

A Lesson Plan for the Schools With Little Learning Behind It

By Gerald Bracey, Ph.D.

On January 23, President Bush proposed a sweeping education reform program that deals with literacy, math, science, testing, technology, teacher training, charters, vouchers, "failing schools," school violence, character education, and rebuilding schools for Native Americans--and more. The plan is often vague and no doubt many devils will be found in the details as specifics of a congressional bill replace the indeterminate prose and inchoate program of the document.

Before looking at some problems in the plan, let us give the president credit for emphasizing literacy. For all of the talk of performance on math and science tests, it is reading that really counts. Unfortunately, the specifics of the program appear to depend on the conclusions of the National Reading Panel whose work is suspect.

In spite of the text's ambiguities, many problems emerge from the document, only a few of which can be treated in this space.

THE PROBLEMS WITH TESTING

The plan requires states to annually test reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8. It also demands that states set "high content standards" for science and history, but prescribes no tests. This uneven treatment of curriculum topics would guarantee the neglect of science and history. People naturally concentrate on doing well that which they are evaluated on. Both carrots and sticks apply to test scores in reading and mathematics, but not science and history. Schools will, therefore, emphasize reading and math. Education moves by the law of WYTIWYG (pronounced, WITTY-WIG): What You Test Is What You Get.

Moreover, important educational decisions should not be made on the basis of standardized tests. Such tests do not measure creativity, judgment, persistence, higher-order thinking, stamina, motivation, imagination, determination, sense of craft or civic mindedness. No wonder, then, that studies find that test scores do not correlate with later success in life. Aside from these little problems, they're fine.

Even if the testing were appropriate, the plan starts it too late. Too late, at least, for eliminating the rich-poor achievement gap. Currently, it is too late once the child is born. Poor mothers often do not receive the pre-natal care they need, especially in the first trimester, and as a direct consequence, some children are born with conditions that later impair their intellects. No wonder that a U. S. Department of Education study found that children from low-income families were mentally well behind their middle class peers--in kindergarten. A program that doesn't get any formal information about children's functioning until the end of third grade is doomed (there is no hint in the plan that any

proposal to deal with the prenatal care or cognitive stimulation in the earliest years will be forthcoming).

THE PROBLEMS WITH VOUCHERS

Bush's voucher proposal is a gift to the Catholic Church from American taxpayers of all denominations. He sets their value at \$1,500. Catholic Schools, with their low salaries, heavy subsidies, and emptying classrooms can welcome these vouchers. They are the only reputable educational system that can afford to do so.

In Cleveland, where vouchers are worth \$2,500, 96% of the 3,000 voucher students attended Catholic Schools. For this reason, a Federal Appeals Court declared the program unconstitutional.

The recently defeated California voucher proposal would have given any California child \$4,000. But syndicated Los Angeles columnist, Matthew Miller, who has himself brought forth voucher proposals, estimated that a voucher would have to be worth at least \$6,000 to arouse the interest of Los Angeles' private schools. After all, the educational institutions of the National Association of Independent Schools charge on average from \$8,000 for kindergarten to \$13,000 for secondary school.

The plan also assumes that the private schools await voucher-bearing students with open arms and doors. They do not. Most are not looking to expand. During the California referendum campaign, one story stated that 85% of California's private schools would not accept vouchers from students performing below grade level. And even if *all* private schools were open to voucher children, they could accommodate only four percent of existing public school students.

Free market theorists will argue that new schools will pop up to accommodate the voucher kids. This presumes that building a school is no more complicated than building a fast food joint. But the "intelligence" in a fast food restaurant is built into the hardware and the system. All the employees have to do is follow the book -- rigidly. A school's intelligence, though, is built into its "software" -- the teachers and administrators who must display all of the personal characteristics listed above that tests cannot test. It is not as if we had a deep bench of well-educated, well-trained would-be teachers just waiting to get into the game.

The plan does permit children in "failing schools" (undefined) to attend "higher performing public schools" (also undefined). But most of these schools are already bursting at the gills. And if the voucher students are permitted to attend schools in other districts and displace children who live in those districts, there will be a tax revolt of a magnitude unseen since the American Revolution.

Most people in the United States aren't even interested in vouchers, which might be why secretary of education Rod Paige said "We never use that word." Whites constituted

more than 80% of the voters in the election that brought Bush to power. Their children, over 70% all students, do just fine on international comparisons of mathematics and science. Thirty-eight countries participated in the most recent comparison. White students ranked 13th in the world in math and 6th in the world in science. And most of the higher scoring countries were only a few points higher. In the most recent reading comparison, American students of all colors were second among 27 countries and our best readers scored higher than any other nation's best readers. The people who vote are satisfied with their public schools, and rightly so.

It is more than slightly ironic that a plan that claims to increase accountability dumps students into schools that have no accountability at all. Private schools are free from all accountability sanctions. At least, so far. Home schoolers and many Protestant schools oppose vouchers because they fear that increased use of public funds for private schools will inevitably bring increased government regulation. They are right. This is precisely what has happened in Europe where private schools receive government funds. Government regulations bind the private schools so tightly that they differ from the public schools only in that they explicitly teach religion. Any large use of public funds for private schools will produce demands that private schools be accountable in the same ways that public schools are. Virtually all private schools will then refuse to participate.

THE PROBLEMS WITH THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Poor and minority students do not do well in international comparisons. In one study involving 41 countries, the District of Columbia finished ahead of only South Africa and tied with Colombia and Kuwait. The other 38 nations all scored higher. Urban education experts think that the District is about average among major urban areas.

So let's really go after educational improvements in the cities (and in poor rural areas as well). But let's not do it with a narrow, shallow testing plan. Let's do it with a Marshall Plan. After all, from birth to age 18, even students with perfect attendance only spend 9% of their lives in school. How on earth can we single out this one institution and hold it "accountable?" How can we refer to "failing schools" in areas where employment is irregular and low-paying, families are unstable or single-parent, student mobility is high, and drugs and crime are prevalent?

In sum, Bush's plan is fragmented, incoherent and poorly thought out. It has been flung together with cliches, buzz phrases, and piecemeal ideas. It bears all the hallmarks of haste, of ideological rather than logical and systemic thinking. It reveals an extremely limited understanding of how schools work, what education means or how children learn. No workable bill can emerge from it.