

**The “No Child Left Behind Act”
and Teaching Reading**

Policy Brief

by

**Harold Berlak
Senior Research Fellow
Applied Research Center (ARC)**

Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU)
Education Policy Studies Laboratory
College of Education
Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Box 872411
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287-2411

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What is Reading?

No issue in U.S. public education arouses more controversy and passion than the reading question. When the words “literacy” or “fundamentals” are introduced into conversation, what immediately comes to mind is not math, geography, history, or the arts, but reading. Children’s ability to read—to construct meaning from print and communicate with others—is seen as key to school success and the gateway to virtually all other areas of knowledge and learning.

How to best teach children to read appears on its face to be a straightforward question. But throughout the 20th century, the questions of what constitutes language literacy and how to teach reading have remained entangled in intense controversy rooted in different political philosophies, cultural values and beliefs about learning, social justice, and the role public schools should play in a democratic nation.

Three Approaches to Teaching Reading

The words used to characterize these controversies have shifted over time. We can identify, however, three perspectives on teaching beginning reading. The first and most familiar focuses on phonics and acquisition of specific skills. According to the National Reading Panel (NRP):

Phonics instruction is a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling. The primary focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers understand how letters are linked to sounds (phonemes) to form letter/sound correspondences, and to help them learn how to apply this knowledge in their reading.¹

Note that there are two aspects to the NRP definition: (1) systematic acquisition of a sequence of discrete phonic skills and (2) their application to reading. The fundamental assumption of a phonics/skills based approach is that children must be taught these skills before they are able to read.

A second approach to beginning reading has been variously labeled “literature-based,” “constructivist,” or “whole language.” This approach emphasizes the importance of learning from context, drawing on learners’ previous experience and their capacity to use available visual and textual clues. The assumption is that children brought up in “print-rich” communities grasp the elements of phonics—the association of spoken language with alphabetic symbols—as they become familiar with print from their daily life, from their active experience with books, and having conversations about books with peers and adults.

This approach does not reject regular instruction in phonics. It does, however, reject the assumption that all children must master a fixed and optimum sequence of discrete phonetic skills *before* they are capable of reading “real” books (as opposed to texts that have been deliberately constructed to teach discrete skills with little regard for meaning or literary value). The teaching of phonics is contingent or opportunistic. The

teacher listens, identifies needed decoding skills as a child reads, and then directly teaches those skills to groups or individuals.

The third approach in recent years has been referred to as “critical literacy.” Advocates of critical literacy expect learners to go beyond taking meaning from print and to develop the capacity to reflect on their experience and the texts they read, making judgments about the texts and the world around them. No fine line can be drawn between this emphasis and a whole-language perspective. Both stress the need for children to compose their own texts, to attend to differences in situation and context, and to connect texts with lived experience. The emphasis of critical literacy is not only on students using reading to understand self, culture, and society, and to become fully informed, but to become actively engaged in social change. In this sense, the critical literacy approach is overtly political and viewed by some as radical.

Variations and combinations of these three perspectives are to be found in U.S. classrooms. The emphasis on direct teaching of phonics and skills development has had, and continues to have, a strong hold in U.S. classrooms. Though fully developed whole language/literature programs are relatively few, pedagogical methods associated with these approaches are widely accepted and used in U.S. classrooms despite conservative critics’ frequently repeated claim that the whole language approach is ideologically driven and unscientific. Elements of critical literacy approaches also are found in public schools, but the most coherent examples of such practices exist in a relatively small number of independent progressive schools, and within some alternative public schools, special programs, and charter schools. Although instances of critical literacy approaches are few, these schools and programs are often cited as models for school reform and

showcased by the press as success stories, particularly over the long term.² New federal legislation, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), if enforced as written, schools and programs such as these would be at risk of closing, because they will unlikely be able to show consistent annual gains in standardized reading test scores.

Reading Provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act

The *No Child Left Behind Act* makes the most sweeping change in decades in the role that federal and state governments play in the nation's schools. For many years liberals and conservatives alike assumed that choice of teaching methods for any subject was the province of educators, not politicians. The erosion of local control over curriculum and pedagogical decisions was underway well before George W. Bush signed NCLB in January 2002. The act, however, represents an unprecedented transfer of power to federal and state government officials, allowing them to intervene and to determine how reading should be taught in classrooms.

