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Reading Between the Lines

Stephen Metcalf | January 10, 2002

On the morning of September 11, President Bush was sitting in the second-grade class of the Emma E. Booker Elementary School. The location is revealing: Up to the moment Chief of Staff Andrew Card whispered in his ear, Bush believed he was going to be an Education President. The second plane put an end to that, of course; and when he signed his education plan into law on January 8, the celebration was understandably muted.

Nonetheless, the legislation delivers a huge victory to Bush: This year's reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is widely regarded as the most ambitious federal overhaul of public schools since the 1960s. States will now test all students annually from third to eighth grade, while launching a federally guided drive for universal literacy among schoolchildren. Perhaps more strikingly, a political party that once called for the abolition of the Education Department has radically enhanced the federal presence in public schools. After repeating the mantra of local control and states' rights for a generation, the GOP now intrudes on both. What has happened?

The Bush revolution in education is the culmination of a decade of educational reform spearheaded by conservatives and business leaders. To gauge the significance of this trend, consider the original aspirations for an American public school system: As Horace Mann, and later John Dewey, saw it, public schools were necessary to fashion a common national culture out of a far-flung and often immigrant population, and to prepare young people to be reflective and critical citizens in a democratic society. The emphasis was on self-governance through self-respect; a sense of cultural ownership through participation; and ultimately, freedom from tyranny through rational deliberation.

Fast-forward to 2002: The new Bush testing regime emphasizes minimal competence along a narrow range of skills, with an eye toward satisfying the low end of the labor market. All this sits well with a business community whose first preoccupation is "global competitiveness": a community most comfortable thinking in terms of inputs (dollars spent on public schools) in relation to outputs (test scores). No one disputes that schools must inculcate the skills necessary for economic survival. But does it follow that the theory behind public schooling should be overwhelmingly economic? One of the reform movement's founding documents is *Reinventing Education: Entrepreneurship in America's Public Schools*, by Lou Gerstner, chairman of IBM. Gerstner describes schoolchildren as human capital, teachers as sellers in a marketplace and the public school system as a monopoly. Predictably, CEOs bring to education reform CEO rhetoric: stringent, intolerant of failure, even punitive--hence the word "sanction," as if some schools had been turning away weapons inspectors.

Nowhere has this orientation been more frank than in George W. Bush's policies, first as Texas governor and now as President. When he invited a group of "education leaders" to join him for his first day in the White House, the guest list was dominated by Fortune 500 CEOs. One, Harold McGraw, the publishing scion and current chairman of McGraw-Hill, summed up: "It's a great day for education, because we now have substantial alignment among all the key constituents--the public, the education community, business and political leaders--that results matter."

The phrase "results matter," like the popular buzzwords "accountability" and "standards," means one thing: more standardized testing. The Business Roundtable, an organization of powerful CEOs (including Gerstner) intensely focused on education issues, admits in one position paper that "voices of opposition to these policies...emanate from parents and teachers." No matter: Testing is a "bedrock principle" for the Roundtable, and the "leadership and credibility of the business community is needed" to make sure standardized testing becomes a reality.

Why the infatuation with testing? For its most conservative enthusiasts, testing makes sense as a lone solution to school failure because, they insist, adequate resources are already in place, and only the threat of exposure and censure is necessary for schools to succeed. Moreover, among those who style themselves "compassionate conservatives," education has become a sentimental and, all things considered, cheap way to talk about equalizing opportunity without committing to substantial income redistribution. Liberal faddishness, not chronic underfunding of poorer schools or child poverty itself, is blamed for underachievement: "Child-centered" education, "progressive" education or "whole language"--each has been singled out as a social menace that can be vanquished only by applying a more rational, results-oriented and business-minded approach to public education.

