

The Drive to Oust the Middle Class from Inner City Public Schools

By Margot Pepper

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law in 2001 by President George Bush, backed by both Democrats and Republicans. The backbone of the program, allegedly designed to hold schools accountable for academic failure, is standardized state testing for students and educators. Rather than improve public education, however, there is now ample evidence that NCLB testing is part of a systematic effort to privatize diverse urban public schools in the United States. The objectives of privatization have been threefold: first, to divert taxpayer money from the public sector to the corporate sector; second, to capture part of the market, which would otherwise be receiving free education; and third, to drive out middle class accountability, leaving behind a disposable population that won't have a voice about the inappropriate use of their tax dollars, nor the bleak outlook on their futures.

“As a for-profit venture, public education represents a market worth over \$600 billion dollars,” notes Dr. Henry A. Giroux, in *Z Magazine*.¹

“The emergence of HMOs and hospital management companies created enormous opportunities for investors. We believe the same pattern will occur in education,” observes Mary Tanner, Managing Director of Lehman Brothers.²

“Bush’s proposal for national standardized testing is helping to pave the way for these EMO’s,” says Project Censored in their annual collection of most censored stories. “While the aptly named Educational Management Organizations are being promoted as the new answer to impoverished school districts and dilapidated classrooms, the real emphasis is on investment returns rather than student welfare and educational development.”³

For over a century, norm-referenced test results have been misinterpreted in the United States to support racist campaigns. IQ tests were used as an argument against integration of schools, the passage of the Civil Rights Law of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1969, Arthur Jensen used his so-called “findings”—that average African-American IQs were significantly lower than those of Euro-American or white children—to attack educational programs which benefit the poor, like Head Start.⁴

An influential study by Elizabeth Peal and Wallace Lambert in 1962 found that the higher the subjects’ economic status, the higher scores would be on norm-referenced tests. Similarly, higher achievement scores on the NCLB tests have been predicted according to zip codes, used by economists to sort by economic status.⁵

Randy L. Hoover and Kathy L. Shook note that a study of 593 Ohio School Districts show the district’s high stakes tests “to correlate with Social Economic Status to such a high degree as to virtually mask any and all actual academic achievement claimed to be measured by these tests.”⁶ They observe that students were “visible victims of sorting by socio-economic status... by high stakes tests that fail to meet recognized, scientific standards of test validity.”

Now, the standardized tests that are part of the NCLB campaign are being used to lend legitimacy to policies that lead to a cheap, uneducated labor pool and increased profits in the private sector. The effect of NCLB has been to dismantle public education by funneling public tax dollars directly to corporations through penalties, private tutoring companies, and vouchers. Once more, the populations paying for this policy are students of color and the poor, since the poorest schools with limited resources comprised primarily of such students perform the worst on the

tests. The schools are then reconstituted by the school district, outsourced to private companies like Edison, or a portion of their federal funding is diverted to “parental choice” tutoring programs. According to Ben Clarke in a Corpwatch.org article entitled “Leaving Children Behind,”⁷ public school money was thus diverted to the company Educate, which runs the Sylvan Learning Centers, whose revenues, Clarke states, “grew from \$180 to \$250 million in the past three years [2001–04] and whose profits shot up 250 percent last year.” And, writes Clarke, since the introduction of NCLB, sales of printed materials related to standardized tests nearly tripled to \$592 million, money that was drained from the public schools, since Bush provided no funding for the increased costs.

False Reports of NCLB Success

A 2006 study by Harvard University Civil Rights Project found that the successes reported by NCLB proponents “simply do not show up on an independent national test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the ‘nation’s report card.’”⁸

A comparison of public high-school graduation rates over the course of the implementation of NCLB seems to confirm that the policy is actually damaging students of color. The public high school graduation rate for African Americans and Latinos nationwide has sunk from 56 percent and 54 percent respectively in 1998—before NCLB policies took their toll—to about 50 percent in 2005, according to a March 2005 report by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.⁹ The authors, Dan Losen and Johanna Wald, point out that “because of misleading and inaccurate reporting of dropout and graduation rates, the public remains unaware of this educational and civil rights crisis.”

In California, looking at the inverse—or dropout rates—according to statistics provided by the California Department of Education and published by Ed-Data, from 2000 to 2005, the four-year dropout rate for California went from 11.1 percent to 12.7 percent, with dropout rates for African Americans increasing nearly four percentage points from 18.1 percent to 21.8 percent. Latino dropout rates also increased from 15.3 percent to 16.6 percent during that same period.¹⁰

Middle Class Flee to Private Schools

The dismantling of the public schools is forcing those who can afford to pay for private schools to give up their right to free, equal education. Driving the entitled middle class out of the public schools furthers yet another goal of privatization, namely that of decreasing accountability, reports Dr. Giroux.¹¹