Two provisions—those governing testing and the “Reading First” program—have a direct and immediate influence on how schools will teach reading.

Testing provisions

NCLB testing provisions require annual reading assessments in grades three through eight and at least one assessment in grades 10 through 12 by the 2005-2006 school year. States may select or design their own reading assessments, which must be “aligned” with the states’ language and reading standards. States must also develop a plan to assure that all students are “proficient” by the year 2014, and schools are required to

improve by a specific number of test points each year to meet that goal—or, in NCLB’s terms, make “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP).

Because each state uses different reading tests, the scores are not comparable from state to state. Beginning in 2002-03 states must also participate in biennial National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and mathematics for fourth and eighth-graders, and use the data to “...examine the relative rigor of state standards and assessments against a common metric.”³ In effect, NAEP tests become the national standard for measuring the quality of schools, teaching, student academic achievement, and for distributing rewards and sanctions.

NAEP are standardized tests that the federal government administers to a national sample of students. NAEP does not provide scores for individual students or schools. Test results are released to the public as a “report card” on the quality of the nation’s schools. Data are disaggregated by poverty, race or ethnicity, disability, and English language proficiency.

The use of NAEP tests as the standard, however, is inappropriate. NAEP was not designed to be used for this purpose,⁴ and the proficiency levels now set are arbitrary and excessively high. For instance, on the 2000 NAEP reading assessment, only 32 percent of U.S. fourth graders scored at the “proficient” level or above. Yet in separate assessment comparing U.S. nine-year-olds with children in 26 other nations, the U.S. children ranked second.⁵ In addition, NAEP assessments are afflicted with validity problems that are no less serious than those in standardized tests now mandated by most states. Neither is grounded in actual academic performance nor have predictive value.⁶

Schools that repeatedly fail to achieve proficiency goals are designated for “Program Improvement” (PI) and are subject to “corrective action”—a series of sanctions and interventions that could lead to a reallocation or loss of resources, and to schools being disbanded or “reconstituted.”⁷ Furthermore, the act gives parents of students in low-scoring schools the opportunity to transfer their children to higher scoring public schools; funds for Title I supplemental educational services would move with children to the new school. Children with limited English proficiency who have attended schools in the United States (excluding Puerto Rico) for three or more consecutive school years must be assessed in English. There are some provisions for exemptions to this requirement.

What is the effect of using standardized tests to measure reading proficiency? Since standardized tests are the most commonly used measure of school quality, school districts, individual schools, administrators, and teachers are under great pressure to show improvement in standardized test scores.

Studies in states that have had their own versions of NCLB testing provisions in place for several years—notably Texas, Massachusetts and California—have documented the effects of mandated testing.⁸ The first and the most obvious consequence is the loss of flexibility on the part of districts, schools, and classroom teachers to make modifications and accommodations in what children read and in reading pedagogy based on individual learning differences and their differing cultural and linguistic histories. The second effect is a drastic narrowing of the curriculum over time. Schools under the gun to raise test scores curtail activities and programs that do not contribute directly to short-term test score gains. And the list is long: two-way bilingual education, critical thinking,

reading for enjoyment, cross disciplinary studies, art, music, citizenship and community service programs, physical and health education, and last, but not least, multicultural curricula.

The “Reading First” Program

Shortly after his inauguration in 2001, President Bush sent Congress an educational proposal called “Reading First,” modeled on the program he introduced as governor of Texas. The proposal was incorporated into Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), which Bush renamed *No Child Left Behind*. He said it would fulfill his campaign promise of “ensuring that every child can read by the third grade.”

“Reading First” provides significant grants to improve reading instruction in the early grades⁹—but with the condition that all teaching materials, books, assessments, and professional development paid for in full or in part by Title I funds must be grounded in “scientifically-based” research, a term that appears one hundred and eleven times in the text of NCLB Act.

