

An Analysis of the 2005 National Technology Plan: Better for Business than for Children

by

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Executive Summary

In January 2005, then-Secretary of Education Rod Paige submitted the Department of Education's revised National Education Technology Plan (NETP) to Congress in compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The plan, titled *Toward a New Golden Age in American Education*, recommends seven "Action Steps" urging schools to strengthen leadership for technology, to consider innovative budgeting, to support e-learning and virtual schools, to encourage broadband access, to move toward digital content, and to integrate data systems. NETP also urges improved "teacher training" to enhance teachers' ability to use technological products.

This report identifies, analyzes, and critiques assumptions underpinning NETP's recommendations. Assumptions are crucial to any policy; invalid assumptions create an unreliable foundation for any plan. In addition to identifying flaws in key assumptions, this analysis concurrently uncovers embedded advantages for business and privatization supporters.

This report examines four specific assumptions in terms of their roles as components of NCLB. The first assumption is that education ought to be run more like business. This precept is based on the idea that test scores equate to a traditional business

“product,” an equation that has been challenged by many critics. The second is that more technology will reliably result in increased student learning. This assumption lacks credible evidence and is undermined by recent large-scale research. The third, that extensive technological infrastructure is already in place, rests on a report with questionable methodology and is contradicted by an arguably more credible report. The fourth assumption, that students’ advice to NETP planners was reliable, is found unwarranted because of severe methodological weaknesses, including the fact that children too young to read were asked for advice on such issues as budget priorities.

Following this extended critique of the plan’s assumptions, a review of the proposed action steps within the context of groundwork laid by NCLB uncovers several ways government policy is opening new “markets” and providing other advantages for business and support for privatization. The analysis concludes that NCLB and NETP provide more benefits for business than for children—especially poor children. Educators who are considering expanding technology in light of NETP recommendations should proceed with great caution, insisting on evidence to support claims of improved learning and considering other consequences of a shift to primarily online instruction.

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Introduction

Overview of the National Education Technology Plan

In January, 2005, then-Secretary of Education Rod Paige complied with requirements of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation by submitting the Department of Education's revised National Education Technology Plan (NETP) to Congress. NETP's title— *Toward a New Golden Age in American Education*—indicates its authors' faith in technology and its power to transform education positively.

According to the Department of Education's press release announcing publication of the NETP, increasing use of technology outside of schools has prompted increased use within them. The plan authors attribute this change largely to increasing competition in the global economy and to students who have never known a world without the Internet.¹ The NETP home page² and its website segment "Student Voices"³ stress that the plan used substantive input from students because they understand the technological needs of tomorrow's schools better than their teachers or administrators.

The heart of NETP lies in seven "action steps" or recommendations.⁴ Together, they yield the following picture of changes considered desirable: Schools should become more data-driven (consistent with NCLB's emphasis on test scores and "accountability"),

and administrators and teachers should make decisions based on ever increasing amounts of data.⁵ Thus, schools will need “tech-savvy” administrators who can partner with businesses, “empower” students in planning processes, and implement comprehensive data systems.⁶ Such administrators are to consider “innovative” budgeting, looking specifically to realize “efficiencies” and “cost savings.”⁷ Teachers, too, are to use newly expanded data to “personalize instruction,” and teacher education programs are to become accountable for producing new teachers skilled in using data to identify appropriate “interventions,” or instructional strategies, for individual students. To be sure that new teachers have these skills, the “quality and consistency” of teacher education is to be improved through “measurement, accountability and increased technology resources” (extending NCLB’s plan for K-12 education and its focus on standardized test scores to higher education and teacher education).⁸

Teachers as well as students are to engage in online learning⁹; schools are to move away from textbooks to digital content and to support the growth of “virtual” schools.¹⁰ To enable such technological expansion, schools are to pursue broadband access.¹¹ Finally, administrators are to be sure that any technological products they purchase are certified to comply with the School Interoperability Framework (SIF), a set of standards that ensure data will transfer easily among schools, districts, and others.¹²

Overview of this analysis

This report identifies, analyzes, and critiques several assumptions underpinning NETP’s recommendations. Assumptions are crucial; invalid assumptions create an unreliable foundation for any plan. On the whole, the analysis examines the plan’s

