

The New Common Sense of Education: Advocacy Research Versus Academic Authority

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Current education policy is increasingly controlled by partisan politicians and the corporate interests that speak through them. Attacking American education and blaming economic troubles on failing schools and low standardized test scores coalesces the rhetoric of the right and draws attention away from fundamental social and economic problems. Add to this political opportunity the economic fact that attacking K–12 education leaves this market of \$732 billion vulnerable to development by corporate America. Though such attacks have been with us since A Nation at Risk, an increasingly broad array of cultural and institutional forces are at work creating a new “common sense” of education that maligns or manipulates the corpus of educational research and attacks promising practices and reforms. In addition, a new type of education scholarship has emerged that is delivered in alternative ways, funded through unorthodox sources, motivated by nonacademic purposes, and supported through direct access to media and political organizations, including the federal government. This article examines the details of the new commonsense policy and rhetoric and considers what is being lost and what educators need to do to restore to public education its position of civic and moral leadership in our society.

During the past two decades, the debate over American public education has been conducted through a new form of partisan rhetoric. Private sector economic motives are increasingly prominent, as is the use of education as a wedge issue to further broad, unrelated political agendas. When these initiatives commenced, the schools were enjoying a relative degree of insulation from partisanship as a result of the interwar reform efforts of Progressives and others. Elements of these reforms included independent

school boards—state and local, teacher tenure, the professionalization of school administration, and a general respect for the civic trust upon which American public education was founded. A long and careful process of institution building helped balance the professional interests of educators with the needs of the people in terms of governance, ethics, and quality. K–12 education’s funding streams through local initiatives and levies also contributed to its autonomy. Public education tends to be the repository for the best hopes and worst fears of every generation and thus has always been contested and deeply influenced by political and cultural struggles.

From the very inception of public education, there has been much debate on the relationship between school and society, including the missions of preparing students for work and citizenship; the contribution of the school in geopolitical and economic supremacy; the role of research and psychometrics; the value of schooling for life adjustment; and the role of schools in desegregating society and addressing ethnic, religious, gender, language, and handicap diversity. Yet, in spite of this turmoil, during the period of time between the two world wars and subsequently, the schools were not central to the lobbying efforts of corporate interests or the pork-barrel negotiations of Congress. Federal spending represented far less than its current 10% of education budgets and federal control was commensurately less prominent. During the 20 years since *A Nation at Risk*, however, these traditions have been greatly eroded.

In a surface-level critique of education, journalists and other observers assert that an unruly and inefficient public education system is being brought under the control of effective central authorities—local, state, and federal. Mayoral control and the standards and high stakes testing movements are obvious cases in point exemplifying the current popular definition of reform. Mayors of our largest urban centers have fought—often successfully—for the power to appoint their boards of education and superintendents of schools. States have experimented in teacher education, inviting a wide range of alternative forms subject to varying quality control and accountability. For-profit ventures have been invited to operate public schools in the interest of quality and efficiency. Most recently, the federal government has launched efforts to define and legitimize the forms of educational research by limiting funding to projects emanating from certain scientific paradigms.

A strong trend is, therefore, toward closer control of education by partisan politicians and the corporate interests that speak through them. Lobbying, once dominated by teachers’ unions, is now replete with a range of voices, including school management companies, technology purveyors, investment consortiums, think tanks, textbook and test publishers, and others. As one consequence, the new Elementary and Secondary Education

Act (ESEA), known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is being implemented by the U.S. Department of Education to restrict literacy initiatives to those that follow narrow methodological definitions, despite what local educators may prefer or Congress intended. In California, for example, state board appointees with specific pedagogical orientations, dictate reading instruction to the level of specific objectives in teacher education curriculum (California Commission for Teacher Credentialing, 2003), as well as maintaining an ongoing K–12 textbook approval process. Ohio’s state board of education, following in the shadow of Kansas, became enmeshed in dictating definitions of science over the objections of professionals in that field. As is well known, high stakes standardized testing, under the new ESEA, is assuming a universal scope and impact and presenting the testing industry with an unprecedented opportunity for profit and influence. Increased involvement of private ownership in education is a key feature of new federal NCLB policy. To improve schools that fail to make adequate progress, the federal government now supports a wide range of plans that are generally known as promarket or proprivatization. For example, when a school is identified for school improvement after it has not made AYP—adequate yearly progress—for 2 consecutive school years, all students are offered public school choice in Year 1. By Year 4 the school may reopen as charter school or contract with a private management company. Promarket theory assumes that a system based on competition and minimal regulation will result in better quality education at a lower cost. This deregulatory ideology also promotes the removal or reduction of teacher certification and accreditation requirements and the cessation of collective bargaining agreements. Though these measures are described as offering options to children and parents, a clear motive of these changes is for the private sector to have access to the \$732 billion of annual education spending (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a). When seeking to be conciliatory rather than confrontational, these voices describe themselves with terms such as “common sense”:

the National Council on Teacher Quality, a nonprofit organization that aims to foster public understanding and acceptance of a commonsense approach to teacher quality that measures teacher success in improved student achievement. (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2002)

Generally, American educators and their organizations have responded to these many initiatives and the cumulative climate of change in a rational, if piecemeal, fashion. Our research 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—for example, accountability, competition, and standards. It may be, however, that this debate cannot be properly joined in such a fragmented and didactic manner. 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 be no more than a reflection of how educators see their own motives rather than a dispassionate evaluation of those of the critics.