In practice this requires a federal panel and the office of the Secretary of Education to certify that the approach to teaching reading, and the professional training offered to teachers must be “scientifically-based.” The President, Secretary of Education Rod Paige, and Department of Education documents are explicit about the Administration position on what is and is not “scientifically-based” and what is the scientifically acceptable way to teach beginning reading. They will rely on what the Bush administration asserts are the conclusions of the 2000 National Reading Panel (NRP) Report. (See following boxed description of the panel.)

The National Reading Panel

In 1997, Congress authorized the creation of a National Reading Panel whose charge was to identify best practices in reading instruction. The Director of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) appointed the panel in consultation with the Secretary of Education. The chief of the branch that commissioned the NRP report is G. Reid Lyon, Ph.D., a specialist in learning disabilities, a long time advocate for direct, sequential phonics instruction, and Bush's educational advisor on reading since 1995. He testified to a congressional committee in 1997, the same year that the panel was first convened, that scientific research had definitively proven the superiority of systematic phonics instruction in early reading.¹⁰ Congress mandated the panel be composed of "leading scientists in reading research, representatives of colleges of education, reading teachers, education administrators, and parents." In fact, there were 12 university professors, eight of them researchers. There were no researchers or reading specialists who did not share Dr. Lyon's research perspective. One person officially represented parents. There was one middle school teacher on the panel and one principal, Joanne Yatvin,¹¹ the only panel member who openly held a different perspective on early reading instruction. When the report of the National Reading Panel was released in April 2000, Ms. Yatvin refused to sign charging that the panel had misrepresented the evidence they did examine, or had ignored or never examined contrary perspectives on reading and reading research and literacy.¹²

The NRP was convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), which is a part of the National Institutes of Health. The chief of branch that commissioned the report is G. Reid Lyon, Ph.D., a specialist in special education, who has been Bush's educational advisor on reading since his days as governor. The NRP Report was released in April 2000, along with a 32-page summary booklet and video "ideal for parents, teachers, and anyone concerned about reading instruction and how to better teach children to read." When Education Secretary Paige announced "unprecedented reading reform" for U.S. schools in April 2002, he cited the findings of the National Reading Panel as the "scientific" foundation of the Reading First program.¹³

The following statement is taken from the desktop reference on the official NCLB website, which is intended as a guide for local and state authorities applying for Reading First funds.

Professional development, instructional programs, and materials used by a state education agency (SEA) or school district must focus on the five key areas that scientifically based reading research has identified as essential components of reading instruction—phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension.¹⁴

The video and the desktop reference are also unambiguous about the conclusions of NRP Report. According to these versions of the report the scientific merits of direct phonics instruction in the early grades are definitively proven: learning to read requires "mastery of a sequence of skills, each building upon the other and all taught directly."

National Reading Panel Report Conclusions

Grand claims about what science says should be greeted with skepticism, particularly in an area as complex and contentious as reading, where there are vested interests within and outside of government, billions of dollars in products and services at stake, and firmly held ideological and cultural differences with respect to child development, learning, teaching, and the purposes of public education.

Although government sources repeatedly cite the superiority of a phonics emphasis as beyond question, a reading of the full NRP Report indicates that this conclusion is false or at best misleading. Though its members were heavily weighted to favor phonics, the report did not draw this conclusion. The 32-page summary of the report says, “Teachers must understand that systematic phonics instruction is only one component—albeit a necessary component—of a total reading program...”¹⁵ The full report, which runs more than 500 pages, includes numerous caveats against heavy-handed emphasis on phonics drills and in several places urges “balance” and increased opportunities for early readers to be “immersed in print” and to have ready access to real books and quality literature. In another place the summary booklet reads, “systematic phonics produces significant benefits for students kindergarten through sixth grade.” This assertion, however, blatantly contradicts the full report, which states “there were insufficient data to draw any conclusions about the effects of phonics with normally developing readers above first grade.”¹⁶

The most striking limitation of using the NRP Report as a guide to policy is that the panel chose to ignore a large body of research on reading and language that does not fit the panel’s criteria for what is considered “scientific.” The panel restricted its

analyses and conclusions to what it called “experimental” research—that is, research that assigns subjects randomly to an experimental group or to a control group, and where all variables and outcomes are expressed in quantitative terms. This definition of scientific research eliminates studies of teaching of reading as it occurs in natural settings—virtually all established forms of systematic, observational, and interview research, and most, if not all, quantitative and qualitative studies conducted by linguists, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, reading researchers, and cognitive, developmental, and clinical psychologists.

