

# Race to the Bottom

BY DIANE RAVITCH

Momentous changes are occurring in American education, and they are occurring at a rapid pace, with far too little deliberation about the value and the likely consequences of these changes. As usual, these changes will disproportionately hurt our nation's poorest children, ill-equipping them to compete or succeed in the 21st century economy.

These changes are being driven by the federal Department of Education's quiet but firm assumption of control of the nation's public schools. This is not an overnight development. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is building on the precedent established by President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program, which established a strong federal presence in every public school district. NCLB not only required the states to create a testing and accountability regime for every public school in the nation, but it prescribed the sanctions that would be applied to schools that did not make adequate yearly progress. Acting without regard to research or evidence, NCLB dictated that every student in every school would be proficient by 2014, a goal that has never been attained by any state or nation in the history of humankind. As that date draws nearer, more and more schools will be stigmatized as failing because of their inability to reach a goal that was unrealistic from the start. And as they fail, they will suffer harsh penalties; they will be compelled to close, to fire the principal, to fire all or part of the staff, to be taken over by the state or a private management organization, or to "restructure" in some other fashion. And given that these schools are more likely to have disproportionate numbers of poor children, it is precisely the schools that serve our poorest children that will bear the brunt of our misguided policies. It is precisely in the

poorest communities that school closings and staff firings will be concentrated.

NCLB has been a costly disaster. None of its prescribed remedies has been successful as a template for turning around a low-performing school. No school was ever improved by closing it. Few schools see results if they are handed over to the state or private management, and thus far, restructuring has demonstrated little or no success. Indeed, according to a study by the Center on Education Policy in Washington, D.C., more than 3,500 public schools were in the planning or implementation phase of restructuring in 2007–2008. Yet “none of the five federal restructuring options were associated with a greater likelihood of a school making AYP [adequate yearly progress] overall or in reading or math alone.” Low-performing schools can improve—and there are many examples of such improvement—but there is no model that Washington can prescribe or dictate to make it happen. When low-performing schools improve, it is almost always the work of an inspiring principal and a dedicated staff, whose efforts are enhanced by professional development, a strengthened curriculum, a culture of collaboration, greater access to resources, better supervision, reduced class size, extra instructional time, and other common sense changes.

NCLB’s legacy is this: state accountability systems that produce inflated results; widespread cheating to meet the annual targets; a curriculum with less time for history, science, and the arts; teaching to the test; and meager academic gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The gains in student achievement were actually larger before the passage of NCLB, and the racial achievement gap narrowed most significantly in the 1970s and 1980s. NCLB mandates that by 2014 all students are to have met proficiency, which is a utopian goal. No state or district is likely to meet it, even though each state defined proficiency on state tests for itself. Secretary Duncan predicted early in 2011 that more than 80% of the nation’s schools would be declared “failing” by NCLB standards within a year. If the law is not changed by 2014, nearly all public schools will be “failures,” because one group (usually students with disabilities) have not reached proficiency. This too is the legacy of NCLB: a widespread public perception that the public schools have “failed” because they are unable to meet the law’s demand for 100 percent proficiency. This perception of failure erodes public confidence in public education and sets the stage for privatization.

Instead of admitting that NCLB has been an expensive and demoralizing failure, President Obama and Secretary Duncan have accepted its fundamental premise that students must be tested annually and that schools and teachers must be subject to harsh punishment if they are unable to raise test scores. Their Race to the Top program will make student test scores even more consequential than they were under NCLB.

Race to the Top received funding of \$4.3 billion from the economic stimulus plan enacted by Congress in 2009. Secretary Duncan used this money to launch a competition among the states at a time when every state was facing fiscal meltdown. To

become eligible, the states had to enact changes that most were unlikely to make without the lure of the federal cash. Hoping to win a share of the billions, some states lifted their caps on charter schools; some passed laws to evaluate teachers in relation to their students’ test scores; others agreed to “turn around” low-performing schools by adopting the punitive measures favored by the Obama administration; many embraced newly created national standards in mathematics and English language arts.