Dr. Giroux points out, that while an increasing number of students of color may not graduate under NCLB, their failing public schools are more than willing to provide them with “the appropriate attitudes for future work in low-skilled, low-paying jobs.”¹² Pat Wechsler reported in *Business Week* that thanks to partnerships with businesses, such as McDonald’s, in under-funded schools, students “learned how a McDonald’s works, and how to apply and interview for a job at McDonald’s.”¹³

It is no coincidence that one of the largest contributors to President Bush’s drive to institute vouchers, tuition tax credits, and charter schools is the Walton family—founder of Wal-Mart—who has dedicated at least \$250 million to such efforts over the past six years, according to *USA Today*. Wal-Mart is the largest private employer in the United States, with more than one million workers. Wal-Mart’s wages and benefits are significantly below retail industry standards, according to a report entitled, “The Hidden Cost of Wal-Mart Jobs,” by Dr. Arindrajit Dube, Ph.D. and Ken Jacobs.¹⁴ According to Anthony Bianco, who wrote a 2006 biography of the man, Walton “preferred uneducated workers.”¹⁵ Such workers are unlikely to question low pay, or unionize.

School failure is a product of “the political, economic, and social dynamics of poverty, joblessness, sexism, race and class discrimination, unequal funding, or a diminished tax base,” summarizes Dr. Giroux.¹⁶

NCLB Requirements Lower Quality of Education

An illustration of class and race discrimination leading to school failure is the use of McGraw-Hill’s Open Court program by schools afraid of NCLB penalties, even though the phonics program has been proven to damage students. According to a study by Margaret Moustafa and Robert E. Land at California State University in Los Angeles, “schools using Open Court are significantly more likely to be in the bottom quartile of the SAT 9 [state] assessment than comparable schools using non-scripted programs.”¹⁷

The president's educational program mandates any district wishing to qualify for government funding to implement "approved" reading curricula. It is not surprising that McGraw-Hill's Open Court has a majority of these contracts, given the fact that the McGraw-Hill and Bush family connections go back three generations, notes Stephen Metcalf in the *Nation*: "The McGraws are old Bush friends, dating back to the 1930s, when Joseph and Permelia Pryor Reed began to establish Jupiter Island, a barrier island off the coast of Florida, as a haven for the Northeast wealthy."¹⁸

Similarly, Neil Bush, George W.'s brother, also used his political influence to solicit contributions for his educational software company, Ignite. "In February 2004, the Houston school board unanimously agreed to accept \$115,000 in charitable donations from businesses and individuals who insisted the money be spent on Ignite. The deal raised conflict of interest concerns," reported Cynthia Leonor Garza in the *Houston Chronicle*.¹⁹ More recently, former first lady Barbara Bush donated to the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, with specific instructions that the money be spent on Ignite.

Perhaps a more apt name for Bush's NCLB is, No Corporation Left Behind, particularly if that corporation has strong ties to the Bush family—though we must be careful not to confuse the Bush "dynasty" with a long-term, systemic illness.

Ronald Bailey, a former fellow at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, and Chicano Scholar Guillermo Flores have identified these deliberate historic campaigns to exclude people of color from the political and educational system as a product of "internal colonialism."

"Internal colonialism," they write, "is nothing more than the domestic face of world imperialism.... The use of racial minorities brought surpluses to white society that contributed to the growth of monopoly capitalism."²⁰ In other words, cheap labor and raw materials led to huge profits for monopolistic firms, which today have become supra-national corporations. These larger forces are the real source of legislation like NCLB. Educators and activists who want real change must recognize and address this fundamental reality if they are serious about winning equal access to education for all. ■



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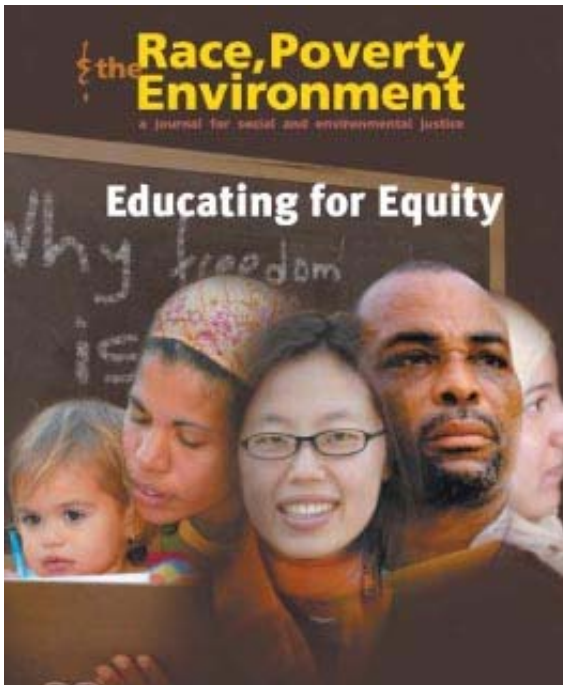
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