

SCAPEGOATING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The pitting of political advocacy versus professional authority has drowned out the crucial voices of educators

BY PAUL S. SHAKER AND ELIZABETH E. HEILMAN

In their popular explanation of No Child Left Behind, journalists and other public voices claim that unruly and inefficient public schools are being brought under the control of effective central authorities by scientific, test-driven accountability. Other popular themes of reform in media include mayoral control of schools, non-educators as superintendents and the standards and high-stakes testing movements.

At the same time, states have experimented in teacher licensure, inviting a wide range of alternative forms subject to varying quality control and featuring standardized testing over student teaching or university studies. For-profit ventures have been invited to operate public schools in the interest of quality and free-market competition.

Following up, the U.S. Department of Education has launched efforts to define and legitimize the forms of educational research by limiting funding to projects emanating from certain paradigms for inquiry, specifically scientifically based research.

Aggrandizing Motives

Cui bono? Among these advocates of change are some sincere citizens and educators with altruistic motives for supporting the NCLB agenda for our schools. Increasingly, however, we have come to realize that more often this camp is populated with self-interested parties whose motives range from political advantage to old-fashioned profit taking. These individuals, corporations and nongovernmental organizations have

reached their apotheosis of power under the Bush administration and are revealed in books such as Joel Bakan's *The Corporation*, David Brock's *Blinded by the Right*, David Cay Johnston's *Free Lunch*, Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* and Paul Krugman's *The Conscience of a Liberal*.

Such forces were examined at AASA's 2008 National Conference on Education during the Century Club 100 panel, "Public Perception of Public Education: The Real Battle With Conservative Think Tanks." A scholarly treatment of these ideas can be found in our article, "The New Common Sense of Education: Advocacy Research vs. Academic Authority" in the July 2004 issue of *Teachers College Record*.

Generally, American educators and their organizations have responded to these many initiatives and the cumulative climate of change in a rational, if piecemeal, fashion. For example, the research of professional educators is juxtaposed with their research. Our journals, newsletters and magazines analyze the details of their proposals. Our annual meetings and conferences take up their themes as the concepts driving our dialogue. Among these are accountability, competition and standards.

The response of educators has been based on the assumption that the critics of public education have as their objective the improvement of our schools and are separated from the professional education mainstream only by an honest difference of opinion with respect to methods. This gentle analysis may, however, be no more than a reflection of how educators see their

own motives and not a dispassionate evaluation of the goals of the critics.

A Coalescing Target

From a historical point of view, why should the two groups — political advocates and education authorities — have such differing purposes? One explanation is that intellectuals of the free market right recognized that with the fall of communism a need emerged for another target to coalesce their rhetoric.

During the 1990s, prior to Sept. 11 and the Iraq War, American public education was pre-eminent in filling this void. Unde-fended by corporate lobbying interests and identified as a Democratic voting block, educators and their institutions provided a useful target.

Scapegoating public education also serves to draw attention away from many fundamental social and economic problems that call for deep economic restructuring. More problematic is why many education stakeholder groups got behind the initiative. NCLB, for example, was resoundingly bipartisan and counted unions, minority advocacy organizations and other progressive entities among its supporters.

One explanation is that a dubious version of science was adopted by Democratic technocrats of whom Bill Clinton was an early partner in Arkansas. By restricting their view of reform to sound bites and by favoring as advisers some passionate amateurs (think William Bennett, Richard Riley and Margaret Spellings), Democrats joined Republicans in belying up to the bar for

their administrative yearly performance testing. The stage was set for this radical, top-down meddling in the profession by years of disinformation propagated to the public.

Looking further in history, during the 1950s Sputnik raised fears that American public education was not keeping pace in science and technology with the schools of our enemies. In retrospect, it was the Soviets who failed to compete successfully with America economically and in the race to the moon.

Next came the great SAT debate in which it was alleged that falling college-entrance examination scores demonstrated a decline in American education. The College Board's 1977 report "On Further Examination," the Sandia Report of 1993 and most comprehensively the writings of Gerald Bracey convincingly argued against this analysis.

Then during the 1980s, critique of public education emanating from "A Nation at Risk" stirred similar emotions by alleging that Japan, among other nations, was about to surpass us economically, again due to the failures of our schools. Yet education had little to do with American loss of global market share in the late 20th century, and it was Japan that went into prolonged recession while the U.S. economy enjoyed its decade of greatest prosperity. Public education received no noticeable credit for this economic boom.