DESTRUCTIVE POLITICIZING

“Another way people liked to refer to what we were doing is waging a ‘battle of ideas.’ That battle, at least among serious people, is now over. We have won it” [Midge] Decter went on to identify a new enemy: the American education system. (Brock, 2002, p. 50)

Intellectuals of the right recognized that with the fall of Communism a need emerged for another target to coalesce their rhetoric. Increasingly during the past 20 years American public education has been filling this void. Undefended by corporate lobbying interests and identified as a Democratic voting block, educators and their institutions provide a useful object for reproach. Education is an institution about which most Americans care and feel informed, and, thus, makes a broadly relevant target. Discrediting public education also serves to draw attention away from many fundamental social and economic problems. Despite the drumbeat of mainstream media, however, public education has been very successful. Berliner and Biddle (1995) carefully documented public education’s alleged shortcomings in their publication *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools*. They demonstrated how skewed the analyses of the right have been. Richard Rothstein, in “Lessons,” his column in *The New York Times* (until its unexplained cancellation by the *Times* in November, 2002) and Gerald Bracey in his monthly department “Research” in *Phi Delta Kappan* also regularly submit convincing analysis and empirical evidence to support a fair and positive appraisal of our schools. Yet blaming economic troubles on failing schools and low TIMSS scores continues to be an extremely effective strategy by what Bracey (2001) calls the “Education Scare Industry” (p. 157). “Trade deficits that ballooned 20 years ago,” Rothstein (1996) writes, “were caused not by low test scores but by corporate bloat, markets that were more open here than elsewhere and a budget deficit that pushed up interest rates and the dollar’s value” (p. A-14). These facts are rarely apparent to the average American who has been conditioned

through dumbed-down and misleading mass media and social studies textbooks to view failing schools, immigrants, and welfare mothers as the source of their troubles (Spring, 2002, p. 176).

Add to this political opportunity the economic fact that the K–12 education “market” of \$732 billion (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a) is arguably the largest reservoir of public funds insulated from full development by corporate America. 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.

In 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 is they who failed to compete successfully with us economically and in the race to the moon. Next came the great SAT debate in which it was alleged that declining college entrance examination scores demonstrated a decline in American education. *On Further Examination* (College Board, 1977), the Sandia study (Carson & Herrnstein, 1992), and, most comprehensively, the writings of Gerald Bracey (1997) convincingly argued for this analysis: “If the standard-setting group is compared with a demographically similar group today, the mathematics scores show no decline and the verbal scores show only a small (22-point) decline” (p. 56). 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 very little to do with American loss of global market share in the late twentieth 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.

All this is not to claim that 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 our public schools, as have mismanagement of resources and cronyism in, particularly, urban centers. The quality of public education varies enormously, and far too many children attend schools without adequate 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. In contrast, the *Sputnik*/*SAT*/*Nation* debates are chimeras—impossible to resolve because they were largely rhetorical from the outset, a variety of media hyperbole.

AN ALTERNATE ECONOMIC HISTORY—SANS EDUCATION
BASHING

To best reject the myth that American education policy has been responsible for loss of global economic market share, the real nature of economic change must be understood. This rather detailed review is provided to reveal how little public education had to do with the American economics in the 1980s and 1990s. Declining market shares and unequal trade balances with Japan were minimally related with mathematics scores or phonics skills.

After World War II, the United States was in a position to structure global political, economic and military development for much of the world. The United States was involved in the war for fewer years than most nations and did not have to rebuild infrastructure such as factories and roads since World War II did not occur on American soil. Thus, the United States left the war with a stronger economy and military than other nations. Before Japan and Western Europe recovered from the war, the United States was the primary world producer of many important products such as steel, automobiles and electronic goods. Trade conditions favorable to Americans were supported by both formal and informal post-war trade policies. Marshall Plan aid, for example, required countries to sign free trade pledges.

In addition to prescribing the development of Europe through the Marshall Plan, the United States became involved, often covertly, in the affairs of numerous newly independent countries. Although after World War II former European colonies in South America, Africa and Asia gained independence, most remained economically dependent by having to supply markets, labor and raw materials to America and other first world countries. An example of covert efforts used by the United States to influence economic policy internationally can be seen in the CIA's work to disrupt labor movements in Europe that were not supportive of U.S. trade policy. More dramatically, the CIA was involved in overthrowing leaders who wanted to pursue independent paths of development. Such involvement included efforts to subvert progressive governments—including that of democratically elected Jacob Arbenz in 1954 in Guatemala—to protect American business holdings. As a result of these policies, the United States dominated the globe both economically and strategically by the late 1950s (Prados, 1996).

Many Americans think of that decade as the halcyon era in which even working class families could afford to buy their own homes. In fact, the standard of living was high, at least for those Americans who had a public voice. The minimum wage was relatively high in constant dollars, and there were many good industrial jobs. By the late 1960s, however, the American economy began to experience three phenomena: economic competition from newly industrialized countries, and from a recovered Europe and Asia; a balance-of-payments deficit caused, in part, by the enormous cost of

the Vietnam War; and increasingly powerful working and middle class labor. To some extent, America's early success was based on being the only salesman—the first to offer many products on the world market. Decline was inevitable as corporations in other nations offered the same exports and developed their own new products. Because American companies had experienced an easy early dominance, they were slow to make innovations. As many Americans are painfully aware, European and Japanese companies recovered from WWII and made innovations in automobiles, electronics and steel production that enabled them to gain important global market share (Madison, 1989). Also, Asian and European countries such as Japan and Germany directed little federal spending to the military and relatively more to education and infrastructure whereas the United States continued to spend heavily on the military rather than areas that return compounded benefits (Friedman, 1989, pp. 204–205).

