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The Assault on Public Education

CONFRONTING THE POLITICS OF CORPORATE SCHOOL REFORM

EDITED BY

William H. Watkins

Foreword by Michael W. Apple

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Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow

Using Accountability to "Reform" Public Schools to Death

Alfie Kohn

The mantle of school reform has been appropriated by those who oppose the whole idea of public schooling. Their aim is to paint themselves as bold challengers to the current system and to claim that defenders of public education lack the vision or courage to endorse meaningful change. This rhetorical assault seemed to come out of nowhere, as though a memo had been circulated one day among those on the right: "Attention. Effective immediately, all of our efforts to privatize the schools will be known as 'reform,' and any opposition to those efforts will be known as 'anti-reform.' That is all."

Silver-lining hunters may note that this strategy pays a backhanded compliment to the very idea of change. It implicitly acknowledges the inadequacy of conservatism, at least in the original sense of that word. These days everyone insists there's a problem with the way things are. (On one level, this posture is familiar: Polemicists across the political spectrum frequently try to describe whatever position they're about to criticize as "fashionable." The implication is that only the bravest soul—that is, the writer—dares to support an unfashionable view.) But the word *reform* is particularly slippery and tendentious. The *Associated Press Guide to Newswriting* urges journalists to exercise caution about using it, pointing out that "one group's reform can be another group's calamity" (cited in Freeman, 2004, p. L3). At the same time, conservative politicians are being exhorted (for example, by a like-minded *New York Times* columnist) to embrace the word. "For my money," David Brooks (2004) wrote earlier this year,

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"the best organizing principle for Republicans centers on the word 'reform'"—which can give the impression that they want to "promote change, while Democrats remain the churlish defenders of the status quo" (p. 15).

Of course, this begs the question of what kind of change actually is being promoted, but begging the question is really the whole point, isn't it? The "reform" of environmental laws often has meant diluting them or simply washing them away. And just ask someone who depends on public assistance what "welfare reform" really implies. The privatizers and deregulators have gone after healthcare, prisons, banks, airlines, and electric utilities. Now they're setting their sights on Social Security. I recently was reading about the added misery experienced by desperately poor families in various parts of the world as a result of the privatization of local water supplies. The clarity of language be damned: They come to bury a given institution rather than to improve it, but they describe their mission as "reform." As Lily Tomlin once remarked, "No matter how cynical you become, it's never enough to keep up."[1]

THE NATURE OF "SCHOOL REFORM"

But back to education. People with an animus against public schooling typically set the stage for their demolition plans by proclaiming that there isn't much there worth saving. Meanwhile, those who object are portrayed as apologists for every policy in every school. It's a very clever gambit, you have to admit. Either you're in favor of privatization or else you are inexplicably satisfied with mediocrity.

Let's state what should be obvious, then. First, a defense of public education is wholly consistent with a desire for excellence. Second, by most conventional criteria, public schools have done surprisingly well in managing with limited resources to educate an increasingly diverse student population (see Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Rothstein, 1998; the collected works of Gerald Bracey [e.g., 2003, 2004]). Third, notwithstanding that assessment, there's plenty of room for dissatisfaction with the current state of our schools. An awful lot is wrong with them: the way conformity is valued over curiosity and enforced with rewards and punishments, the way children are compelled to compete against one another, the way curriculum so often privileges skills over meaning, the way students are prevented from designing their own learning, the way instruction and assessment are increasingly standardized, the way different avenues of study are rarely integrated, the way educators are systematically deskilled . . . and I'm just getting warmed up.

Notice, however, that these criticisms are quite different from—in fact, often the exact opposite of—the particulars cited by most proponents of vouchers and similar "reforms." To that extent, even if privatization worked exactly the way it was supposed to, we shouldn't expect any of the defects I've just listed to be corrected. If anything, the micro-level impact (on teaching and learning) of such a macro-level shift is likely to exacerbate such problems. Making schools resemble businesses often results in a kind of pedagogy that's not merely conservative but reactionary, turning back the clock on the few changes that have managed to infiltrate and improve classrooms. Consider the stultifyingly scripted lessons and dictatorial discipline that pervade for-profit charter schools. Or have a look at some research from England showing that "when schools have to compete for students, they tend to adopt 'safe,' conventional and teacher-centered methods, to stay close to the prescribed curriculum, and to tailor teaching closely to test-taking" (Delhi, 1998).[2] (One more example of the destructive effects of competition.)

