

Bush's 'No Child Left Behind' Education Law Leaves Every Child Behind

by Don Phau

The first bill that George W. Bush presented to Congress upon becoming President was education legislation called the No Child Left Behind Act. It passed nearly unanimously with overwhelming bi-partisan support in both houses of Congress. When he signed it into law on Jan. 8, 2002, Bush proclaimed himself "The Education President." He was joined by Senator and now Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry who called it "groundbreaking legislation." Kerry, in his typical fashion, has backtracked and is now saying the bill was a "compromise" that must be "fixed."

The stated goal of the NCLBA is laudable enough: To have every child "proficient" in reading and mathematics by the next decade. Many in Washington proclaimed it would provide the means to hold the states "accountable." A staff member of the Congressional House Committee on Labor and the Workforce explained to *EIR* why so many in Washington saw the NCLBA as important: "There has to be a way to measure educational performance. . . . Today, there are a lot of kids being taught by unqualified teachers. The bill is an effort to improve the accountability and qualifications of teachers."

In the two years since NCLBA's passage, however, a massive national revolt has grown up against the Act, with many states calling for its complete repeal. For example, by a vote of 98-1, the Republican-controlled Virginia House of Delegates passed a resolution in January 2004 saying the NCLBA "represents the most sweeping intrusions into state and local control of education in the history of the United States," and will cost "literally millions of dollars which Virginia does not have."

Today, the NCLBA is being attacked by both parties as an "unfunded mandate." It should come as no surprise that there are not sufficient funds for education. As Democratic Presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche has noted on many occasions since 2001, 48 out of the 50 Federal states are effectively bankrupt due to a three-year decline in tax revenues and to having already been forced into paying for unfunded Federal government obligations.

The problem with No Child Left Behind, however, is not the lack of money; the very premise of what is "education," which is insisted upon and relentlessly enforced in the Act, is wrong.

President Bush has made "testing"—nationally standard-

ized, multiple-choice-based testing—the heart of his education act, and his and his Education Secretary's top priority. Praising the NCLBA's focus on testing, Bush declared, when presenting his first Federal budget to a joint session of Congress on Feb. 27, 2001, "Measuring is the only way to know whether all our children are learning."

Teaching for the Test

As a condition for Federal aid, each school must test all its pupils every year in core subjects, beginning in elementary grades 3 through 8. The NCLBA also mandates that each state test, annually, a sampling of 4th and 8th graders, using the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)—also known as "The Nation's Report Card." Recently, at a campaign event in Arkansas, Bush said that he now wants all schools to test 12th graders as well with the NAEP. "We have to raise the bar!" the President insisted.

Bush's priority on testing raises the question: What should be the methods used in determining whether a student is really learning? Real learning, from the teaching of history to the re-experiencing and understanding of original discoveries in science and physics, is a product of a fruitful dialogue between teacher and student, and what is sometimes called "hands-on" teaching and learning. Under the NCLB, this is dismissed; instead "teaching for the test" becomes the very reason for education, and even if broader intellectual dialogue with students is not explicitly opposed or debunked, in the practice of school districts all over the country, massive amounts of school time, money, and human resources have been devoted to test preparation at the expense of all other educational activity.

With the belief that "testing" shows and even accomplishes "learning," the door is opened for outright falsification, based on repetitive grilling on "questions" and "objectives" each of which is pulled completely out of any historical, scientific, or artistic context. For example: In a sample Virginia History and Social Science standardized examination, entitled "Grades 5-7 U.S. History I and III Civics & Economics," under "Civics," students are asked:

"Whose idea, expressed in the Declaration of Independence, was it that people have natural rights to life, liberty, and property? A) George Washington; B) Patrick Henry; C) John Adams; D) John Locke."

There is no correct answer, because the question itself is false. The right of “Life, Liberty and Property”—rejected by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration in favor of “the pursuit of happiness,” was taken directly from the Constitution of the Confederacy, which the United States fought a Civil War to defeat. The Confederate Constitution was taken from the work of John Locke, a British subject whose ideas we fought the American Revolution against.