In the 1980s corporations sought to reduce labor costs by “downsizing” not only at the production level, but also at the managerial level. In the 1980s and 1990s corporate consolidation, or large companies buying up smaller ones, also contributed to middle class job loss and insecure employment. Another trend has been for employers to replace fulltime workers with benefits, with temporary or part-time workers (Ayling, 1997). Finally, more recently, investments were made in a wide range of high tech product development requiring a highly educated workforce. These efforts have ultimately benefited corporations and the GDP but have weakened the security of many workers.

Although the past decade demonstrated resoundingly that American ingenuity and expertise and corporate restructuring once again could leave economic rivals behind, no retraction of the critical allegations about education has been forthcoming. Nor has any overdue praise come to our schools and universities for their contribution to an unprecedented technological revolution and economic boom. Public education is able to make little political capital from its triumphs while its critics simply shift their ground to launch new attacks once the old ones have become conspicuously unfounded or devoid of sensation in media eyes.

Today, according to the rhetoric of officials such as Eugene Hickok, Deputy Secretary of Education, it is educators, particularly urban educators, who are allegedly bigots with excuses and low standards and it is certain politicians who heroically will “leave no child behind” (Hickok, 2002). The criterion for success is to be performance on standardized tests, although such tests in themselves are a narrow and inadequate measure of school success. Dropout rates, now rising for the first time in U.S. history due to high stakes high school exit exams, are doctored or hidden from view—Texas being the most dramatic case in point (McNeil, 2000). Educators appear to be on the wrong side of the public's commonsense view of schooling and are on the defensive in explaining how what they do amounts

to more than tests measure. Educators also seem unable to convince many of their constituents that children deprived to a significant degree of the basic necessities of life are, as a group, at a serious disadvantage in school. This too should be common sense. Yet even these simple assertions have gained little purchase in the public imagination when faced with the relentless repetition of popular media messages asserting a simplistic accountability defined as testing and the marginalization of poverty and neglect as merely the “excuses” of educators.

ATTACKING AND MANIPULATING REFORMS AND RESEARCH

Another insidious and ironic manifestation of the right’s attacks is the manner in which certain of the most promising innovations of educators are restricted or banned from implementation. Reading Recovery is a case in point. Attacked from the left for its so-called “skills” orientation during its introduction to America, it has recently become anathema to the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development for being on the wrong side of the reading wars (i.e., in the whole language camp). A more accurate view is that Reading Recovery transcends these categories and is a pragmatic early intervention whose thoroughly substantiated track record documents the restoration of tens of thousands of new readers to grade level annually in the United States alone—saving these students from eventual special education placement or testing failure due to poor literacy (Askew et al., 2002; National Data Evaluation Center, 2002; Schmitt & Gregory, 2001).

Draft guidance by the U.S. Department of Education threatened to subvert the clear intent of Congressional language in ESEA by directing funds away from pullout programs such as this. At the same time researchers professionally associated with NICHD have become enmeshed over the Internet in a letter-writing campaign to discredit Reading Recovery by selectively applying research findings and, ironically, employing qualitative research (a paradigm the NRP abjured) to turn Congress against this reform (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2002, pp. 64–67). In its 78-page self-defense, the Reading Recovery Council of North America begins, “Although the letter purports to be an academic debate, its motivation appears to be political. . . . The Internet letter chooses to ignore all of this easily available information in an attempt to undermine public confidence in Reading Recovery” (p. 1).

There are other examples of reform efforts being stunted despite their promise. Specifically, *The New York Times* reports 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 (Perez-Pena, 2001). If accountability and results were true mantras in this education reform movement, these superior 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 Ron Unz achieving success at mandating English language learner methodology through the proposition route. Page one of *The New York Times* read like a press release from Unz's offices in a notorious and subsequently discredited Oceanside, California example (Steinberg, 2000, p. A-1). 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. The net result is a lessening of the states' accountability and freedom to act. Another targeted reform is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2002) in a tour de force of imbalance maintains an entire segment of its website to promulgate only critical articles about the NBPTS. 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 (Stone, 2002). *Education Week* and other 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 (Zehr, 2002). One can only speculate as to why important media would feature work emanating from what is essentially an electronic vanity press.

Another variation is research of dubious quality that touts alternatives to public education. For example, Paul E. Peterson's heralded study of vouchers in New York City and their positive effect on African-American boys (Howell & Peterson, 2002) is an instance of advocacy research in support of privatization efforts which received wide acclaim, only to be quietly but resoundingly discredited by peers after its damage was done to the reputation of our public schools. This uncorroborated, limited study was initially treated in media as being definitive. David Myers, lead researcher for Mathematics, states, "It is scary how many prominent thinkers in this nation of 290 million were ready to make new policy from a single study that appears to have gone from meaningful to meaningless based on whether 292 children's test scores are discounted or included" (Winerip, 2003, p. A-27).

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WEIGHS IN

The politics of the education establishment sometimes shares blame for these disputes as extremists on both sides have determined the shape of

policy by creating a train wreck of process instead of workable compromises. As Zinn (1999) observes regarding government involvement,

But is it the aim of government to maintain order, as a referee, between two equally matched fighters? Or is it that government has some special interest in maintaining a certain kind of order, a certain distribution of power and wealth, a distribution in which government officials are not neutral referees but participants? (p. 97).

