The Bush Education Agenda: Tested for Failure

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By Harold Berlak

Three presidents have sought to claim the title of education president and campaigned to institute national testing. George Bush (the elder) tried in 1992 and failed. In 1994 Bill Clinton implemented Goals 2000, which gave states federal incentives to install statewide testing. But Congress blocked Clinton's proposal to create national tests for 4th and 8th graders in reading and math. Organized opposition to these national testing schemes joined the left and right margins of American electoral politics, uniting civil rights, children's, and fair test advocates with conservative Christians and libertarian Republicans. Opposition to Clinton's testing proposal was led in the House by the Black Caucus and in the Senate by then-Senator John Ashcroft.

George W. Bush has made education one of his first orders of business, proposing a sweeping plan that requires annual tests for children in elementary and middle schools and punishes low-scoring schools. While the President rhetorically de-emphasized his plan's use of private school vouchers – and acquiesced when a Congressional panel dropped vouchers entirely in order to win bipartisan support – he and his political advisors believe his proposal for national testing will be a winner.

The Bush plan, while it does not require states to use the same test, nevertheless installs a form of national high-stakes testing. In order to collect federal dollars (which account for approximately 7% of state education budgets), Bush would require states to test children in grades 3 through 8 annually, set specific test performance goals, and mandate what the proposal calls "corrective action."[1] Although vouchers allowing students in such so-called under-performing schools to attend private schools are apparently out of the picture for now, the amended bill still would allow parents to use federal funds to pay for private after-school tutoring.[2]

National testing also has the support of center-right Democrats. Senator Joseph Lieberman, the 2000 vice presidential candidate, and Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana, who chairs the Democratic Leadership Council (the group that has worked to remold the party to attract affluent

suburbanites and helped orchestrate Clinton's first election), have proposed an alternative to the Bush plan that resembles the President's, although with less-frequent testing. Lieberman and Bayh also would require states to set content standards and to meet test performance goals in order to continue receiving federal education dollars. All students would be tested in reading and math, once during elementary school and once during the middle school years. In the place of vouchers, they propose grants to charter and magnet schools.[3]

Both the Bush and the Lieberman-Bayh plans, if enacted, would as never before concentrate power in the hands of federal and state government officials, greatly diminishing local control by district boards, schools, teachers, and parents. In the words of one official, the plans represent "a sea change"-- a 180 degree reversal of the traditional Republican populist position espoused by Ronald Reagan, who called for minimizing the federal role in education and for eliminating the US Department of Education.[4]

Distancing himself from the maligned Clinton testing proposal, Bush denies altogether that his is a proposal for compulsory national testing. Every state, he asserts, is free to opt out, and also is free to write its own standards and administer its own test. The freedom to opt out is illusory, however; states cannot afford to lose the federal government's 7% contribution to their education budgets. And while states may write their own content standards and may use any test they choose, for the purpose of receiving federal dollars the plan calls for federal officials to adjust each state's test results to a test known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Currently the NAEP is a wholly voluntary, nationally normed standardized achievement test given annually to a scientifically selected sample of students in each state. It is now administered in a way that does not permit use of scores to make judgments and decisions about the fates of particular individuals or schools. While NAEP is considered on technical grounds to be a good test relative to other off-the-shelf standardized achievement tests and custom-tailored state tests, it is still a multiple-choice standardized tests with all the shortcomings and limitations of such tests.

Under the Bush plan, however, NAEP would be employed in a way it was never intended to be used, violating professional testing standards which bar the use of any single standardized test for making high-stakes decisions.[5] The most serious consequence of using the NAEP, or any single test, as the only valid indicator of educational achievement and learning is that it inevitably comes to serve as a *de facto* national curriculum. Whatever the rhetoric may be about local control and individual responsibility, the Bush plan would place politicians, appointed and career government bureaucrats, and their chosen experts distant from classrooms and local communities, in firm control of what teachers teach and how they teach it.

Using government-mandated tests to reform schools is certain to fail. It will lower educational standards, increase inequalities, and deepen the nation's racial divide. We can be sure of this because many states already have in place the sorts of testing and accountability plans that both the Bush and the Lieberman-Bayh proposals contemplate.

Bush himself cites his Texas experience as the model of success for the nation. A look at the results in Texas is sobering, however. While Bush and his Secretary of Education, former Houston school superintendent Rod Page, point to higher test scores, the actual numerical gains in test scores were small, and a subsequent Rand Corp. study cast considerable doubt on the claimed gains.[6] Separately, Boston College researcher Walt Haney showed that a sharp increase in the number of 9th grade students retained likely inflated Houston's high school passing rates, and that the numbers of dropouts in Houston, already among the highest in the nation, soared, most markedly for African Americans and Mexican Americans.[7] Another study by Rice University Professor Linda McNeil documents the multiple ways Texas policy pushed students out of school, increased educational disparities, and degraded the curriculum as a consequence of enormous institutional pressures to prep students for the state-mandated standardized test.[8]

California began its march toward "aligning" tests to standards sixteen years ago. A newly elected, liberal-leaning Superintendent of Instruction, Bill Honig, initiated the policy as a low-cost solution to raising standards at a time when the state's expenditures for education and other social services were shrinking. What was sold to the public as an apolitical, non-partisan plan became deeply mired in California's cultural wars and the state's toxic electoral politics. The first of the new tests aligned to the State's language standards, called CLAS, was developed by Educational Testing Service and arrived in 1994 on the eve of that year's elections. Republican Pete Wilson, in his successful bid for a second term as governor, made CLAS into a hot-button issue. Wilson vilified the test and the standards as an effort by the left to impose a multicultural orthodoxy on schools. With his reelection, as part of a Republican wave that turned over the US Congress to GOP control for the first time in 40 years, the policy completely unraveled. CLAS and the new language standards were jettisoned and subsequently curriculum standards for all major school subjects were rewritten largely to mollify the right.