Among the numerous studies excluded from the panel’s analyses are those that focused on the connections between writing and learning to read; student attitudes and motivation; and the impact of “print-rich” and “print-poor” social environments on learning to read. Also ignored were close-in descriptive, clinical, observational, and interview studies of students with special developmental needs, longitudinal case studies, and studies of the impact of race, racism, and cultural and language differences on language acquisition and early reading. The effect of policies of the current Administration is to outlaw most of the research on reading of the last century by designating it as unscientific.

Finally, the panel chose not to address a number of critically important issues: the inequities between rich and poor, whether schools provide all children with an *equal opportunity to learn*—that is, the human and material resources necessary for learning to read: physical facilities, curriculum materials, books, qualified teachers, quiet places for reading, small group and individual tutoring, and of course, access to well provisioned schools and public libraries.¹⁷

NCLB, Race, Poverty, and the Achievement Gap

The title of the act, “No Child Left Behind,” suggests that the intention of the act is to reduce educational inequalities in the nation’s schools. The testing provisions and Reading First program are aimed at “clos[ing] the achievement gap for disadvantaged students.”¹⁸ The remedy for addressing educational inequality follows the policy line of the Standards Movement: a) set high standards for all, b) use standardized testing to measure progress, and c) reward the successful while sanctioning and imposing corrective action on those that fail to make progress.¹⁹

There is an accumulating body of independent research that suggests that the negative consequences of testing policies far outweigh the presumed benefits, and that if the policies continue unchanged, the longer-range effects will be devastating in terms of academic quality and numbers of high school dropouts.²⁰ The best proponents can do is to point to some modest gains in test scores, but even when there are small gains, they are predictably erratic and flatten over time.

While the educational significance of these statistical shifts up and down will continue to be debated by policy makers, the public, and the press, there is no dispute over which schools are most likely to fail to make AYP and be designated as PI (Program Improvement)—in need of “corrective action.” Nor is there controversy over which students are first in line for the limited curriculum that accompanies the pressures to raise test scores: children of color, children who are poor, those who have special developmental needs, and those raised in homes where Standard English is a second language.

The institutional pressures on principals and teachers to meet AYP goals are particularly intense in urban and rural district schools that serve large numbers of poor children and children of color. The demand to raise test scores translates to sharp increases in time and resources devoted to test preparation, replacing other forms of reading and language instruction and professional development with highly structured phonics programs that a government agency has certified as meeting state and federal standards for “scientifically-based” instruction.

To be assured of federal approval, school districts increasingly adopt commercially available packaged programs such as Open Court, Reading Mastery (the successor to DISTAR), and other highly scripted programs that focus almost entirely on teaching children to read through a structured and intense focus on phonics. All these programs claim that their emphasis on phonemic awareness and sequential direct instruction is “scientific” and “research-based” and cite as authority the findings of the National Reading Panel and language drawn from official federal government documents.

The Office of Education readily approves purchase of these materials even though the NRP Report explicitly cautions *against* “phonics programs [that] present a fixed set of lessons scheduled from the beginning to end of the school year,” and the lack of flexibility and developmental and cultural appropriateness offered by commercial programs.²¹ As noted elsewhere, however, officials and government documents have misrepresented the panel’s already questionable conclusions.

There is no evidence within the NRP Report that supports the view that a direct instruction of phonics is effective with poor children or so-called at-risk students.²² Whether such programs do in fact work remains in dispute. The NRP Report, however, cannot be used to support *any* claims that scientific evidence shows that phonics programs help close the achievement gap, for the simple reason that the very studies that focused on how race, culture, linguistic histories, peer groups, learning styles, and social and economic contexts influence learning do not fit the experimental research model and hence were excluded from the panel's consideration.