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And, not surprisingly, the Bush legislation has ardent supporters in the testing and textbook publishing industries. Only days after the 2000 election, an executive for publishing giant NCS Pearson addressed a Waldorf ballroom filled with Wall Street analysts. According to *Education Week*, the executive displayed a quote from President-elect Bush calling for state testing and school-by-school report cards, and announced, "This almost reads like our business plan." The bill has allotted \$387 million to get states up to speed; the National Association of State Boards of Education estimates that properly funding the testing mandate could cost anywhere from \$2.7 billion to \$7 billion. The bottom line? "This promises to be a bonanza for the testing companies," says Monte Neill of FairTest, a Boston-based nonprofit. "Fifteen states now test in all the grades Bush wants. All the rest are going to have to increase the amount of testing they do." Testing was already big business: According to Peter Sacks, author of *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do to Change It*, between 1960 and 1989 sales of standardized tests to public schools more than doubled, while enrollment increased only 15 percent. Over the past five years alone, state testing expenditures have almost tripled, from \$141 million to \$390 million, according to Achieve Inc., a standards-movement group formed by governors and CEOs. Under the new legislation, as many as fifteen states might need to triple their testing budgets.

All of which has led to a feeding frenzy. Educational Testing Service, maker of the SAT, has always been nonprofit; but it recently created a for-profit, K-12 subsidiary, ETS K-12 Works, to provide "testing and measurement services to the nation's elementary and secondary schools." To help market it, the company replaced CEO Nancy Cole, an educator with a background in psychometrics, with an executive from the marketing wing of the pharmaceutical industry. As new CEO Kurt Landgraf recently declared, ETS has a "moral responsibility" to participate in the debate on the "viability of high-stakes outcome testing," for "the betterment of our society and the people in it."

The big educational testing companies have thus dispatched lobbyists to Capitol Hill. Bruce Hunter, who represents the American Association of School Administrators, says, "I've been lobbying on education issues since 1982, but the test publishers have been active at a level I've never seen before. At every hearing, every discussion, the big test publishers are always present with at least one lobbyist, sometimes more." Both standardized testing and textbook publishing are dominated by the so-called Big Three--McGraw-Hill, Houghton-Mifflin and Harcourt General--all identified as "Bush stocks" by Wall Street analysts in the wake of the 2000 election.

While critics of the Bush Administration's energy policies have pointed repeatedly to its intimacy with the oil and gas industry--specifically the now-imploding Enron--few education critics have noted the Administration's cozy relationship with McGraw-Hill. At its heart lies the three-generation social mingling between the McGraw and Bush families. The McGraws are old Bush friends, dating back to the 1930s, when Joseph and Permelia Pryor Reed began to establish Jupiter Island, a barrier island off the coast of Florida, as a haven for the Northeast wealthy. The island's original roster of socialite vacationers reads like a who's who of American industry, finance and government: the Meads, the Mellons, the Paysons, the Whitneys, the Lovetts, the Harrimans--and Prescott Bush and James McGraw Jr. The generations of the two families parallel each other closely in age: the patriarchs Prescott and James Jr., son George and nephew Harold Jr., and grandson George W. and grandnephew Harold III, who now runs the family publishing empire.

The amount of cross-pollination and mutual admiration between the Administration and that empire is striking: Harold McGraw Jr. sits on the national grant advisory and founding board of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. McGraw in turn received the highest literacy award from President Bush in the early 1990s, for his contributions to the cause of literacy. The McGraw Foundation awarded current Bush Education Secretary Rod Paige its highest educator's award while Paige was Houston's school chief; Paige, in turn, was the keynote speaker at McGraw-Hill's "government initiatives" conference last spring. Harold McGraw III was selected as a member of President George W. Bush's transition advisory team, along with McGraw-Hill board member Edward Rust Jr., the CEO of State Farm and an active member of

the Business Roundtable on educational issues. An ex-chief of staff for Barbara Bush is returning to work for Laura Bush in the White House--after a stint with McGraw-Hill as a media relations executive. John Negroponete left his position as McGraw-Hill's executive vice president for global markets to become Bush's ambassador to the United Nations.