Under a federal mandate to install a test, California in 1998 adopted an off-the-shelf standardized achievement test, the Stanford 9, published by Harcourt Measurement, Inc. At best last year's gains were small and mixed; California reported an overall 4- to 5-percentile-point gain on the Stanford 9, which is equivalent to a handful of test items.

This year for the first time the state is providing cash bonuses to the schools and their staffs who have met testing targets set by the state, and $1,000 prizes to the state's highest-scoring students. In the original legislation, parents were given the unrestricted right to exempt their children from taking the tests. When it became clear that large numbers of parents would likely opt out, the State Board of Education adopted the rule that schools with exemptions exceeding 15% of the student body would be ineligible for all financial rewards. Organized protests have occurred in several areas across the state. Some teachers in high scoring schools have pledged to donate their reward money to schools that are in greatest need. Further complicating California's plan, on President Clinton's last day in office, the U.S. Department of Education informed the state that the federal government's contribution to administering the state's testing program may be in jeopardy because the Stanford 9 did not comply with the regulation that the test must be "aligned" to the curriculum.[9]

In Massachusetts the appointed state board of education controlled by advocates of testing and allied with business interests is in the process of imposing the Massachusetts Comprehensive

Assessment System (MCAS) test as a condition for grade advancement and graduation. The effort is being resisted by students and parents who are boycotting tests and by a coalition of parents, students, civil rights leaders, children's and fair test advocates who have organized a fierce and sustained campaign of opposition. The high school population in Massachusetts is 17% Latino and African American, yet together they account for more than 40% of those who are pushed out or drop out. A study concluded that, based on a trial run of 10th graders, the failure rate in schools and districts that predominantly serve the poor and people of color could likely exceed 70%.[10] Under considerable pressure, the State Board of Education slightly softened the rules on exemptions and delayed by two years a requirement that students pass MCAS as a condition for high school graduation. The controversy will not go away, however, and it will almost certainly intensify as the new deadline approaches.

The failures and deepening controversy about such testing policies are not limited to California, Texas, and Massachusetts. Currently 24 states have installed or are in the process of installing a form of mandated testing linked to a system of rewards and punishments. Problems are widespread, and organized opposition crossing ideological, party, cultural and racial lines is growing, in New York, Illinois, Florida, and D.C., Georgia, Louisiana, Nevada and other states.

The political stakes for President Bush are high: A domestic policy victory would bolster his claim that he can reach out to Democrats and be a unifier; a loss on education, which both parties say is "non-partisan" issue, would undermine his other policy initiatives where there are obvious and deep ideological differences.

Whether Congress passes and funds Bush's testing proposals depends on two things: whether conservative Christians in the GOP – heretofore hostile to national testing, but whose spokesman John Ashcroft is now Bush's attorney general – will remain silent on the policy they once opposed; and whether the loosely knit movements of civil rights groups, fair test advocates, parents, teachers, students, and local community activists can unify and bring enough pressure to bear on state legislators and on Congress to derail the president's plan.

National and statewide testing as the chief instrument of educational reform is simplistic, counterproductive, and a major assault on local, democratic control of the nation's public schools. The tragedy is that mandated testing increases inequality, perpetuates institutional racism and installs mediocrity. It inflicts lasting harm on all children, but those most likely to be hurt are the children of the poor, of color, immigrants, and those with special developmental needs.

Testing has been sold to the public as an inexpensive fix for our schools. This is false. In addition to the social costs, the direct and indirect administrative costs are enormous. At a minimum, the Bush plan has been estimated by the National Association of State Boards of Education to add $2.7 billion to $7 billion in expenses annually.[11] Based on previous research, the true cost could be many times that once lost teaching days and the loss of classroom time that is diverted to coaching students for tests are included.[12] These are resources that could and should be directed to fixing deteriorated school buildings, buying books, raising teacher salaries, and encouraging the development of systems of accountability that expand and deepen student learning and extend educational opportunities to all children.

NOTES

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Schemo, D.J., "Schoolbook balancing act." *New York Times*, Jan. 24, 2001

[2]. Ornstein, Charles, "Bush losing vouchers, gaining an education deal." *Dallas Morning News.* May 7, 2001

[3]. Wilgoren, Jan 23, 2001
Sanger, Jan. 24, 2001
Schemo, Jan. 24, 2001

[4]. Schemo, Jan. 24, 2001

[5]. 1999 *Standards, for Educational and Psychological Tests* produced jointly by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA) and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME)
See also:
Linn, Robert, "Assessments and Accountability," *Educational Researcher* 29:2 2000

[6]. Texas reports as much as 11 percentile points gain on its own test (TAAS). A recent Rand report, *Improving Student Achievement; What State NAEP Scores Tell Us* (available at http://www.rand.org) shows gains of three percentile points or less. On the other hand, the Nation's Report Card compiled by National Center for Educational Statistics indicates a small but steady decline in NAEP reading scores of Texas high school students. Available at: http://www.nces.ed/ gov

[7]. Haney, Walter, "The Myth of the Texas Miracle in Education," *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol. 8, No 41, http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41/

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[11]. News release, "Cost Of President's Testing Mandate Estimated As High As $7 Billion." Washington D.C.: National Association of State Boards of Education, April 25, 2001. Available at: http://www.nasbe.org/Archives/cost.html

[12]. In 1993, Boston College Researchers Walter Haney, George Madaus, and Robert Lyons estimated indirect costs of testing at $20 billion annually (*The Fractured Marketplace for Standardized Testing* Boston: Kluwer, 1993)