

# **The Assault on Public Education - What Does it Mean for Humanist Values and Principles**

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THE RESTRUCTURING of the U.S. education system began in 1983 with the report, "A Nation at Risk" and the subsequent moves by the current administration are destined to destroy public education in this country which is basically a humanist institution.

Restructuring is highly consistent with American values such as decentralization, individuality, personal initiative, individual responsibility and the anti bureaucratic sentiment for today. But the strategies mask the real problem of the government conning the business world into paying for the outcomes it wants for jacking up our economy and conning the parents into thinking they will have a say in the enterprise by making choices of schools that will up their kids scores for better opportunities in the future. When in fact the government is asking us to help it to achieve number one status without regard to the students real needs to cope in this future world or the institutions and the people in them who will be held responsible for doing the job without the power, time or funds.

I will trace the steps that have resulted in Bush's plan called "America 2000" so that we can have an outline of the issues that are involved in this restructuring program for discussion.

The strategies are immoral, unethical, self-serving and destructive. They are neither humane nor mindful of the humanist principles and values that have underpinned our

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public education system. Public Education is the one institution we have in this country which is truly reflective of our ideals and we must not let it be destroyed by so-called improvements which look okay on the surface but in reality are designed to do away with any institution that could produce students who can think for themselves, make informed and critical decisions and behave according to their consciences.

"A Nation at Risk" spurred the educational reform movement of the 80's. The report was compiled by The Center for Policy Research in Education - a federally funded consortium of University professors. In essence what they said was that as a nation we were experiencing lower test scores in the schools and were not competing well on the international scene.

A follow up report in 1989 told us that we had made little progress in this area. At that point our "Mr. Education President" stepped forth and called in the NGA (National Governors Association) to act on the problem. Business people were calling for higher level skilled workers.

Economists were worried about the international comparisons and our becoming a second class nation. The administration wanted uniformity of purpose and a less decentralized and diverse system of education.

Together the administration and governors set national education goals aimed at making us internationally competitive. Please note the absence in this formation of the educators, albeit some were consulted, but mostly from the administration ranks.

The goals are as follows:

All children in America will start school ready to learn.

The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.

American students will leave grades 4,8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.

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Every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

While these are very idealistic and far ranging goals, most of us would agree they sound pretty good. At the time of their publishing there were, of course, calls for specifics.

A National Education Goals Panel was created in 1990 to go further. It is a bipartisan group consisting of: an NGA chairperson, 4 senior level federal executive branch officials appointed by the President, six governors from each of the 2 parties, and 4 Congressional leaders. They are charged with overseeing the development and implementation of a national education reporting system to track progress toward the goals.

The first resistance to the national goal setting amounted to concerns that it would lead to:

- Federal control and a nationally imposed curriculum
- States sending mandates to local boards
- Loss of diversity and pluralism, one of our nation's strengths
- A diluted set of standards so that everyone can meet them
- State rankings and thereby norm referenced tests teaching to the tests
- The shaming of poor performers
- Measuring only factual knowledge with multiple choice testing
- Too great an emphasis on reaching test score marks putting a cap on performance
- Tests dictating curriculum
- Government commissions deciding curriculum through decisions of what to test

But the administration tried to assuage these concerns with some bargains. They promised greater latitude in the use of federal funds to state agencies and local districts in return for higher performance. Preschool, health and nutrition programs would receive higher funding. And more authority would be given to the school level if a tougher curriculum would be installed, and parent and community involvement would occur

in return for accountability in results.

Now what was emerging at the end of '89 was the real beginnings of the restructuring plan. Local autonomy due to federal deregulation and accountability in the form of national testing. This was an historic transition as pointed out by Marshall S. Smith, dean of education at Stanford, but was a balancing problem. Is school-based management really compatible with externally imposed goals? How are we to run our own show locally with the outcome planned from above?

As Arthur Wise, a director of Rand Corporation Center for the Study of the Teaching Profession, pointed out at the time, there was little theoretical or empirical grounding for the solution being proposed. His concern was that to make changes without employing the knowledge base we have and testing alternatives is to waste resources and perhaps result in no improvement. He advocated creating separate institutions which would include a broad range of participants for each of the many issues involved, something on the order of the various health institutes.

However, the administration had other designs to keep control of creating strategies for restructuring education in government hands. The commissions around the country discussing these issues were carefully orchestrated affairs with handpicked participants who were, for the most part, politically correct contributors.

The Secretary of Education at the time, Cavazos, was the first to announce that the natural partner for the concept of site-management was parental choice in schools. In the beginning this referred only to choice within the public system. Private and parochial schools were supposed to be another matter. However, a book in June of 1990 by John E. Chubb, a senior fellow at Brookings Institute and Terry M. Moe, a political science professor at Stanford, entitled, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* greatly helped to change this matter.