And over the years, Bush's education policies have been a considerable boon to the textbook publishing conglomerate. In the mid-1990s, then-Governor Bush became intensely focused on childhood literacy in Texas. For a period of roughly two years, most often at the invitation of the Governor, a small group of reading experts testified repeatedly about what would constitute a "scientifically valid" reading curriculum for Texas schoolchildren. As critics pointed out, a preponderance of the consultants were McGraw-Hill authors. "Like ants at a picnic," recalls Richard Allington, an education professor at the University of Florida. "They wrote statements of principles for the Texas Education Agency, advised on the development of the reading curriculum framework, helped shape the state board of education call for new reading textbooks. Not surprisingly, the 'research' was presented as supporting McGraw-Hill products." And not surprisingly, the company gained a dominant share in Texas's lucrative textbook marketplace. *Educational Marketer* dubbed McGraw-Hill's campaign in the state "masterful," identifying standards-based reform and the success of McGraw-Hill's "scientifically valid" phonics-based reading program as the source of the company's eventual triumph in Texas.

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Is the pattern repeating itself at the national level? On the day he assumed the White House--the day he invited Harold McGraw III into his office--Bush called on Congress to help him eliminate the nation's "reading deficit" by implementing the "findings of years of scientific research on reading." Bush would loosen the purse strings on one condition: Instructional practices must be "scientifically based."

To the literacy cognoscenti, the meaning was clear: Classrooms must follow the conclusions of the National Reading Panel, a blue-ribbon panel assembled by Congress in the late 1990s to determine the "status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read." Thanks to the NRP report, the phrase "scientifically based reading instruction" appears dozens of times in the new federal reading legislation. Education Secretary Paige recently explained in a speech before reading educators, "The National Reading Panel screened more than 100,000 studies of reading and...found that the most effective course of reading instruction includes explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, [and] phonics."

Why is the same conservative constituency that loves testing even more moonstruck by phonics? For starters, phonics is traditional and rote--the pupil begins by sounding out letters, then works through vocabulary drills, then short passages using the learned vocabulary. Furthermore, to teach phonics you need a textbook and usually a series of items--worksheets, tests, teacher's editions--that constitute an elaborate purchase for a school district and a profitable product line for a publisher. In addition, heavily scripted phonics programs are routinely marketed as compensation for bad teachers. (What's not mentioned is that they often repel, and even drive out, good teachers.) Finally, as Gerald Coles, author of *Reading Lessons: The Debate Over Literacy*, points out, "Phonics is a way of thinking about illiteracy that doesn't involve thinking about larger social injustices. To cure illiteracy, presumably all children need is a new set of textbooks."

Coles believes the NRP's conclusions, now implemented into law, are likely to be as friendly to McGraw-Hill's bottom line as Bush's policies were in Texas. "Combine the NRP report and the Bush legislation, and they suddenly have quite a paddle for rowing toward huge profits," he says. "Their products have been designed to embody the phrase 'scientifically based.'"

Several critics have emerged with key questions about the NRP report. To begin with, the 100,000 figure is wildly misleading. The central findings--those most likely to guide school practices, and thus their purchase of textbooks--involved only thirty-eight studies. Coles argues that those studies are often themselves of questionable relevance. On the decisive question of whether phonics instruction has an impact on reading comprehension, for example, the panel cited just three studies supporting a significant boost: one conducted in Spain, one in Finland and one comparing phonics to placing words and pictures into categories--as Coles puts it, in effect comparing phonics to "no instruction at all." Coles found the NRP report to be consistently slanted in favor of the skills-based, phonics approach. Another researcher, Stephen Krashen of the University of Southern California, complains that the report misrepresents his research and is rife with errors.

Nonetheless, the NRP report was sold to the public as a conclusive end to the so-called Reading Wars. It was presented to

educators across the country, and reported by the media, as the triumph of disinterested science, largely by means of a thirty-page media-friendly summary and viewer-friendly video. Both are in lieu of a forbidding "Reports of the Subgroups," which weighs in at a media-repellent 600 pages.