Moving beyond passive methods, the federal government is asserting its agenda in increasingly aggressive and unprecedented ways. *The Report of National Reading Panel* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999a) was a very public early 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. The new ESEA/NCLB supports only “strategies and professional development that are based on scientifically based reading research.” The NCLB defines *scientifically based* to mean research which “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” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

This definition threatens to roll back a generation of work broadening the field of research in education to accommodate diverse quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It makes more sense to use the highest *quality* studies—including studies that use both qualitative and quantitative methods—but this is not what the new federal law requires. Naturally, some dimensions of successful learning are generalizable across contexts while others are complex, personal and local. There is a place for experimental or quasi-experimental designs, but narrative, descriptive and qualitative studies provide different, also valuable, information. Different research foci and different research paradigms each have something to offer. No single paradigm of research is capable of presenting a whole truth or offering silver bullets for school improvement.

Unfortunately, this highly limited and intellectually naïve concept of research is now actively driving policy. In a continuing example, based on supposed “scientific” studies, the superiority of English-only immersion is being touted by critics of bilingual education (Crawford, 2002). Buttressed by the government’s new interest in defining the “science of education,” this view of how ESL (English as a second language) students should be educated has become federal policy, despite the research-supported merit of bilingual education (Wiese & Garcia, 1998; Wiley, 1996). Moving forward

to set the stage for further federal narrowing of the definition of educational research, HR 3801 currently contemplates a revised appointment process for the commissioner of education statistics via the director of a new "Academy of Education Sciences." The director would award the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) contracts and grants as well. The conclusion seems inescapable that there is a federal imperative for the government to shape and define educational research in a manner that in the past would have been seen as wholly inappropriate. Even Diane Ravitch demurs stating, "These are both agencies that are truth-telling agencies—assessment and statistics—and both should be insulated to the maximum extent possible from any political controls" (Olson, 2002, p. 24).

THE LARGER CONTEXT

The elements of the attacks on public education come into clearer focus when seen as part of a broad political movement with goals far beyond education reform. There is a need in the right's movement to discredit, for example, the representatives and terminology of their opponents. "Liberal" has largely been removed from the congratulatory vocabulary of politicians and the term "progressive" seems scheduled to follow this fate. Along with the term will go the reputation of its most prominent intellectual advocate, John Dewey. A recent vehicle for this purge in the literature of education is Diane Ravitch's *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (2000). The content of this volume and its treatment by the press and the scholarly community represent a case study of the cultural struggles in which education is enmeshed. Reviews of *Left Back* separate into the popular and the scholarly. While the former (in the *New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, etc.) were almost universally positive and written by journalists or noneducators, the latter in *Educational Researcher* (Wraga, 2001), *The American Prospect* (Tyack, 2000), *The New York Review of Books* (Ryan, 2001), *The Journal of Curriculum Studies* (Shaker, 2004), *Teachers College Record* (Goetz, 2002), were the work of scholars and educators and ranged from negative to damning. Ravitch, they assert, misrepresents the content of primary source material, perpetrates historical presentism, slants her arguments, oversimplifies, and distorts the record. She sets up an indefensibly broad definition of progressive education and then proceeds to take apart the straw man of her own construction. Likewise, she mischaracterizes John Dewey by identifying him with positions he abhorred and then attacks the Dewey of her imagination. For example,

The insidious anti-intellectualism that riddles this book, and which is manifest in selective reading, oversimplification, and slanting of the

historic record, and in reliance on rhetorical tactics, ultimately undermines Ravitch's glorification of the academic curriculum and denigration of progressive education (Wraga, 2001, p. 38).

More significant than the ideology of her views is that all this takes place because Ravitch, although viewed as a scholar and not a journalist, operates today outside of the normal checks and balances of education scholarship. Through her notoriety and foundation support, she has credibility and access to publication that bypasses (if not transcends) the world of academic journals and meetings. *Left Back* is the most dramatic recent example of the interdiction of mainstream education scholarship as it is displaced from its limited, but legitimate, role in the public education debate by a new brand of punditry. This faux scholarship wears the trappings of legitimacy, but passes through none of the normal channels of scrutiny and peer review. More significantly, *Left Back* embodies the new form the education debate is taking. The misrepresentations and dubious analyses of the book make it difficult to evaluate as a scholarly historical work. If social efficiency theorists and mental measurement extremists can be defined as progressive educators; if progressives are those who limited access to education for the American underclass; if Dewey was "locked in dualisms, the famous 'either-ors' that he so often wrote about" (Ravitch, 2000, p. 40); if these analyses of Ravitch are accurate, then previous scholarship in such matters, including particularly that of her mentor, Lawrence Cremin, is discredited resoundingly (Shaker, 2004). Dewey welcomed conflict and controversy in the pursuit of growth and understanding. The attacks of *Left Back*, however, do not appear to be so intended.