The late Sen. Paul Wellstone of Minnesota was a passionate opponent of standardized testing. Shortly before his death in a plane crash on Oct 25, 2002, Wellstone said, in a speech on the floor of the Senate: “Standardized tests are the worst kind of tests, but these are inevitably the ones the White House will require, because they are the easiest to compare numerically. Many of the brightest kids can write beautifully and read perceptively, but cannot regurgitate answers for a multiple choice test. . . . No standardized test will ever identify the true potential of a gifted child, only his ‘test-taking savvy.’ We’ll lose too many kids as a result.

Referring directly to the NCLBA and its testing requirements, Wellstone concluded, “Senators, we should be ashamed to go along with this. Excessive testing is already degrading and distorting instruction. Teachers are turning to robotic “drill and grill” routines because they’re terrified of “sanctions” [loss of school funding] if their students’ scores aren’t high enough. The White House plan will make it worse.”

Banker Heads Biggest Test Firm

Bush’s focus on make-or-break testing, and the consequence of future privatization of public schools, must be seen as one package. The intention of NCLBA is to put “education” on a business-accounting basis. In the place of “profit” and “loss” statements will be the school system’s and the individual school’s results on the battery of standardized tests. Schools that fail to meet required results in the tests face being shut down. School systems with rising standardized scores raise the valuations and median prices of local real estate, as the *Washington Post* recently reported.

It’s hardly a mere coincidence that the largest company that produces and marks these tests, NSC Pearson, also owns the London *Financial Times*. The director of NSC Pearson, based in London, is David Weill. Weill, until the year 2000, was also the chairman of Lazard Frères, one of the oldest and most influential investment banks. Weill’s colleague Felix Rohatyn, a controller of the Democratic Party and a leading opponent of the economic policies of Lyndon LaRouche, is a senior partner of Lazard Frères.

The 2005 U.S. Department of Education budget is projected at \$57.3 billion, affecting 50 million students in 85,000 public schools. For Bush’s friends, to have control over these billions is a venture capital speculator’s dream. NCLBA is a step in the direction of that control. Bush’s original bill included a plan to give parents vouchers as payment to send their children to any school they desired. This was dropped

in the final bill, but the provision which allows schools to lose their funding if they are rated “failing” over five years, and to be shut down and replaced by a private firm’s or foundation’s “charter school,” was kept.

Parents will then have the choice of sending their children to another public school, or to the charter school. Private, for-profit charter schools are unregulated and liable to abuse, as in one Pennsylvania school where teachers were required to use course books that were published by the private company which managed the school. In short, what is planned for education is what Dick Cheney’s Halliburton did to the military, inviting private contractors to control multi-billion-dollar contracts in taking over what had been military operations.

A ‘Results’-Oriented Society

The NCLBA’s focus on reading and math has led many school districts to cut out such subjects as language, art and music, or to relegate them to “extra-curricular activities.” For example, Warren Township, a suburb of Indianapolis, eliminated its art department at the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year. The township’s new superintendent, determined to meet NCLBA requirements, told the *Washington Post*, “We are living in a results oriented society. . . . Everybody is looking for results, and we will do whatever we can to achieve them.”

Another consequence, not often publicized, is that NCLBA’s requirements are forcing poorer students to drop out of high school, and instead to seek much less demanding General Equivalency Degree (GED) diplomas. While high school graduation rates since 1989 have fallen, the number of teenagers getting GEDs have doubled. Many states manipulate their statistics, not counting those teenagers who are pursuing GEDs as school drop-outs. Duncan Chaplin, an economist for the Urban Institute in Washington, called it a “perverse incentive system. Under No Child Left Behind, we’re holding schools very strictly accountable for test scores, but barely hold them accountable for students who drop out or go into GED programs.”

In many states in addition to Virginia, the most vociferous attacks on NCLBA have come from George W. Bush’s own Republican party. In Oklahoma, for example, Democratic legislators drafted a resolution calling on Congress to overhaul the law; when one of the state’s most conservative Republicans, William Graves, rose on the floor of the state house to suggest that Congress, instead, repeal NCLBA entirely, he was given an ovation by his fellow legislators. In Utah, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed a resolution calling on Congress to repeal the NCLBA because it had not provided financing for the law’s mandates. In Arizona, where 85% of schools are expected to be declared failing under the NCLBA, the State Education Commissioner, Tom Horne, told the *New York Times* that the NCLBA provisions for a 100% proficiency standard are “definitely impossible.”