The most obvious consequence of using highly prescriptive reading packages is the loss of flexibility—the ability of classroom teachers and schools to use their own judgment in selecting teaching materials and methods that respond to children's learning differences as well as to differences in culture and language. The educational interests of children—particularly those who are poor and of color—are at risk of being compromised. Moreover, there is cause for concern that, rather than being based solely on scientific merit, decisions about testing and reading programs may be made based on the financial interests of major textbook publishers.²³

Finally, the increased use of standardized tests as the single most important measure of reading proficiency raises profound questions about the credibility of current standardized test technology. The validity issue is central. Do the tests measure what they purport to measure? Is there, for example, a connection between performance on a reading test and actual reading, that is, between a test score and a child's interest in reading and his or her ability to take meaning from text, and to communicate thoughts, ideas, and feelings? The failure to address the test validity question raises serious

concerns about their misuse.²⁴ Standardized tests are often used as gatekeepers that determine, for example, eligibility for promotion and access to advanced classes. Yet the tests disproportionately exclude students of color, the poor, and those not raised in standard English-speaking households.

The denial of educational opportunity and access based not on performance—on what a person knows and can actually do—is a form of institutional racism. Because the technology of standardized tests inflates differences that often have little or no educational significance, and because there are no demonstrable connections between performance on a standardized reading test and academic performance, the use of standardized testing to measure reading proficiency and assess school and teacher competence reinforces institutional racism.

Horace Mann, the U.S. educator in the mid-nineteenth century who fought to establish the common school, free and open to all, spoke of his vision of public education as “the great equalizer,” the great “balance wheel of the social machinery” that would lead to the disappearance of poverty and with it the “rancorous discord between the haves and have-nots.” It is questionable whether NCLB will advance this vision of the common school; it seems more likely to increase inequalities and further undermine the nation’s commitment to public education.

There is significant resistance to the NCLB Act, which will undoubtedly grow and intensify as the Act’s provisions are enforced. *Education Week* carries reports almost weekly of objections by state and local education officials, administrators, and teachers to NCLB provisions. Presently two states, Maine and Nebraska, have declined to participate in NCLB Act programs because it trespasses on the tradition of state and local control,

thereby forgoing federal funds should they follow through with their threats. Whether other states will decline to participate is uncertain. Not uncertain, however, is that struggles in this nation over what reading literacy is and who makes the decisions will continue.

There are key questions that must continue to be asked about the teaching of reading:

1. ***Flexibility***: Are provisions made to address students' developmental, learning, and cultural differences? Are teachers constrained and required to follow a fixed sequence of instruction? Is test prep replacing writing, oral language, reading for pleasure, and other aspects of a balanced reading and language program?
2. ***Local autonomy and student and parent rights***: Section 1905 of NCLB Act asserts that federal officials may not "mandate, direct, or control a state, local educational agency, or school's specific instructional content, academic achievement standards and assessments, curriculum or program of instruction."²⁵ Is this provision to preserve local community control being circumvented? Are parents and students being fully informed of their rights and federal, state, and local provisions that allow for waivers, exemptions, modifications, and accommodations in assessment practices? Are parents and community members involved in the decision-making?
3. ***Research-based***: Are there independent reviews of scientific claims made for curriculum materials and staff development programs that are purchased with Title I funds? Who determines what is scientifically based and on what basis?
4. ***Resources: quality and costs***: What is the quality and accessibility of school and local public libraries? Do the collections and required texts reflect the backgrounds and cultures of the students? Are there in place "opportunity to learn" standards to

assure that all children have access to qualified teachers, tutoring, physical facilities, material resources, books, libraries required for acquiring language literacy? What are the full costs of implementing testing mandates, including legal costs, all administrative costs, costs of teacher and staff time, and of lost teaching days? How are local funds for reading materials, books and professional programs being used?

5. ***Assessment standards:*** Do the tests and assessments used for evaluation and individual diagnosis meet professional standards set by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council for Measurements in Education (NCME)? Are standardized tests being used as by a school or district as the only or the primary measures of reading proficiency and school quality?
6. ***School climate and morale:*** Is there an independent assessment of the effects of high stakes standardized testing programs on school climate, student engagement in learning, drop-out rates, teacher morale and turnover?