Alternately, something else may be at play as a new type of education scholarship has emerged that is delivered in unconventional ways, funded through unorthodox sources, motivated by non-academic purposes, and supported through direct access to media and political organizations. This tactic has shown up in fields other than education with similar results. For example, tobacco-sponsored research presented without identification has, for example, entered the literature through book publication (Guterman, 2002). This method has the advantage of avoiding scholarly critique and, with sponsorship concealed, ducking scrutiny for bias. Intelligent design, one recent alternative to the theory of evolution, was wrapped in the credibility of Baylor University's Polanyi Institute until the university forcefully separated its scientific voice from other, distinct and theological traditions (McMurtrie, 2001). We also now know that the pharmaceutical industry has, through its advertising agencies, been commissioning "advocacy" research of dubious merit to promote its products (Kolata, 2001). Neoconservatives, particularly, allege the left pioneered these techniques and are now reaping what they have sowed. Today, however, it is the funding and

passion of the right that threatens public education through its advocacy initiatives.

AN ALTERNATE REALITY TO SUPPORT THE NEW COMMON SENSE

According to calculations made by the Washington Post, [Richard Mellon] Scaife gave more than \$200 million to conservative institutions between 1974 and 1992 in an attempt to influence government policy and train personnel. (Brock, 2002, p. 80)

A parallel world of journals, experts, foundations, and organizations has emerged in education over the past twenty years that is gradually rising in prominence and effectiveness, particularly among media and political audiences. Correspondingly, the original structures that have organically developed during the last century 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 increasingly marginalized. These independent and institutional voices 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 even in official government documents such as the “summary” of *The Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999a), a counterestablishment of 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. Foundation support has been forthcoming and by the sheer volume and repetition of consistent messages the right has gone a long way toward redefining the conventional wisdom about public education (Shaker & Heilman, 2002).

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; education faculty are woolly apologists for the status quo; explanations of school problems—including the impact of poverty on children—are only “excuses”; there is no correlation 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; etc. Those who question this new conventional wisdom in community forums do so today at their own peril. “Conservative modernization has radically

reshaped the commonsense of society” (Apple, 2001, p. 194) and it has done so while creating a structure that institutionalizes its messages.

There are numerous examples of these new institutions. Among journals there are *Education Next* and *Texas Education Review*. There are centers, think tanks, and research organizations such as the Cato Institute, Center for Education Reform, Center for Policy Studies, Center for School Change, Heartland Institute, Hudson Institute, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Mackinaw Center for Public Policy, Center for Research on Education Outcomes and the Pacific Research Institute. Foundations such as Abell, Heritage, Bradley, and Fordham support or themselves conduct such work. The insinuation of the right wing into the U.S. Department of Education (2002c) is particularly evident on their links page “Where to Go” explaining, “Many of these government and non-profit groups can provide useful information about education.” The department then hotlinks citizens to a list, the vast majority of which are organizations engaged in partisan “research” and policy such as the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, The Heritage Foundation, Mathematically Correct, National Council on Teacher Quality, Pacific Research Institute, and the Core Knowledge Foundation. Most recently word has come of an impending “deaccession” of much of the research archived in the Department of Education’s Web site and the paring down of ERIC. Few expect such unwelcome editorial work to be in any sense objective.

Additionally, in a troubling use of federal monies, the American Board for Certification and Teacher Excellence launched an alternative to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards for Certification of Teacher Excellence through a \$5 million grant from the U. S. Department of Education to the National Council on Teacher Quality and the Education Leaders Council (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2002). This has been followed by a dramatic infusion of Department of Education support during lean budgetary times, as ABCTE received \$35 million in late 2003 just as NCLB funding was being reduced. ABCTE programs now seek also to certify new teachers, primarily through a teacher testing approach (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2003). We can find warnings of the impact of these organizations in words such as these:

While it is possible to conduct high quality social science research in private think tanks and research centers, it is necessary that the studies be subjected to an internal review process that has integrity and that they be scrutinized by qualified and disinterested external reviewers. . . . The way in which Mackinac Center sponsored research characteristically frames questions is biased and the methodology employed of little social science merit. (Cookson, Molnar, & Embree, 2001)

Scholars in reading have been asserting that such manipulations and misrepresentations have invaded federal agencies and their documents, signaling a new level of success by the modernizers of the right. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999b) and its accompanying summary are cases in point. Writing in *Phi Delta Kappan* and *Language Arts*, Elaine Garan (2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d) launched a series of exposés regarding the composition of the National Reading Panel, its curious definition of research (Cunningham, 2001), its suppression of dissent (Yatvin, 2001), and the outright distortions of its summary materials (Yatvin, 2003):

Widmeyer Communications, the powerful Washington, D.C., public relations firm hired by the government to promote the panel's work . . . had represented McGraw-Hill and the Business Roundtable among its most prominent clients. "They wrote the introduction to the final report," says NRP member Joanne Yatvin. "And they wrote the summary, and prepared the video, and did the press release." (Metcalfe, 2002, p. 21)

This approach allowed further manipulation of the Report's message and the obscuring of minority views. Garan (2001a) cites a list of clear contradictions between the 600-page *Reports of the Subgroups* (of NRP) and the 34-page summary. In every case a significant bias is introduced in favor of "systematic phonics instruction" (p. 506). The creation of policy and the manipulation of the policy-making environment by self-interested parties—a phenomenon we have seen rising in the energy and environmental fields—is also increasingly the order of the day in education, particularly at the federal level. In cases such as this, federal agencies are not only assuming ideologically charged positions, but are caught up in attempts to control the methods of research and the process of academic debate. Partisan officials employing industry lobbyists to define the study of education and to steer business to textbook and test publishers, among other profit-oriented parties, subsume the laborious quest of educational researchers for standards of inquiry and verification.