This is a point worth emphasizing to the handful of progressive-minded individuals who have made common cause with those on the right by attacking public education. John Taylor Gatto is an example here. In a *Harper's* essay entitled "Against School" (Gatto, 2003), he asserts that the goal of "mandatory public education in this country" is "a population deliberately dumbed down," with children turned "into servants."

In support of this sweeping charge, Gatto names some important men who managed to become well educated without setting foot in a classroom. (However, he fails to name any defenders of public education who have ever claimed that it's impossible for people to learn outside of school or to prosper without a degree.) He also cites a few "school as factory" comments from long-dead policymakers, and observes that many of our educational practices originated in Prussia. Here he's right. Our school system is indeed rooted in efforts to control. But the same indictment could be leveled, with equal justification, at other institutions. The history of newspapers, for example, and the intent of many powerful people associated with them, has much to do with manufacturing consent, marginalizing dissent, and distracting readers. But is that an argument for no newspapers or better newspapers?

Ideally, public schools can enrich lives, nourish curiosity, and introduce students to new ways of formulating questions and finding answers. Their existence also has the power to strengthen a democratic society, in part by extending those benefits to vast numbers of people who didn't fare nearly as well before the great experiment of free public education began.

Granted, "ideally" is a hell of a qualifier. But an attack on schooling as we know it generally is grounded in politics rather than pedagogy, and is advanced

most energetically by those who despise not just public schools but all public institutions. The marketplace, which likely would inherit the task of educating our children if Gatto got his way, is (to put it gently) unlikely to honor the ideals that inform his critique. Some folks will benefit from that kind of "reform," but they certainly won't be kids.[3]

People who want to strike a blow for individual liberty understandably lash out against the government—and these days they don't want for examples of undue interference from Washington and state capitals. But in education, as in other arenas of contemporary American life, there is an equal or greater danger from concentrating power in *private* hands, which is to say in enterprises that aren't accountable to anyone (except their own shareholders) or for anything (except making a profit).

Worst of all is a situation where public entities remake themselves in the image of private entities, where politicians pass laws to codify corporate ideology and impose it on our schools (see Kohn, 2002; Kohn & Shannon, 2002). Perhaps the two most destructive forces in education these days are the tendency to view children as "investments" (whose ultimate beneficiary is business) and a market-driven credentialism in which discrete individuals struggle for competitive distinctions. To attack the institution of public education is like hollering at the shadows on the wall. The source of the problem is behind you, and it grows larger as you train your rage on the flickering images in front.

"FREEDOM" FROM PUBLIC EDUCATION

I try to imagine myself as a privatizer. How would I proceed? If my objective were to dismantle public schools, I would begin by trying to discredit them. I probably would refer to them as "government" schools, hoping to tap into a vein of libertarian resentment. I would never miss an opportunity to sneer at researchers and teacher educators as out-of-touch "educationists." Recognizing that it's politically unwise to attack teachers, I would do so obliquely, bashing the unions to which most of them belong. Most important, if I had the power, I would ratchet up the number and difficulty of standardized tests that students had to take, so that I then could point to the predictably pitiful results. I then would defy my opponents to defend the schools that had produced students who did so poorly.

How closely does my thought experiment match reality? One way to ascertain the actual motivation behind the widespread use of testing is to watch what happens in the real world when a lot of students manage to do well on a given

test. Are schools credited and teachers congratulated? Hardly. The response, from New Jersey to New Mexico, is instead to make the test harder, with the result that many more students subsequently fail.

