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Bush Flunks Schools

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At first, many people liked the sound of "No Child Left Behind," President Bush's education plan. Who could object? The press and the public responded positively to the sentiment--until the failure-to-measure-up labels started rolling in. But now, New York Times education columnist Michael Winerip says NCLB (pronounced "nicklebee") "may go down in history as the most unpopular piece of education legislation ever created."

Across the country, thousands of federal scarlet letters have been posted on schoolhouse doors. According to a Machiavellian federal formula, many schools well respected in their communities didn't make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In Florida, only 22 percent of the schools earning A's under the state's ranking system received the NCLB imprimatur; overall, 87 percent of Florida's public schools were judged inadequate. NCLB wonks are quick to point out that nowhere in the law is the word failure used. True. But everybody reads the "in need of improvement" tag as a euphemism for failure. And schools "in need of improvement" are penalized, so the distinction is a sham.

Note that these labels apply only to public schools. Private and parochial schools are exempt from the same requirements--even when they receive vouchers paid for with public funds.

Under what is termed disaggregation, a scheme central to NCLB, kids are divided into subgroups, every one of which must show 95 percent test participation (and progress). Here are Minnesota's: All Students, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Black, White, Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Priced Meals. It's true that in the past, schools could hide poor performance of, say, special-ed students by averaging it in with that of excellent students. Pulling out the subgroups creates what is called transparency. And that's fine, as far as it goes. But under NCLB, transparency is transmuted into school-bashing. In the words of the North Carolina State Board of Education, "A school's making AYP is an all or

nothing prospect. A school will either have 'Yes' or 'No' in this field." One of Palo Alto's top high schools received a scarlet letter because some students skipped the test to study for AP exams.

And remember, this is all based on how some squirrely kids perform on a standardized test that neither the public nor the educators have a right to examine. In some states a teacher is subject to reprimand or dismissal if she even glances at it. Or tries to comfort a child sobbing over the test.

Multiply the subgroups by two, since all subgroups have to measure up in both reading and math, with science waiting in the wings. Every category must have 95 percent test-taker participation and show adequate yearly progress. In a small rural district, a couple of kids having an off day can cook a school's goose. In a large urban school, it doesn't take many more. A school can meet as many as seventeen out of eighteen target goals, and because this game is all or nothing, still be labeled failing. Ninety-four percent--and failing.

If No Child Left Behind meant what it says, it would help schools concentrate on that 6 percent, not cripple the whole school with an ugly label and crushing financial consequences. If even 6 percent of the bombast supporting NCLB was in touch with reality, they'd take heed of the American Society of Civil Engineers Report Card for America's Infrastructure, where public school buildings are ranked in worse shape than our bridges, transit systems and hazardous-waste disposal systems. Where's the Congressional breast-beating about this D-?

Of late, some Democrats have been saying they wouldn't have voted for NCLB if they'd known the Administration was going to skim on funding. But to educators, this fiat for perfection looks like a gotcha setup; money or no, everybody will fail. As respected researcher Gerald Bracey puts it, NCLB is "a weapon of mass destruction, and the target is the public school system." Vermont Senator James Jeffords sees NCLB as "a back door to anything that will let the private sector take over public education."

If a school doesn't meet its AYP for two consecutive years, then it has to offer students the opportunity to go to a school with better scores, paying for the transportation costs. The Feds call this capacity-building; schools trying to meet already depleted budgets call it a crisis. Students with the lowest scores get first choice for moving, so consider this scenario: A receiving school's AYP is endangered by the incoming students, and the sending school's AYP improves just because they left. Then the bus can reverse direction, with the sending school becoming the recipient. Such a scheme looks at schools not as social institutions but as skill delivery systems. Already, there have been ugly incidents of cities not wanting to accept Somali refugees because they're worried about AYPs.

States must come up with a plan for achieving 100 percent proficiency by 2013-14, so they set up a grid: Oregon is typical, promising 40 percent proficiency in English/Language Arts in 2002-03, jumping to 60 percent by 2007-08, 80 percent by

2011-12 and 100 percent by 2013-14. Note that they're putting off the utterly fantastic gains until the last years. Maybe they're counting on NCLB's self-destructing by then.

A July press release from the Business Roundtable quotes Joseph Tucci, chairman of the Roundtable's Education and the Workforce Task Force: "You can't manage what you don't measure. No executive can run a business without accurate, granular data that explains what's working and what's not. Our school systems should be no different." Keep those 8-year-old widgets rolling along the conveyor belt! But man does not live by granular data alone. Neither should children, though everywhere music, art and recess are being cut--to make room for more test prep.

Consider this: A Steinway grand has more than 12,000 parts, and a third grader's brain has about 100 billion neurons; but it's the Steinway that's acknowledged as unique, differing not only from all other piano brands but from all other Steinways. In an article celebrating the Steinway, James Barron says, "Perhaps it is the wood. No matter how carefully Steinway selects or prepares each batch, some trees get more sunlight than others in the forest, and some get more water. Certain piano technicians say uncontrollable factors make the difference." Uncontrollable factors. These days, piano makers may talk about uncontrollable factors, but no teacher or principal had better try it. With test-score numbers passing for accountability, "No Excuses" is the mantra for schools.

Ask any teacher and she will tell you how different is each third grader in her classroom. But the corporate-politico-media alliance long ago abandoned teacher judgments as "anecdotal," putting all their eggs in that granular data basket. Because the governor of Florida holds firm to a magic test score for every third grader--disregarding the kind of work they have done all year in class--he called on God, who has given children "the ability to gain this power and they haven't learned it," to justify holding back 43,000 of them. Maybe God was listening; this number was later reduced to 32,000. In the short term, retaining kids this year will make next year's AYP scores look better. But what about the long-term consequences? The relationships between retention, race and dropout rates are amply documented in research on retention. Hold ten students back a grade and only three will be around on graduation day; hold those students back twice and none will complete school. None. And African-American and Latino students are retained at twice the rate of white students.

Holding back third graders a year in school is said to be in the nation's self-interest. The hysterical tone harks back to the cold war rhetoric found in 1983's *A Nation at Risk*: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Refusing to acknowledge evidence to the contrary, Business Roundtable bullies still talk this way about schools, and the national press lets them get away with it.

People are so used to thinking of issues as right wing and left wing that they often miss the business wing. Go to the Business Roundtable (BRT) website and you can download the NCLB Business Leaders Toolkit. In the name of preparing students for "the

21st century workplace," CEOs are urged to deliver the BRT-crafted messages to public officials, taking advantage of this "exceptional window of opportunity...[to] act strategically and with a common voice." The Roundtable cannot have missed the fact that this law, which will declare nearly all public schools failures, greases the skids for vouchers and privatization (though that danger appears to have escaped the law's Democratic supporters). NCLB also paves the way for school-to-work plans that have been sitting on the back burner ever since Clinton failed to get the national test he wanted. When school-to-work, which is a technology-based learning model training students for their place in the global economy (meaning school ends for some kids after tenth grade), is combined with NCLB-type open enrollment (in which kids revolve constantly from school to school), a marketplace model determines the relationship of people to schools. Which is exactly what business wanted in the first place.