The Author

Harold Berlak holds a doctorate in research in instruction from Harvard University. He is a former professor of education at Washington University in St. Louis, and former social studies teacher. Currently he is a Fellow at the Educational Policy Research Unit at Arizona State University, Senior Research Fellow at the Applied Research Center in Oakland, California, and an educational activist. He lives in Oakland. Gerald Coles provided valuable guidance in the preparation of this article. Email: hberlak@sbcglobal.net

Endnotes

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 - 2 Central Park East Secondary and River East Elementary are examples of two such schools in New York City.
 - 3 *No Child Left Behind: A Desktop Reference.* (2002). Washington, DC: Office of the Undersecretary. Available online at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/reference.html>.
 - 4 Linn, R. L (1998) *Standards-Based Accountability: Ten Suggestions. Policy Paper.* Center for Research in Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing, General Accounting Office; *Educational Achievement Standards: NAGB's Approach Yields Misleading Interpretations.*(1993). Washington, DC: Author, June, Report GAO/PEMD-93-12; National Academy of Sciences; *Grading the Nation's Report Card: Evaluating NAEP and Transforming the Assessment of Educational Progress.* (1999). Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Jones, L.V. (1997) *National Tests of Educational Reform: Are They Compatible?* Princeton, NJ: Policy Information Center, Educational Testing Service. Accessible at www.ets.org/search97cgi/s97.cgi.
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 - 9 This figure was \$900 million for 2002. See the No Child Left Behind web site: <http://www.nclb.gov/start/facts/readingfirst.html>. Critics note that this amount does not represent additional funds; rather funds are taken from existing federal programs, support for purchase of library books being one example.
 - 10 See: <http://mirror.apa.org/ppo-OLD/lyon.html>
 - 11 Yatvin, J. (2002) "Babes in the Woods: The Wanderings of the National Reading Panel." *Phi Delta Kappan*, January. pp. 364-369.
 - 12 Coles, G. (2003) *Reading the naked truth: Literacy, legislation, and lies.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann;
 - Garan, E.M. (2002) *Resisting reading mandates: How to triumph with the truth.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
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 - 13 See <http://www.ed.gov/PressReleases/04-2002/04022002.html>
 - 14 *No Child Left Behind: A Desktop Reference.* 2002. Washington, DC: Office of the Undersecretary. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/reference.html>, p.23.

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- 15 *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Summary Booklet*. (1999). Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. p.11,
- 16 *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Summary Booklet*. p. 9. *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Report of the Subgroups* (1999). Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. p.2-116
- 17 For more detailed critique and analysis see Coles, *op cit*. Garan, *op cit*., Krashen, S. (2000) “More Smoke and Mirrors: A Critique of NRP Report” *Phi Delta Kappan* 83 (2)
- 18 *No Child Left Behind: A Desktop Reference*. (2002). Washington, DC: Office of the Undersecretary. Available on line at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/reference.html>.
- 19 <http://www.achieve.org>; <http://www.nclb.gov>. This is the policy actively supported by highly influential business interests such as the Business Roundtable and the National Alliance for Business, and by mainline and right-wing ‘think tanks’.
- 20 Linn, 1998; Amrein and Berliner, 2003
- 21 *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Report of the Subgroups*. (1999). Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. p. 2-97
- 22 Coles, G. *op cit* Chapter 6 pp. 86-114
- 23 A full exploration of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. It’s worth noting, however, ties between the current administration and the textbook and testing industry. For example, among Bush’s Transition Advisory Committee on Trade appointees was Harold McGraw III, CEO of McGraw-Hill, the nation’s largest producer of standardized tests, school textbooks, and instructional materials, including the Stanford Achievement Test, Open Court and DISTAR programs.
- 24 See Berlak, H. *op cit*
- 25 Manzo, K.K. & Hoff, D.J. (2003). Federal influence over curriculum exhibits growth. *Education Week*, February 5. p.1.