> **Addendum 2009**: "Math scores are up on Long Island and statewide—enough so that state educational leaders could soon start raising the bar," Meryl Tisch of Manhattan, the new Chancellor of the state's Board of Regents, said. "What today's scores tell me is not that we should be celebrating but that New York State needs to raise its standards." (*Newsday*, June 1, 2009)

Consider this item from the *Boston Globe:*

> As the first senior class required to pass the MCAS exam prepares for graduation, state education officials are considering raising the passing grade for the exam. State Education Commissioner David Driscoll and Board of Education chairman James Peyser said the passing grade needs to be raised to keep the test challenging, given that a high proportion of students are passing it on the first try. . . . Peyser said as students continue to meet the standard, the state is challenged to make the exam meaningful. (Redd, 2003, p. B2)

You have to admire the sheer Orwellian chutzpah represented by that last word. By definition, a test is "meaningful" only if large numbers of students (and, by implication, schools) fare poorly on it. What at first seems purely perverse—a mindless acceptance of the premise that harder is always better—reveals itself instead as a strategic move in the service of a very specific objective. Peyser, you see, served for 8 years as executive director of the conservative Pioneer Institute, a Boston-based think tank devoted to "the application of free market principles to state and local policy" (in the words of its website, http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/). The man charged with overseeing public education in Massachusetts is critical of the very idea of public education. And how does he choose to pursue his privatizing agenda? By raising the bar until alarming failure[4] is ensured.

Of course, tougher standards are usually justified in the name of excellence—or, even more audaciously (given the demographics of most of the victims), equity. One doesn't expect to hear people like Peyser casually concede that the real point of this whole standards-and-testing business is to make the schools look bad, the better to justify a free-market alternative. Now and then, however, a revealing comment does slip out. For example, when the *School Choice Advocate*, the newsletter of the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation, approvingly described Colorado's policy of publishing schools' test scores, a

senior education advisor to Republican Governor Bill Owens remarked that the motive behind reporting these results was to "greatly enhance and build pressure for school choice" ("In the Spotlight: Colorado," 2001, p. 7).

An op-ed published in the *Wall Street Journal* by William Bennett and Chester Finn underscored the integral relationship between the push for high-stakes testing (which they call "standards") and the effort to undermine public schooling (which they call "freedom"). The latter bit of spin is interesting in its own right: Vouchers, having been rejected decisively by voters on several occasions, were promptly reintroduced as "school choice" to make them sound more palatable.[5] But apparently an even more blatant appeal to emotionally charged values is now called for. In any case, the article notes (correctly, I fear) that "our two political parties . . . can find common ground on testing and accountability," but then goes on to announce that "what Republicans have going for them in education is freedom." They understand this value "because of their business ties"; unlike Democrats, they are "not afraid of freedom."

Even in an era distinguished by unpleasantly adversarial discourse, Bennett and Finn redefine its lower depths with the charge that freedom is a "domain that few Democrats dare to visit." (Their evidence for this charge is that most Democrats exclude private schools from choice plans.) But this nasty little essay, headlined "No Standards Without Freedom," serves primarily to remind us that the most vocal proponents of accountability—defined, as it usually is these days, in terms of top-down standards and coercive pressure to raise scores on an endless series of standardized tests—have absolutely no interest in improving the schools that struggle to fulfill these requirements. Public education, in their view, is not something to be made better; it is something from which we need to be freed.

MANY CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

None of this is exactly new. "Standards" have been used to promote "freedom" for some time. But if that picture slowly has been coming into focus as education policies are enacted at the state level, it now attains digital clarity as a result of federal involvement—in particular, the law that some have rechristened No Child Left Untested (or No Corporation Left Behind, or No Child's Behind Left). Even those observers who missed, or dismissed, the causal relationship until now, are coming to realize that you don't have to be a conspiracy nut to understand the real purpose of this new law. Indeed, you have to be vision-impaired *not* to see it.

Jamie McKenzie, a former superintendent, put it this way on his website, NoChildLeft.com: "Misrepresented as a reform effort, NCLB is actually a cynical effort to shift public school funding to a host of private schools, religious schools and free-market diploma mills or corporate experiments in education." The same point has been made by Jerry Bracey, Stan Karp, and a number of others. Lately, even some prominent politicians are catching on. Senator James Jeffords, who chaired the Senate committee that oversees education from 1997 to 2001, has described the law as a back-door maneuver "that will let the private sector take over public education, something the Republicans have wanted for years."[6] Former senator Carol Moseley Braun recently made the same point.