Kenneth Howe (2002) sees these phenomena as part of a marketing strategy for partisan views that "jettisons" educational research as a source of objective information. Instead, advocates, in a manner unbridled by professional ethics, use research, or bowdlerized research, as a "spruced up form of testimonial" (p. 34). Peer review is an early victim of this approach since it must either be manipulated by creating a sham process, or bypassed by being discredited as a legitimizing technique. We see both strategies operating among advocates of the right: the parallel world of foundations,

publications, and think tanks can and does provide peer review for one another's projects. Alternately, the NRP summary example illustrates how to transcend peer influence by working directly with public relations firms who define the popular media debate; by shaping the politics of decision-making; and by leaving most academicians on the fringes—dialoguing with one another, outside of the public's view.

The ink was hardly dry on Howe's challenge when Chester E. Finn, Jr. (2002) responded with "The Limits of Peer Review" which argues that, though "helpful," peer review is corruptible and not a "supreme arbiter of the truth" or "deserv[ing] to be deified as the one true god of education research" (p. 30). His theatrical and dichotomizing style may be more revealing than his message as he goes on to assert that

Second and third opinions are frequently beneficial. But let's not pretend that there's something neutral, objective, or scientific about them . . . key decisions should stay with the cognizant editor, funder or consumer. (p. 34)

Yielding decisions to "outsiders," Finn argues, "may compromise [editors' and funders'] own publication's or organization's mission or blur its focus." The Fordham Foundation, he goes on, "sees its research mission as engaging in rather than refereeing arguments about education policy" (p. 34). One has to appreciate Finn's candor, even as confidence in his publications ebbs. Since positive science functions imperfectly in education (as well as medical circles, as he argues) one is justified in setting aside the subterfuge and knowingly using scientific forms to package advocacy. In the same issue of *Education Week*, Douglas B. Reeves (2002), while enumerating the limitations of scientific certainty in educational research, concludes with this more temperate assessment:

real science involves ambiguity, experimentation, and error. However distasteful that trio may be, it is far superior to political agendas, uninformed prejudice and breathless enthusiasm for the flavor of the month. (p. 33)

Finn reveals another emerging strand in the evolution of the debate over education. The right has propagated so many institutions, publications, and foundations that their debates among each other are beginning to rival their displeasure with the education establishment. Finn not only opposes conventional peer review, specifically as manifested by the American Educational Research Association and *Teachers College Record*, but he similarly disparages the commitment of the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act to scientifically proven and research-based programs. Also, while

the education mainstream criticizes the National Reading Panel for the composition of its peer panel, its literature review process, and the consequent narrowness of its definition of science (Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Krashen, 2001), Finn sees the conflict as more evidence that peer review is hopelessly partisan and flawed. So at a time when educators are struggling against political correctness and bias in their review process, the advocates of the right debate whether dropping the pretense of science and objectivity is more effective than manipulating these forms. The debate becomes more interesting as it fractures into multiple positions.

THE LOSS OF FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS—THE OLD COMMON SENSE

Lost in these events are certain fundamental assumptions—the old common sense—on which the profession of education is thought to have been built. Chief among these is the idea that the interests of the student should be preeminent and put in every instance above those of the practitioner. As members of a human service profession, educators and educational researchers are presumed to place students above profit, personal aggrandizement, or ideological victory. Students, to paraphrase Dewey, are not a means to an end but the end itself. This is not the caveat emptor of the marketplace. A student in our public schools should not have to “beware” of the motives or practice of his or her teachers and administrators. This is another of the dimensions of the “zone of protection” that had characterized our American ideal of education. Would K–12 education that is driven by a free market ethos, motivated by profit, and characterized by winner-take-all competition have the benevolent values we presume denote a school environment for children? From what quarter would come restraint on the marketing of bad food, expensive merchandise, and irresponsible bank credit to our students?

Teacher unionization and the introduction of strikes by teachers to improve their economic condition is argued by some as the actual turning point in the public’s view of education. Without question union tactics, particularly strikes, damaged the public’s view of teachers. Further analysis would typically include, however, that ethical behavior does not preclude earning a living wage and that teachers may well have exhausted the systems provided to them by law and convention for addressing their economic plight. Again the questions arise: Did an actual crisis demand extraordinary response? Or are “manufactured crises” employed as ruse to independently gain economic or political advantage?

A related concept lost in the current debates about education is that a key purpose of education in a democracy is to foster the creation of a critically

thinking citizenry who are able to make informed, democratically derived decisions in response to an ever-changing world. Though this ideal has never been achieved, it has been widely valued. By contrast, current policy is suspicious of critical thinking and supports instead obedience to eternal truths. “The right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is not a personal opinion, but an eternal truth.” President George W. Bush advocates “clear instruction in right and wrong” (Issues—Education, 2001). Furthermore, education is explicitly articulated not as a right of the citizen, but as a national economic investment. As President Bush (2003) explains “In return for a lot of money, the federal government, for the first time, is asking, are we getting the kind of return the American people want for every child?”