What they proposed was to look at the "presumed" success of the private schools in terms of achievement on test scores. Since they do so much better why not privatize the whole school system in certain ways so that competition in the market place among schools will drive them all to do better.

The states could set the criteria for the establishment of new schools in the program and when an applying school met all these requirements it would receive state funding per pupil

according to need. Each school could charge some students tuition, set admissions standards and structure itself as it wished. School achievement would then not be accountable to the state but to the parents and students.

So now private schools are part and parcel of the scheme. No one says voucher anymore but funds will follow the kids. The parents will be the ones looking over the results of the tests and choosing those schools which show the best results.

Lest you worry that results will only be measured by the standard multiple choice variety test, there are proposals to add performance testing to the package. This concept includes teachers and teams of evaluators looking over children's projects, writings, problem solving exercises as well as fact-testing. Already the SATs are including expanded language and math problems to get at other dimensions of knowledge.

Most recently Bush has gotten on a new band wagon that is looking at the business community as models for achievement. The reasoning is that business is successful in getting things done and in doing research. Thus he had drawn business into the R&D cycle to implement his strategies. Of course they will be expected to provide the funding.

The scenario implies that each senator and congressman will get a new million \$ school, the kids will conform to higher standards by facing a battery of modern tests and exams, and Ozzie and Harriet will return with a ready to go family of clean cut kids prepared to face a color-blind world bursting with opportunities.

The plan is now called "America 2000," a strategy that is mostly the baby of Lamar Alexander, the current Secretary of Education who gained much respect as President of The University of Tennessee and Governor of the state.

The key aspects of the program are:

- national testing
- deregulation and privatization of schools
- school choice
- citizen involvement
- research and development by the business bureaucracy
- outcome based education

Lets begin our discussion with an issue raised by Clark Kerr, President Emeritus of the University of California. He suggests that there are other things besides education that

may contribute to economic non-competitiveness, such as: spending too much, saving too little and investing too little; too much investment in the military and not enough on research and development in industry; too much self-gratification in life-style; too much advertising and too little quality; not enough emphasis on human relations.

Lester Thoreau of MIT a philosopher economist said in a recent speech that the key weapon in economic competitiveness is attention to high tech processes and not to R&D into products. But we don't educate to produce people who have the skills to analyze, problem solve, and collaborate on finding creative solutions which is what we need for the work force to be viable competitors for the future world.

Some jobs are being simplified, but overall the ones being created require different and higher levels of education and related skills than 10 years ago. The abilities to identify, analyze, and apply appropriate information in responding to complex situations and to learn on one's own and with others will be essential. Productivity and success in one's own personal life will be increasingly dependent on the ability to deal with uncertainty, to work with others, to set group goals (tempering rapid individuality), and to overcome racial and ethnic prejudices.

But so far the reform movement has emphasized rather narrow and limited low-level skills and the states just keep adding more of the same old types of courses rather than make the changes that reflect economic and technical trends.

The issue of competitiveness raises some other questions. What are the consequences for students of introducing market incentives to schools and their staffs? Will more measurement skills create the intellectual capital to drive the post-industrial economy?

A national test designed by government and business interests alone will measure achievement in the areas that are of most concern to them, namely factual knowledge of areas they deem important. States, local districts and schools will teach to these tests. The message is: "What's important is what is tested."

Ernest L. Boyer, President of the Camegie Foundation for Advanced Teaching at Princeton said in a speech this November that we are measuring that which matters least. By this I assumed he means we are ignoring a very essential aspect of learning by focusing on the acquisition of knowledge rather

than the capacity to use it. Willis D. Hawley, professor of education and political science and director of the Center for Educational Policy at Vanderbilt calls this the "jugs and mugs" theory of learning. The teachers are the jugs who pour what they have into the mugs.

Hawley suggests that if the reform movement was aware of the educational research available, a whole new set of roles for teachers and administrators would result. There is no validity shown in transmitting knowledge to students by teachers, tests or computers. Why don't we stop looking at kids as consumers of information and skills and see them as producers of knowledge and learning capabilities?

In his schema teachers would be managers of experience and the job would be more than maintaining discipline, providing interesting materials and directing students to the right answers. Teachers would put kids into situations where they could use the knowledge they have to relate it in new and systematic ways, to organize these seemingly unconnected pieces of information and to assess their conclusions before settling on them even if correct.

The stress would be on the development of problem-finding capabilities not just solving ones. They would be helped to understand the strategies they use in the process of learning and problem solving. Added to this would be an emphasis on the opportunity to learn with and through others. Boyer calls this cooperation and collaboration instead of the competition and conformity called for by the government reformists.

Further Hawley notes that kids learn a lot incidentally and as much as is possible we should have them deal with problems and in contexts which are familiar to them. Brazilian educator Paolo Friere has been remarkably successful with children in deprived environments with this approach.