> **Addendum 2008:** We now have corroboration that these fears were entirely justified. Susan Neuman, an assistant secretary of education during the roll-out of NCLB, admitted that others in Bush's Department of Education "saw NCLB as a Trojan horse for the choice agenda—a way to expose the failure of public education and 'blow it up a bit.'" (Wallis, 2008)

So what is it about NCLB in particular that has led a growing number of people to view it as a stalking horse for privatization? While any test can be, and many tests have been, rigged to create the impression of public school failure, nothing has ever come close to NCLB in this regard. Put aside for a moment the rather important point that higher scores on standardized tests do not necessarily reflect meaningful improvement in teaching or learning—and may even indicate the opposite (see, e.g., Kohn, 2000). Let's assume for the sake of the argument that better performance on these tests *was* a good sign. This law's criteria for being judged successful—how fast the scores must rise, and how high, and for how many subgroups of students—are nothing short of ludicrous. NCLB requires every single student to score at or above the proficient level by 2014, something that has never been done before and that few unmedicated observers believe is possible (see, e.g., Linn, 2003).

As Monty Neill (2003) of FairTest explained, even the criteria for making "adequate yearly progress" toward that goal are such that "virtually no schools serving large numbers of low-income children will clear these arbitrary hurdles." Consequently, he adds, "many successful schools will be declared 'failing' and may be forced to drop practices that work well. Already, highly regarded schools have been put on the 'failing' list." Schools that do manage to jump through these hoops, which include a 95% participation rate in the testing, then must contend with comparable hurdles involving the qualifications of their teachers.

The party line, of course, is that all these requirements are meant to make public schools improve, and that forcing every state to test every student every year (from 3rd through 8th grades and then again in high school) is intended to identify troubled schools in order to "determine who needs extra help," as President Bush put it (quoted in Robelen, 2004). To anyone who makes this claim with a straight face, we might respond by asking three questions.

1. *How many schools will NCLB-required testing reveal to be troubled that were not previously identified as such?* I have challenged defenders of the law to name a single school anywhere in the country whose inadequacy was a secret until yet another wave of standardized test results was released. So far I have had no takers.
2. *Of the many schools and districts that are obviously struggling, how many have received the resources they need, at least without a court order?* If conservatives are sincere in saying they want more testing in order to determine where help is needed, what has their track record been in providing that help? The answer is painfully obvious, of course: Many of the same people who justify more standardized tests for information-gathering purposes also have claimed that more money doesn't produce improvement. The Bush administration's proposed budgets have fallen far short of what states would need just to implement NCLB itself, and those who point this out are dismissed as malcontents. (Thus Bennett and Finn: "Democrats are now saying that Republicans are not spending enough. But that is what they always say—enough is never sufficient for them when it comes to education spending.")
3. *What have the results been of high-stakes testing to this point?* To the best of my knowledge, no positive effects have ever been demonstrated, unless you count higher scores on these same tests. More low-income and minority students are dropping out, more teachers (often the best ones) are leaving the profession, and more mind-numbing test preparation is displacing genuine instruction. Why should anyone believe that annual do-or-die testing mandated by the federal government will lead to anything different? Moreover, the engine of this legislation is punishment. NCLB is designed to humiliate and hurt the schools that, according to its own warped standards, most need help. Families at those schools are given a green light to abandon them—and, specifically, to transfer to other schools that don't want them and probably can't handle them. This, it quickly becomes clear, is an excellent way to sandbag the "successful" schools, too.

So who will be left undisturbed and sitting pretty? Private schools and companies hoping to take over public schools. In the meantime, various corporations already are benefiting. The day after Bennett and Finn's rousing defense of freedom appeared on its op-ed page, the *Wall Street Journal* published a news story that began as follows: "Teachers, parents, and principals may have their doubts about No Child Left Behind. But business loves it." Apart from the obvious bonanza for the giant companies that design and score standardized tests, "hundreds of 'supplemental service providers' have already lined up to offer tutoring, including Sylvan, Kaplan Inc. and Princeton Review Inc. . . . Kaplan says revenue for its elementary- and secondary-school division has doubled since No Child Left Behind passed" (Kronholz, 2003, p. B1).

THE ACCOUNTABILITY–PRIVATIZATION CONNECTION

Ultimately, any attempt to demonstrate the commitment to privatization lurking behind NCLB doesn't require judgments about the probability that its requirements can be fulfilled, or speculation about the significance of which companies find it profitable. That commitment is a matter of public record. As originally proposed by the Bush administration, the legislation would have used federal funds to provide private school vouchers to students in Title I schools with lagging test results. This provision was dropped only when it threatened to torpedo the whole bill; instead, the stick used to beat schools into raising their scores was limited to the threat that students could transfer to other public schools.