Elaine Garan, an education professor at California State University, Fresno, has parsed through all three. She believes there are wide discrepancies between what was reported to the public and what the panel actually found. Most blatantly, the summary proclaimed that "systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through sixth grade," while the report itself said, "There were insufficient data to draw any conclusions about the effects of phonics instruction with normally developing readers above first grade."

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According to one panel member, there is a simple explanation for the discrepancy: Widmeyer Communications, the powerful Washington, DC, public relations firm hired by the government to promote the panel's work. Widmeyer had represented McGraw-Hill's flagship literacy product Open Court during the Texas literacy drive, and now it counts 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 releases."

Yatvin remains frustrated with Widmeyer's influence over the panel--from stacking public hearings with alumni from Bush's Texas literacy drive, to minimizing the impact of her dissent by burying her minority report. Yatvin even recalls, with disgust, a Widmeyer flack getting in between her and a reporter (Scott Widmeyer, Widmeyer's CEO, denies that this happened). Other panel members echo Yatvin's concerns, although the NRP chair, Donald Langenberg, chancellor of the University System of Maryland, says the PR firm was "very nearly invisible" and insists the panel's reading recommendations were "balanced."

It has been phonics-based programs, however, that seem to have enjoyed a boost in the wake of the report. In Texas and California, McGraw-Hill literacy products have been adopted by school districts on the basis of their purported scientific validity. With the new education bill, Bush has tripled funding for early literacy, bumping it up to approximately \$1 billion a year over the next six years. And he has just tapped Christopher Doherty to be in charge of spending that money. His qualifications? As head of the nonprofit Baltimore Curriculum Project, Doherty brought DISTAR--McGraw-Hill's other literacy product--to Baltimore's public schools. "The bill stresses that the federal government must focus in early reading on those programs that have been scientifically proven to be effective," Doherty told the *Baltimore Sun*. "My job will be to help identify those districts and states that show they are going to implement K-3 reading programs based on that scientific research."

Phonics and testing, we're meant to believe, are an intensive therapy set to turn around laggard schools. But administrators, teachers, parents and children know better; all are bracing for the changes wrought by the new legislation. In Oakland the school board wants to spend its money somewhere else, introducing a resolution calling for the district to "cease immediately funding any and all identified un-funded state mandated costs, including but not limited to state-mandated testing, assessment and evaluations." Roy Romer, the superintendent in Los Angeles, told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "It's a good bill only if they fund it." Apprised that the increase would come to roughly 35 cents per student per day, he concluded, "It's just a bunch of new mandates."

If this sounds like a dodge by those afraid of accountability, why the suspicion among successful districts? Last May more than two-thirds of eighth graders in the affluent New York suburb of Scarsdale boycotted a new standardized test, protesting the dumbing down of the district's curriculum. Elizabeth Burmaster, recently elected Wisconsin's state superintendent of public instruction, finds the new legislation wasteful and redundant. "The money we have for public education is going to lowering class size," she says, pointing out that Wisconsin has worked hard to develop its own accountability system and that its students are perennially among the highest-scoring in the nation. "But the federal legislation basically says, 'Nope, you have to go back in and redo your state assessment system.' To what purpose?"

For the Bush Administration, passing the education bill may end up being the easy part. The public liked its emphasis on high expectations for schools and children (as opposed to the "soft bigotry of low expectations" attributed to bleeding-heart educators). A quasi-religious, and very American, faith in education helped the rhetoric of accountability to resonate; people half-consciously believe that schools ought to be able to equalize life opportunity, regardless of grinding

poverty in one district, booming affluence in the next. But that disparity isn't going anywhere soon. The big players now at the education table, some with a considerable financial stake in the new regime, believe that money is best spent on testing and textbooks, rather than on introducing equity into the system over the long term. Meanwhile, thanks to a suave PR campaign, a large segment of the education community takes for granted that the science behind educational research is disinterested and rigorous. Both assumptions prevail in the current legislation; both need to be examined with clarity and skepticism in the years to come.

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