Democracies have also been historically suspicious of the merging of state and business leadership from a fear that the interests of an undemocratically administered economy will not be fully compatible with the interests of the people. In the post-*Nation* era both major political parties have moved away from this principle. In the NCLB, the concept of educating students for thoughtful participation in a democracy is muted or lost. Instead, education is overtly understood to be a means of serving economic interests, an interpretation of the value of education also held by the Clinton administration. The Bush administration’s 2002 budget blueprint pointed out that “Our schools are not preparing our students adequately for today’s knowledge-based, technologically rich society or to become future scientists and engineers” and allocated \$200 million to the National Science Foundation to strengthen mathematics and science education in grades K–12 (Blueprint, 2001). In a speech introducing the Education Act, Bush explained, “We’ll focus on teacher training efforts where the need is greatest, in early childhood education, special education, math, science and reading instruction” (Bush, 2002). NCLB legislation explains “America’s schools are not producing the science excellence required for global economic leadership and homeland security in the 21st century” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Civics, social studies, multiculturalism, the arts and literature are all conspicuously absent.

Equally cynical and misleading is the notion that the forces of the right are truly “free market” and opposed to government intervention. The separation of markets and government is a fundamental commonsense concept in the United States. Yet economic logic is not only highlighted in curriculum as we described above, it is also used as a central metaphor to diagnose problems with education and suggest reforms. U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige (2003) explains, “The great companies confronted the realities of their situation in the marketplace, and they changed their entire system of operating in response. I believe our schools must do the same.” At the same time, however, private interests are deeply involved in using

governmental authority in education to benefit their bottom lines. One common method is to obtain artificial monopolies, such as through textbook approval, practiced in California and Texas, among other states. Associated with this process is restricting, over the objection of superintendents, excessive state funding to categorized uses, such as textbook purchasing in California. Such a policy prevents school administrators from applying funds to areas of most need and steers funds to the purveyors of certain school goods and services, such as tests and textbooks. Another technique is to obtain no-bid contracts for testing or large school projects. Corporate interests also seek to transfer some of their costs of doing business to a generous government. Weak government oversight is also their friend, as when testing companies blunder with results reporting (New York City experienced this under Superintendent Rudy Crew) or when contractors underperform and officials silently acquiesce to gross failures in services. There is the boondoggle of “creative” accounting practices that are accepted with a wink by taxing authorities (Henriques, 2002; Schrag, 2001; Steffens & Cookson, 2002). (Edison Schools, Inc., being the most recent education example through their booking of teacher salaries as revenue to aggrandize their gross receipts and ameliorate their accrual of more than \$300 million in debt. These salaries were no more than a pass-through. This revelation helped fuel a greater than 95% decline in the value of Edison shares in 2002.) The right’s rhetoric is that of independence from government involvement, but it is actually only government oversight and regulation that is opposed. The use of government influence to manipulate markets and raid the public till is a story much older than Enron, although that corporation certainly refined these practices to a high art.

Closely associated with the commitment of educators to service and democratic process is an appreciation in the academy for an open and honest process of inquiry. Again, in a Deweyan spirit, our aspiration should be the “growth” of quality in educational research rather than a belief that we shall achieve “truth” or a perfect objectivity. The recognition that the science of education is imperfect and emergent is not a license to spin research into policy advocacy or make it the handmaiden of corporate interests and the pursuit of profit. For over a century, a tradition of restraint and the creation of institutions that confer legitimacy have placed education research on a path that has been full of diversity and debate but has generally been productive and positive. This having been said, the field of educational research has not been without its problems. Prominent among them is an inability to formulate sufficient consensus to guide policymakers, the media and citizens who in good faith wish to be informed by the education “academy.” Even within the scholarly community itself, certain journals and conferences only present research that conforms to an established range of opinion, theoretical tradition or research paradigm

(Dillon, O'Brien, & Heilman, 2000). The selection of research topics can be influenced by increased specialization, reflecting debates that occur only within narrow academic communities, and findings are too often communicated in esoteric, jargon filled writing styles that seem unlikely to inform policy. These practices reduce the credibility and usefulness of the research enterprise. Additionally, there has been too little effort by a number of leading educational organizations to step forward with an attempt to confer legitimacy and bridge the gap between researchers and the literate public. The alternative movement described here exploits these weaknesses and is a fundamental challenge to the tenuous process of inquiry that has evolved. This attack is notable partly because it is not from within; it is from another sector of society that brings with it its own inherent advantages and vulnerabilities, including an unsteady relationship with what educators see as professional ethics.

THE NEW COMMONPLACE OF BLAMING AND SHAMING

When viewed up close, across a dinner table or from the rostrum of a local civic group, the message of the new common sense of education comes through in a more passionate, less polished manner than when emanating from the op-ed page of *The Wall Street Journal* or in an editorial from *USA Today*. In meetings and conversations among influential citizens in our towns and cities and as reported in letters to the editor and the local television news, there is a recurrent, intemperate, exaggerated critique of our public schools. A threshold of honesty and restraint has been crossed and non-educators feel entitled to roll out their strongest sports metaphors and warfare analogies to make their condemnation of the schools stick. Any hint of balance or reflection is abjured in the rush of argument. A conventional respect for the motives and competence of human service professionals—in this case teachers—is disdained. Mayor Alan Autry in May 2002, for example, characterized Fresno, California's 80,000-student public school system, in testimony before the California Assembly as "the worst of the worst" (Maxwell, 2002, p. A-1). Like many others in the public eye, the mayor can find nothing of merit in the district; ignoring those schools that are ranked in the state's top ten in their categories and the district's many other achievements. True to the current conventional jargon: poverty, hunger, transience, and a preponderance of non-English speakers are "excuses," not reasons, for low test scores in cities such as his. The schools have not yet been blamed for the city's nationally ranked air pollution and related childhood asthma rates, but perhaps a connection can yet be found.