Subsequently, Bush's Department of Education (DOE) took other steps to pursue its agenda, such as allocating money hand over fist to private groups that shared its agenda. People for the American Way reported that the administration funneled more than $75 million in taxpayer funds to pro-voucher groups and miscellaneous for-profit entities. Among them was William Bennett's latest gamble, known as K12—a company specializing in online education for home schoolers. (Finn sits on the board of directors.) "Standards" plus "freedom" eventually may add up to considerable revenue, then. In the meantime, the DOE is happy to ease the transition: A school choice pilot program in Arkansas received $11.5 million to buy a curriculum from Bennett's outfit, and a virtual charter school in Pennsylvania affiliated with K12 got $2.5 million.[7]

At the center of the conservative network receiving public funds to pursue what is arguably an antipublic agenda, is the Education Leaders Council (ELC), which was created in 1995 as a more conservative alternative to the Council of Chief State School Officers (which itself is not all that progressive). One of its

founders was Eugene W. Hickok, formerly Pennsylvania's secretary of education and then the second-ranking official in the U.S. Department of Education. Hickok brushed off the charge that the DOE is promoting and funding privatization. If there's any favoritism reflected in these grants, he said, it's only in that "we support those organizations that support No Child Left Behind" (Dobbs, 2004).

But that's exactly the point. A hefty proportion of those who support vouchers also support NCLB, in large part because the latter is a means to the former. Take Lisa Graham Keegan, who was Arizona's school superintendent and then ELC's executive director. She was a bit more forthcoming about the grants than Hickok, telling a reporter that it was only natural for the Bush administration to want to correct a "liberal bias" in American education by giving grants to groups that shared its philosophy. "It is necessary to be ideological in education these days if you want to promote academic standards, school choice, and new routes to certifying teachers" (Dobbs, 2004). Notice again the juxtaposition of "standards" and "choice," this time joined by another element of the conservatives' agenda: an initiative, undertaken jointly by the ELC and a group set up by Finn's Thomas B. Fordham Foundation—and, again, publicly funded thanks to the DOE—to create a new quasi-private route to teacher credentialing.

For that matter, take former Secretary of Education Rod Paige, who appeared at an ELC conference to assure its members that they were "doing God's work" (Sack, 2001), and has been quoted as saying that "the worst thing that can happen to urban and minority kids is that they are not tested" (Johnston, 2001). Indeed, Paige spent his years as superintendent in Houston doing anything and everything to raise test scores (or, rather, as it turns out, to give the appearance of raising test scores). At the same time, his "tenure as superintendent was marked by efforts to privatize or contract out not only custodial, payroll, and food services, but also educational services like 'alternative schools' for students with 'discipline problems'" (Karp, 2001, p. 4).

Paige made his way around the perimeter of the U.S. Capitol to speak at the conservative Heritage Foundation, whose headquarters stand about a dozen blocks from the Department of Education. His purpose was twofold: to laud NCLB for injecting "competition into the public school system" and to point out that vouchers—which he called "opportunity scholarships"—are the next logical step in offering "educational emancipation" from "the chains of bureaucracy."

The arguments and rhetoric his speechwriters employed on that occasion are instructive. For example, he explained that the way we improve education is "one child at a time"—a phrase both more substantive and more dangerous than it may seem at first hearing. And he demanded to know how anyone could oppose vouchers in light of the fact that the GI Bill was "the greatest voucher

program in history." Paige was particularly enthusiastic about the legislation that earmarks $14 million in public funds—federal funds, for the first time—for religious and private schools in Washington, DC, which he hoped would turn out to be "a model program for the nation." (However, "this isn't a covert plan to finance private, especially Catholic, schools," he assured his audience. The proof? "Many of the students in Catholic schools are not Catholic.")

