; and, finally, that schools can do it all. The law literally dictates the books we are allowed to use on a national basis, not to mention the pedagogy for teaching literacy and, coming soon, math. Before long, until eighth grade, little else will get taught at all.

Yet virtually no high-powered public figures, nor any important leaders of either party (including John Kerry), have done more than demur from this or that aspect of this preposterous bill. Meanwhile, those closest to the action (teachers, principals and superintendents organizations, as well as local school boards) are in almost unanimous opposition--but quietly, as they are fearful of being seen as whiners, a defensive coalition of self-interests.

What is inexcusable is not just the "achievement gap" on tests but the gaps you can see with your own eyes: the gaps in graduation rates, which have been disguised for years by the very folks who support NCLB; the real dropout rates; the attendance data; the condition of buildings and playgrounds; and more. When we know of solutions that are promising, we're told: too expensive; utopian. It's easy for those with money to say it doesn't take money to educate all children well--they can always fall back on rich-family-sponsored education after school, on weekends and during the summer, or choose to spend two or three times as much just on the school day itself, as wealthy communities do. We are just plain lied to, and then shocked that our education czar was the perpetrator of such lies. For example, when Houston's graduation and dropout data--put forward when Education Secretary Rod Paige was superintendent--was revealed to be blatantly false, the myth of the "Texas miracle" should have been forever put to rest, but the scandal disappeared from the headlines within days and it remains alive and well. We open two new schools in Boston under conditions that defy all the literature on best practice, on the grounds that what we know works we can't afford--like starting a new school a grade or two at a time, keeping school size small. No one dares insist that we create professional time for teachers and parents to work together. Instead of improving the education we provide teachers before and after they enter the profession, we've decided that we can fill the need by quick emergency routes. Teacher preparation today is more and more a question of program-specific training, often conducted by private vendors, who implement their prescribed material in prescribed ways to

minimize costs. Moreover, the wisdom of teachers and parents is disregarded--often by the very people who loudly lament the erosion of adult authority in today's society.

To add insult to injury, we use as our only measure of academic performance the one tool that most reliably reflects family assets: standardized paper-and-pencil tests. And the more we reduce taxes on the rich and rely on local taxpayers to fund schools, the more likely we are to have the cheapest and most unreliable kinds of tests--which makes an even further mockery of the idea of closing gaps. As Richard Rothstein reminds us in his new book, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*, if we truly wanted to raise test scores, the route we've chosen is in the long run the most utopian, meaning undoable. We spend \$50 billion a year on schooling K through 12 and three times that this year alone on the Iraq war--and yet are told we "can't afford" what the experts say might make a difference. In the end, standardized tests will largely continue to measure the other gaps in life.

Does that mean we should excuse the poor performance of so many schools? Not at all. I know schools can be transformative--even for those at the bottom of the ladder. But the transformation that counts is not going to lead us to a world in which everyone is above average, much less in the top quarter on any standardized measuring rod. It will depend on building the kinds of communities in which adults are expected to exercise judgment in public and accountable ways, and in which families, students and adults have sufficient time to learn from each other what is needed to educate all children well--and the resources necessary to make this possible.

Meanwhile, pressure mounts to replace public schools with the private marketplace. As we turn more and more to private armies because we don't want to face what it would take to recruit public ones, so too with our schools. The promotion of the idea that private is better than public not only impoverishes our common dreams--it is also clearly untrue. We encourage parents (and kids) to distrust the people they most rely on, under the assumption that they can't be good enough if they are public. We increasingly provide monies to support the not-so-hidden dream of the right: to place the

education of our young into private, for-profit hands.

Yes, the defeat of Bush is a necessity for the future of public education, but it won't rest easy in the hands of a Kerry administration either. Better funding for a host of bad practices won't improve matters. It's just that the fight for good schooling will be easier to mount, and the wild explosion of gaps in every other domain of children's lives may be brought to a halt. Oddly enough, what matters more, for strictly schooling "outcomes," is not what happens inside our schools but inside our society. On those questions there is little doubt which candidate will be better for our kids. We need to remember that the larger struggle is also critical if we truly intend to leave no child behind.

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