The characteristic, rational response of educators to this type of criticism has made little headway. Reasoned, moderate voices countering data with

data and accusation with analysis seem to fall short in shaping the debate on education nationally and locally. The penchant for trashing public education and shaming teachers that has become commonplace is more than simply a feature of an honest public policy debate. There are economic incentives to consider. That is, there are profits to be made from the penetration of education markets in previously off-limits areas such as school management, particularly if the government favors certain interests when the business is parceled out. There are political incentives to consider. There is also the need of certain politicians for a handy issue through which they can advance their careers and redirect attention from other, intractable problems. At the level of many individual citizens, however—persons who gain no economic or political advantage from undermining public education—there is growing sympathy for these overtures from the right regarding education. Why?

One reason for the acceptance of this callous view of public education is that it has in many quarters, through repetition, become increasingly uncontroversial and familiar—similar to complaining about gray days in the Great Lakes or the smog in Los Angeles. If one stands against Main Street's disparagement of schools and teachers, he or she runs the risk of disrupting the implicit fellowship of the group. On one level this means derailing small talk meant as a friendly, bonding expression that is not to be taken too seriously.

Another interpretation is that this blaming and shaming of public education reinforces the values holding together one group in society by separating them from another. In order to maintain a dominant worldview some apparently need to set themselves apart from others. Filling this role, teachers and other educators are marginalized as inefficient, unambitious and economically impaired. They have indulgent attitudes toward the lower classes and a lack of accountability in what they do. All this is why, the theory goes, that profits, discipline, consequences, sanctions, and competition, are all undervalued in the world of education. These characterizations could be translated to many other human service fields, but none are as pervasive, as familiar, and as (supposedly) nontechnical as the public schools. Furthermore, the schools are lacking in organized, powerful defenders who rise up when they are attacked unlike the American Medical Association and the insurance and pharmaceutical industries in the health field.

TRANSCENDING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CURRENT DEBATE

Educators as a profession embody an alternative 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.

Education is in this sense subversive of the values of the marketplace. (This is not to say that educators need be or often are socialists, extreme environmentalists, or those who have taken a vow of poverty.) Although it is a commonplace of democratic theory that an open society requires an authentic, diverse, independent exchange of ideas for public debate, lifestyle choice and policy making, dissenting voices often grate on those with conventional views. Since the public media spaces of the United States 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. Advertiser-supported popular media—which could be another such voice—is increasingly self-censored and spun for corporate purposes. Programming—or journalism—the business argument goes, is that which fills the spaces in between the advertising and generally should support, not dilute, those messages that are paid for. In other democratic societies, public television is generously supported by the government and represents a major segment of broadcast programming. As a result, noncorporate ideas and alternative visions are readily available. In America, theatrical films and premium cable programming are directly supported by viewers and are less servile in their perspectives and sometimes question the powers that be. Hence the right's condemnations of Hollywood when it provides entertainment fare such as *The Insider*, *Erin Brockovich*, *JFK*, *Traffic*, and so on. Unfortunately, however, mainstream media do not ultimately present an intellectually, morally, or aesthetically rich or diverse world. At the same time, these mainstream media sources often attack, trivialize, and misrepresent the educators, activists and artists who do provide such a vision.

Pressure to conform to society's majoritarian values has a much longer and more dominant history than the acceptance of diversity, which is still emergent and controversial. Education, at its best, is an agent of such change and renewal. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there is an obsessive quality to the drumbeat of criticism of education that suggests a type of 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 this 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 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.

To accomplish this, a critical analysis of the motives, methods and rhetoric of federal education policy is imperative, as these policies do not represent the best recommendations of educational research or theory, or the values of many states, teachers, parents or students. Many respected educators and researchers have critiqued these policies and have pointed to a vast body of educational research that suggests there are better ways to promote learning and more suitable rationales for research and for education in a democratic society (Apple, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Drew, 2000; Kohn, 2002; Shaker & Heilman, 2002; Spring, 2002). Yet, in spite of the widespread critique of teachers, researchers and theorists, the above-described policies have been enacted and will have a vast influence on education.

Ultimately, these new commonsense policies need to be understood as ideologically and politically constructed entities, rather than policies that have emerged out of educational research on best practices, or the support of communities. The discourse is what Carlson (1993) describes as “hegemonic policy discourse—that represents the worldview and interests of the dominant political coalition” (p. 149). This coalition is powerful and the ideologies upon which it is based are similarly powerful. The broader American cultural and ideological environment in which modernist, authoritative and promarket concepts have a wide, often symbolic, appeal reinforces the success of “commonsense” standards, accountability, discipline and a market economy in education. The rhetoric of the new policy is even further reinforced by the ways in which it makes reference to democratic equity through high quality education. These last concepts are rightfully popular, but have been coopted and misused. For recent federal policy to be successfully challenged, the ideological content and methods of achieving power *and* the soundness of the actual policies need to be examined. As educational researchers we have often focused on the latter at the expense of the former. Much of the literature critiquing federal policy relates to its specific content, exploring educational claims on their own terms and the effects of policy implementation. Policies are most often examined piece by piece instead of being understood as a set of ideological assumptions, or as political strategy. Given the scarcity of critical attention to how these policies have come about and subsequently achieved national implementation, this essay has sought to raise critical questions about their axiological and ideological foundations and the broader cultural, political and economic contexts that have contributed to their creation and acceptance. Educators should find a deep passion for this debate.

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