Paige couldn't restrain himself from gloating over how the passage of this law represented a triumph over "special interests"—that is, those who just "ask for more money" and want "to keep children in schools in need of improvement." These critics are "the real enemies of public schools." In fact, they put him in mind of France's determined opposition to the Bush administration's efforts to secure UN approval for an invasion of Iraq.[8] (At another gathering, a few weeks later, he compared opponents of the law to terrorists.[9])

Notice that Paige chose to deliver these remarks at the Heritage Foundation, which publishes "No Excuses" apologias for high-stakes testing while simultaneously pushing vouchers and "a competitive market" for education. (Among its other reports: "Why More Money Will Not Solve America's Education Crisis.") Nina Shokraii Rees, a key education analyst at Heritage who helped draft the blueprint for NCLB and pressed for it to include annual high-stakes testing, was then working for Paige, implementing the plans that she and her group helped to formulate. So it goes for the Hoover Institution in California, the Manhattan Institute in New York, the Center for Education Reform in Washington, and other right-wing think tanks. All of them demand higher standards and more testing, and all of them look for ways to turn education over to the marketplace where it will be beyond the reach of democratic control. Over and over again, accountability and privatization appear as conjoined twins.

To point out this correlation is not to deny that there are exceptions to it. To be sure, some proponents of public schooling have, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, hitched a ride on the Accountability Express. In fact, I've even heard one or two people argue that testing requirements in general—and NCLB in particular—represent our last chance to *save* public education, to redeem schools in the public's mind by insisting that they be held to high standards.

But the idea that we should scramble to feed the accountability beast is based on the rather desperate hope that we can satisfy its appetite by providing sufficient evidence of excellence. This is a fool's errand. It overlooks the fact that the whole movement is rooted in a top-down, ideologically driven contempt for public institutions, not in a grassroots loss of faith in neighborhood schools. The demand for accountability didn't start in living rooms; it started in places like the Heritage Foundation. After a time, it's true, even parents who think their

own children's school is just fine may swallow the generalizations they've been fed about the inadequacy of public education in general. But do we really think that the people who have cultivated this distrust, who holler about the need for more testing, who brush off structural barriers like poverty and racism as mere "excuses" for failure, will be satisfied once we agree to let them turn our schools into test prep factories?

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

In any event, if we did so we'd be destroying the village in order to save it. No, scratch the conditional tense there: The devastation is already underway. Every few days there is fresh evidence of how teaching is being narrowed and dumbed down, standardized and scripted—with poor and minority students getting the worst of the deal as usual. I have an overstuffed file of evidence detailing what we're sacrificing on the altar of accountability, from developmentally appropriate education for little children to rich, project-based learning for older ones, from music to field trips to class discussions (see Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; www.susanohanian.org).

Lately, it has become clear that piling NCLB on top of the state testing that already was assuming nightmarish proportions is producing still other sorts of collateral damage. For example, there is now increasing pressure to:

1. Segregate schools by ethnicity. A California study confirms what other scholars have predicted: NCLB contains a "diversity penalty" such that the more subgroups of students that attend a given school, the lower the chance that it will be able to satisfy all the federally imposed requirements for adequate progress (see Novak & Fuller, 2003).
2. Segregate classes by ability. While there are no hard data yet, it appears that schools may be doing more grouping and tracking in order to maximize test prep efficiency.[10] All children lose out from less heterogeneity, but none more than those at the bottom—yet another example of how vulnerable students suffer the most from the shrill demands for accountability.
3. Segregate classes by age. Multiage education reportedly is becoming less common now—not because its benefits haven't been supported by research and experience (they have), but because of "grade-by-grade academic standards and the consequences tied to not meeting those targets as measured by state tests" (Jacobson, 2003).

4. Criminalize misbehavior. "In cities and suburbs around the country, schools are increasingly sending students into the juvenile justice systems for the sort of adolescent misbehavior that used to be handled by school administrators" (Rimer, 2004, p. 1). There are many explanations for this deeply disturbing trend, including the loss of school-based mental health services due to budget cuts. But Augustina Reyes of the University of Houston observes, "If teachers are told, 'Your scores go down, you lose your job,' all of a sudden your values shift very quickly. Teachers think, 'With bad kids in my class, I'll have lower achievement on my tests, so I'll use discretion and remove that kid.'"[11] Moreover, attempts to deal with the kinds of problems for which children are now being hauled off by the police—programs to promote conflict resolution and to address bullying and other sorts of violence—are being eliminated because educators and students are themselves being bullied into focusing on test scores to the exclusion of everything else.[12]
5. Retain students in grade. The same get-tough sensibility that has loosed an avalanche of testing has led to a self-congratulatory war on "social promotion" that consists of forcing students to repeat a grade. The preponderance of evidence indicates that this is just about the worst course of action to take with struggling children in terms of both its academic and social-psychological effects. And the evidence *uniformly* demonstrates that retention increases the chance that a student will leave school; in fact, it's an even stronger predictor of dropping out than is socioeconomic status (see, e.g., Heubert [2003]).