Through the '90s we experienced another rhetorical tsunami around "America 2000/Goals 2000." This consensus of career bureaucrats, congressional staff and some educators operated at a surface level of content that would be covered rather than demonstrably learned. W. Edwards Deming, the father of total quality management, had foreseen the futility and eventual destructiveness of this approach in writing and talks before groups, including AASA in 1991.

The year 2000 came and went without the goals being realized or, of course, funded. NCLB, with its punitive and statistically unattainable standards unsurprisingly followed thereafter.

The Blame Business

This is not to claim educators are without frailty or blame or that the old common sense was without contradictions and denials. For example, ongoing union-board friction has eroded citizen confidence in public schools, as has mismanagement of resources and cronyism in urban centers.

The quality of public education varies enormously, and far too many children attend schools without adequate and equitable funding, good teachers or meaningful curriculum. These are not, however, "manufactured" crises. They are actual problems and, therefore, can be deliberately addressed by citizens of good will. AASA's Governing Board is taking this task on anew in its current declaration of principles of reform.

Blaming economic troubles on failing schools and low standing in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS, continues to be an extremely effective strategy in politics by what Gerald Bracey calls the "education scare industry." Add to this political opportunity the economic fact the K-12 education market of over \$700 billion is arguably the largest reservoir of public funds insulated from full development by corporate America.

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To the extent that political and economic motives are operating, the critics of public education will not be satisfied with articulate responses by educators, well-meaning reforms or even demonstrations of results. Educators may assume they are engaged in an honest policy debate with public-spirited critics, but a more comprehensive view suggests other agendas are at work. A good many politicians want educators as scapegoats and a good many of their corporate friends want to raid our budgets.

Stunted Reforms

Moving beyond passive methods, the federal government is asserting its agenda in increasingly aggressive and unprecedented ways. "Teaching Children to Read," the 2000 report of the National Reading Panel, an offspring of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, was an early public warning that federal agencies were taking it upon themselves to promulgate a narrow definition of what counts as science and bona fide research in education. NCLB supports only "strategies and professional development that are based

on scientifically based reading research." NCLB defines scientifically based to mean research that "employs systematic, empirical methods" and uses "experimental or quasi-experimental designs in which individuals, entities, programs or activities are assigned to different conditions and with appropriate controls to evaluate the effects of the condition of interest, with a preference for random-assignment experiments."

This definition threatens to roll back a generation of work broadening the field of research in education to accommodate diverse quantitative and qualitative methodologies. No single paradigm of research is capable of presenting a whole truth or offering silver bullets for school improvement.

A casualty of this politicization is reform efforts that are stunted despite their promise. Specifically, *The New York Times* reported that performance assessment designs and integrated curricula in innovative and prestigious New York metropolitan schools have been displaced by standardized testing in that state's rush to impose conformity in testing and standards. Similar unrest about the imposition of evaluation schemes has come from Nebraska, Connecticut, Utah and other states.

If accountability and performance results were true mantras in this education reform movement, these valid, alternative manifestations of pedagogical evaluation would be promoted rather than undermined. Bilingual education has, in another instance, been used as a wedge issue in California, Arizona, Massachusetts and other states, with businessman Ron Unz, publisher of *The American Conservative*, achieving success at mandating English language learner methodology through the voter proposition route.

Subsequently, Congress has reinforced Unz's agenda by replacing the Bilingual Education Act with provisions in the new English Language Acquisition Act that omit mention of native language skills, eliminate competitive grants and allow states to impose teaching methods.

Another targeted reform is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. In a tour de force of imbalance, the National Council on Teacher Quality maintains an entire segment of its website to promulgate only critical articles about national teacher certification. Also, J.E. Stone's attack on NBPTS, self-published on the Internet in his Education Consumers Consultants Network, attained widespread publicity without any pretense of

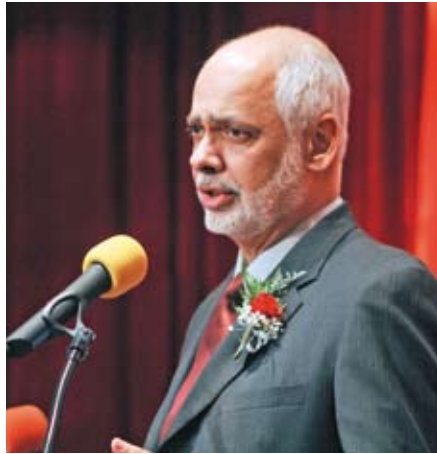
credible verification. *Education Week* and other news media ran with the story as if the study had received normal vetting. The magnitude of the attack led the Education Commission of the States to sponsor an investigatory study in response. One can only speculate as to why important media would feature work emanating from what is essentially an electronic vanity press.