Instead of trying to cover as many topics as are known, it is far more productive for the curricula to go into depth on a limited number of issues, emphasizing "generative knowledge, ideas and theories" which help the students organize to learn other knowledge.

The prime job of administrators would be to support teachers by minimizing distractions and obstacles the teachers face in the learning situation and to encourage and reinforce the teachers own learning by modeling strategies they could use with their students. Also they need to recognize that successful teachers require continual opportunities to

develop their professional expertise.

Boyer adds that we absolutely must give more status and dignity to the teaching profession with both financial and laudatory rewards. The current system is upside down in that those who should be most empowered, the ones primarily accountable for outcomes are the least empowered. We need school based management with the teachers given the freedom to pursue in the most creative climate possible.

Now the public is nationally goal oriented and wants the results its told it should expect. It has been told what it should get back in the process. As Boyer has pointed out parent involvement should be an enrichment to the education process not a replacement for the professionals in it. Parents need to concern themselves about involvement with and connection to their own kids, supporting teachers and administrators in fostering creative learning environments and working on the cultural climate which had become fragmented into age groups unconnected to one another. As he sees it, the problem in the U.S. is that we have become tribal with no connection, loyalty or commitment to the larger community.

Boyer emphasizes several other issues on which we need to work. He sees a struggle in the reform movement for "the soul of school renewal." We're either going to settle for muddling around with structure or we can really concentrate where it counts - on the kids.

To begin we must focus on pre-school readiness which was Bush's first goal but which seems to have disappeared when funding is mentioned. Boyer and other experts say we must see to the proper health of pregnant women and their children from conception onwards. Neglecting the poor will eventually negate all the other national goals. Disadvantaged children must be prepared with language skills to enter school and headstart is an imperative.

In the schools themselves a more humane environment can be created by breaking large schools down into smaller units where each child can feel noticed and connected to his/her community. In turn the students should be connected to the community in which the school resides by service projects that are not only nice in a sentimental, altruistic fashion but provide the opportunity to gain practical insights which will reform their theories by experiences that can be critiqued.

The school life just outlined is totally in line with humanist values and principles as we can all easily see. David Hornbeck.



former superintendent of schools in Maryland asks if we have the will as a nation to succeed in having all of our people learn to think at relatively complex levels, to express thought verbally and in writing and to solve problems from a logical, mathematical and scientific perspective. He says we know how to do it and it is therefore a moral issue as to whether we achieve it.

Looking at school reform as a moral and ethical issue brings us humanists further into the picture than to be on guard for separation of church and state issues like public funding of parochial schools. Our principles about the worth and dignity of human beings, the rights of all peoples to have access to the best education, democracy as the ruling principle for governance all come to bear when we talk about the current proposals.

Lets take the strategies I listed for you one by one and discuss the ramifications of each with an eye to the type of system outlined by some of our most creative and caring educational professionals.

#### National Testing

Whoever measures the outcome controls the tests and takes freedom from the local board

Focus on standard test means less real skills being measured like thinking, writing, creating

What gets tested gets taught - if writing or creating then performance assessment - if multiple choice then facts

Assessment tools for comparisons may make for unfair comparisons between dissimilar districts and schools

States may take on the power to force local schools to standards

Assessment used as a tool for accountability, may force local administrators to concentrate on raising test scores, which may not result in student achievement

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is too narrow in range to do the job and needs more funding

Aim of raising student standards means focus on academic courses and skills but not on high-level academic curriculum

Deregulation and privatization of schools  
could allow schools to ignore the special population  
for whom federal funds were intended  
Funding will follow the kids which hurts the schools  
most in need of funding  
Funding rewards the districts who allow funding to  
private schools  
Public funding to private schools will kill public  
school system and totally support parochial  
schools  
Assumes that private schools are really doing the best  
job and that they are the best model  
Means that public schools will be replaced by privates  
Decades of improvements, research and success are  
being dismissed  
Omits civil rights and equal opportunity  
Leaves out special education programs  
Does not include early intervention for disadvantaged  
Increases segregation by race and income because the  
disparity in district funding makes for unequal  
schools

#### School choice

Assumes competition brings improvement  
Competition impacts price not quality  
Assumes parents will know how to make an informed  
choice

#### Citizen Involvement

Lay assessment by non-educators like parents may be  
one of the problems  
Business wants production workers for its enterprises-  
do we really want education to be only that?

#### Research and development by business and bureaucracy

Missing education for citizenship  
Bureaucrats represent special interest groups  
Diverts funds into new R&D programs away from other  
successes  
Ignores successful models in existence  
Government abdicating responsibility to the private  
sector  
CEO's are making the decisions for their own benefits

Outcome based education

All the focus is on results not on the students and teachers and the classroom setting

Second wave of quality of teaching and learning has never appeared - still have first wave of minimum competency

Problem for teachers to find time for additional designing of creative curriculum materials