If flunking kids is a terrible idea, flunking them solely on the basis of their standardized test scores is even worse. But that's precisely what Chicago, Baltimore, and the state of Florida are doing, harming tens of thousands of elementary schoolchildren in each case. And even that isn't the whole story. Some students are being forced to repeat a grade not because this is believed (however inaccurately) to be in their best interest, but because pressure for schools to show improved test results induces administrators to hold back potentially low-scoring children the year before a key exam is administered. That way, students in, say, 10th grade will be a year older, with another year of test prep under their belts, before they sit down to start bubbling in ovals.

Across the United States, according to calculations by Walt Haney and his colleagues at Boston College (2004), there were 13% more students in 9th grade in 2000 than there were in 8th grade in 1999. Retention rates are particularly

high in states like Texas and North Carolina, which helps to explain their apparently impressive NAEP scores.[13] The impact on the students involved, most of whom end up dropping out, is incalculable, but it makes schools and states look good in an age where accountability trumps all other considerations. Moreover, Haney predicts, "Senseless provisions of NCLB likely will lead to a further increase of 5 percent or more in grade nine retention. And of those who are flunked," he adds, "70 to 75 percent will not persist to high school graduation."[14]

CONCLUSION: THE DANGERS OF COMPLYING WITH NCLB

Take a step back and consider these examples of what I'm calling collateral damage from high-stakes testing: a more traditional, back-to-basics curriculum; more homogeneity; a retreat from innovations like multiage classrooms; more tracking and retention; and harsher discipline. What's striking about these ostensibly accidental by-products of policies designed to ensure accountability, is that they, themselves, are on the wish list of many of the same people who push for more testing—and, often, for vouchers.

In fact, we can add one more gift to the right: By virtue of its definition of a qualified teacher, NCLB helps to cement the idea that education consists of pouring knowledge into empty receptacles. We don't need people who know how to help students become proficient learners (a skill that they might be helped to acquire in a school of education); we just need people who know a lot of stuff (a distinction that might be certified simply by a quasi-private entity—using, naturally, a standardized test). Or, as Bennett and Finn explain things to the readers of the *Wall Street Journal*, "A principal choosing teachers will make better informed decisions if she has access to comparable information about how much history or math or science each candidate knows." This nicely rounds out the "reform" agenda, by locking into place a model that not only deprofessionalizes teachers but confuses teaching with the transmission of facts.

The upshot of all this is that the right has constructed a single puzzle of interlocking parts. It is hoping that some people outside its circle will be persuaded to endorse some of those parts (specific, uniform curriculum standards, for example, or annual testing) without understanding how they are integrally connected to the others (for example, the incremental dissolution of public schooling and the diminution of the very idea that education is a public good).

It is succeeding largely because decent educators are playing into its hands. That's why we must quit confining our complaints about NCLB to peripheral problems of implementation or funding. Too many people give the impression

that there would be nothing to object to if only their own school had been certified as making adequate progress, or if only Washington were more generous in paying for this assault on local autonomy. We have got to stop prefacing our objections by saying that, while the execution of this legislation is faulty, we agree with its laudable objectives. No. What we agree with is some of the rhetoric used to *sell* it, invocations of ideals like excellence and fairness. NCLB is not a step in the right direction. It is a deeply damaging, mostly ill-intentioned law, and no one genuinely committed to improving public schools (or to advancing the interests of those who have suffered from decades of neglect and oppression) would want to have anything to do with it.

Ultimately, we must decide whether we will obediently play our assigned role in helping to punish children and teachers. Every inservice session, every article, every memo from the central office that offers what amounts to an instruction manual for capitulation slides us further in the wrong direction until finally we become a nation at risk of abandoning public education altogether. Rather than scrambling to comply with its provisions, our obligation is to figure out how best to resist.