A Parallel World

In our view, some specifics of the new common sense of education include the following: Standardized tests are the *sine qua non* of assessing school quality; our public schools are failed and cynical institutions; teachers are self-interested unionists (see the campaign at www.teachersunions-exposed.com); administrators would be better replaced with M.B.A.s or retired military leaders; education faculty are woolly apologists for the status quo; explanations of school problems, including the impact of poverty on children, are only excuses; no correlation exists between school quality and school funding; the punitive imposition of high-stakes tests and centralized standards will shape up malingering students and teachers; research in education should exclusively follow certain quantitative models; voucher advocates are the true sponsors of minority advancement; passing a test produced by the Educational Testing Service and holding a bachelor's degree are the only necessary criteria for teacher licensure; and so on.

Those who question this new conventional wisdom in community forums do so today at their own peril. Michael Apple, a professor of curriculum and instruction and educational policy studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, writes that "Conservative modernization has radically reshaped the common sense of society" and it has done so while creating a structure that institutionalizes its messages.

Supporting the advocates of the free market right, a parallel world of journals, experts, foundations and organizations has emerged in education over the past 20 years, particularly aimed at media and political audiences. At the same time, the original structures, such as AASA, that have organically developed during the last century and a half out of the need of educators to meet for debate and discussion, as well as the individuals who have risen to prominence through these entities, are relatively less visible to the public. These independent and institutional voices



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are heard within professional circles, but are absent from the public sphere.

At meetings of political leaders such as those of the Education Commission of the States, in prominent media such as *The New York Times* op-ed page and "The Charlie Rose Show" and even in official government documents such as "The Report of the National Reading Panel," a counter establishment of faux authority holds sway. The message may be brittle and attack-oriented, but evidently it has made good media, attracted politicians and kept the education establishment on the defensive. Right-wing foundation support has been forthcoming, and by the sheer volume and repetition of consistent messages the advocates have gone a long way toward redefining the conventional wisdom about public education. (To see an organized response to these initiatives, visit <http://epicpolicy.org>.)

Assertive Actions

How can we respond effectively? Educators as a profession embody an alternative and nonmaterial set of values in American society. A central message of education is that there are intellectual, moral and aesthetic dimensions to life that coexist with our material aspirations. We call this educating the whole child.

Education is in this sense subversive of the values of the marketplace through its spiritual and holistic emphasis. (This is not to say that educators need be or often are socialists, extreme environmentalists or those who have taken a vow of poverty.) Because the public media spaces are so largely taken up with the din of marketing, sales, consumerism and advertisements in general, this other, reflective, alternative voice does take

on the character of a differing path and, in that sense, is a challenge to the status quo.

We need to assert ourselves in every possible way in the mass media. We recommend radio, television and print interviews of faculty and other educators; op-ed contributions; public debates; letters for publication or privately to media and politicians; a public information office to get out our message; speeches at service organizations and business groups; and participation in politicians' meetings. (For an example of a cable access education television program, see www.youreducationmatters.ca.)

Pressure to conform to society's majoritarian values has a much longer and more dominant history than the acceptance of cultural diversity, which is by its nature emergent and controversial. Education, at its best, is an agent of such change and renewal.

Unsurprisingly, there is an obsessive quality to the drumbeat of criticism of education that suggests an irrational motivation is at work. This is a motivation similar to that which ostracizes those who practice new religions or no religion, dress differently or wear hairstyles that are unconventional. Educators are capable of defining their profession and explaining themselves in an articulate fashion that responds to a climate of criticism. Truly effective ways and means of presenting this message have not yet, however, been put into practice. The current reserved and reasoned response seems inadequate and, of course, defensive.

There is a need for symbolic, arts-based action by coalitions of educators, as well as rational discourse. There is a need for analysis that transcends the boundaries of the current debate and helps restore education to a position of civic and moral leadership in our society. We need to force our voices into the new media discussion of education, stand together on picket lines if necessary, withhold support from politicians who betray the legacy of public education, pressure our organizations to fight the good fight and recognize the alternative identity we wear with pride as teachers and education leaders. We are bearers of society's hope. ■

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