NOTES

The beginning of this chapter was adapted from the introduction to Kohn's book, *What Does It Mean to Be Well Educated? And More Essays on Standards, Grading, and Other Follies*, published by Beacon Press in 2004.

1. To be precise, those who decry these semantic misrepresentations should be described as "skeptical" or "critical." It's those responsible for them who more accurately are described as cynical. (And while we're being precise, the line I've quoted, like much of Tomlin's material, actually was written by Jane Wagner.)

2. The author cites three studies from the UK in support of this conclusion.

3. After I made some of these points in a letter to the editor that appeared in *Harper's*, Gatto wrote to tell me I had missed the point of his essay because he actually doesn't support "the elimination of public education." However, he does "hope to undermine centralized institutional schooling which uses the police power of the state to impose habits, attitudes, etc." I can only assume that he is using the word *public* in a way I don't understand. In any case, his furious attack on "mandatory" education—on universal schooling that is supported by the public treasury and administered by elected authorities—is one that has been warmly received by those on the right. Indeed, Gatto was one of the first endorsers of the Alliance for the Separation of School and State, which repudiates the idea of a "common school" and calls for "the end of federal, state, and local involvement with schooling." (A conference sponsored by the Alliance "featured a wide variety of conservative speakers, including John Taylor Gatto," according to a newsletter of Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum.)

Elsewhere, Gatto has written that he is "deeply depressed by Jonathan Kozol's contention that money would improve the schools of the poor. It would not."

4. Alarming failure, not universal failure. As education policymakers across the country have learned, there are political costs to having too many students flunk the tests, particularly if an unseemly number of them are White and relatively affluent. At that point, politically potent parents—and, eventually, even education reporters—may begin to ask inconvenient questions about the test itself. Fortunately, by tinkering with the construction of items on the exam and adjusting the cut score, it is possible to ensure virtually any outcome long before the tests are scored or even administered. For the officials in charge, the enterprise of standardized testing is reminiscent of shooting an arrow into a wall and then drawing the target around it.

5. For an account of the carefully coordinated decision to stop using the V word, see Bowman (2001).

6. The McKenzie quotation is from "The NCLB Wrecking Ball," an essay first posted on www.nochildleft.com in November 2003. The Jeffords quotation is from Johnson (2003).

7. The report by People for the American Way is entitled "Funding a Movement."

8. Paige's January 28, 2004 speech, "A Time for Choice," is available at www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/01/01282004.html

9. Here Paige was referring to the National Education Association, which he likened to "a terrorist organization" because it opposes some provisions of NCLB. He apologized, under pressure, for a poor choice of words but then immediately resumed his virulent criticisms of the union. See Pear (2004).

10. "The federal No Child Left Behind Act demands that schools show proficient test scores for every student. One approach to achieve that, some argue, is to tailor instruction in groups of similarly skilled students." See Pappano, 2003.

11. That explanation also makes sense to Mark Soler of the Youth Law Center, a public interest group that protects at-risk children: "Now zero tolerance is fed less by fear of crime and more by high-stakes testing. Principals want to get rid of kids they perceive as trouble." Both Reyes and Soler are quoted in Fuentes, 2003.

12. Scott Poland, a school psychologist and expert in crisis intervention, writes: "School principals have told me that they would like to devote curriculum time to topics such as managing anger, violence prevention and learning to get along with others regardless of race and ethnicity, but . . . [they are] under tremendous pressure to raise academic scores on the state accountability test" (see "The Non-Hardware Side of School Safety," 2000). Poland made the same point while testifying at a congressional hearing on school violence in March 1999—a month before the shootings at Columbine.

13. That's triple the rate for the disparity between 9th and 8th grades during the 1970s. See Haney et al., 2004.

14. Walt Haney, personal communication, January 15, 2004. Haney's study also found that there was a substantial drop in high school graduation rates, beginning, as a reporter noticed, "just as President Bill Clinton and Congress ushered in the school accountability measures [that were later] strengthened in the No Child Left Behind Act." Haney is quoted in that same article (see Schemo, 2004) as saying, "The benign explanation is that this whole standards and reform movement was implemented in an ill-conceived manner" (p. 23). This, of course, invites us to consider explanations that are less benign.

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