Secretary Duncan recognized early on that NCLB is a toxic brand and will drop the name in the administration’s proposal for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. But much will remain familiar. Like the Bush administration, the Obama administration will continue to emphasize test-based accountability, merit pay, and choice. All of these are traditional elements of the Republican approach to school reform. Now, they have become the bipartisan consensus.

The mainstream media have applauded the Obama administration’s bold plans to remake American education but have been strangely incurious about the evidence supporting it. In fact, there is little to no evidence for any part of this agenda. It is a risky venture, not only because it involves the expenditure of billions of dollars (leveraging billions more that will be spent by the states), but because it sets the nation’s schools on a course that is unlikely to lead to meaningful improvement in the quality of education. This strategy may ultimately lead to even greater public dissatisfaction with public education and accelerate the movement toward privatization.

The Obama education reform program is indeed muscular. It is brash and confident in claiming to know precisely what is needed to reform American schools and raise student achievement, especially for poor and struggling students. It represents a remarkable expansion of the federal role into what has traditionally been the province of state and local decision-making. If there were incontrovertible proof that the nation’s schools would improve dramatically by taking the required steps, then there might be good reason for the federal government to take such assertive action. But incontrovertible proof does not exist for the federal government’s agenda. Neither President Obama nor Secretary Duncan can point to any district that has applied their reforms and seen dramatic improvement. What we have seen instead is a rash of cheating scandals, most recently in Atlanta, where teachers and principals allegedly changed students’ answers on standardized tests, either to win bonuses or avoid dire consequences. Only months earlier, a similar cheating scandal was revealed in Washington, D.C., where more than half the schools were under investigation because of a high rate of erasures. Where there have been dramatic changes in test scores, heightened scrutiny is called for.

Consider charter schools, which are now receiving royal treatment by the media. In 2010, three commercial films featured charters as the miracle cure for education, a beacon of hope especially for disadvantaged and minority students. There are currently more than 5,000 charter schools in the nation. Some are excellent, some are terrible, and most are somewhere

in the middle. On the whole, charter schools do not produce higher test scores than regular public schools. The CREDO national study, conducted by Stanford economist Margaret Raymond, compared nearly half the nation's charter schools to similar traditional public schools and concluded that only 17 percent of the charters got higher math scores than the public schools. The remaining 83 percent of charters were either no different or worse than neighboring public schools.

When viewed through the scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the federal testing program that is considered the gold standard, charter schools achieve no miracles. Having been compared to regular public schools by NAEP in 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009, charters have never outperformed regular public schools, not in reading or mathematics. Whether one looks at the performance of Black students, Hispanic students, low-income students, or urban students, the two sectors produce similar results. To put it plainly: Charter schools are not a panacea for solving the academic problems of poor and disadvantaged children. Nonetheless, the Obama administration is betting on charters as one of its key levers to reform American education.

Another reform that is supposed to lead to dramatic improvement is evaluating teachers by their students' test scores. In hopes of winning federal dollars, several states have passed laws to base as much as 50 percent of teachers' evaluation on test scores. The results of tying teacher evaluation, compensation, and tenure to student test scores are predictable: There will be more teaching to the test; more time devoted to test preparation rather than instruction; and a consequent narrowing of the curriculum. The current generation of multiple-choice, standardized tests are designed to measure a band of skills, not teacher quality. Test publishers have always warned that the tests should be used only for the purpose for which they were created. A test of fifth-grade reading skills tests fifth-grade reading skills, not teacher quality.

Researchers have found that teacher effects, when measured this way, vary from year to year because scores are influenced by many factors other than teacher quality. Students are not randomly assigned to teachers. A teacher will get great results one year because she had a "good" class, but poor results the next

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year because the class had a few disruptive students. Test scores will also be affected by extraneous events, such as whether students got a good night's sleep, had a quarrel with a friend, or were distracted. These vagaries and "measurement errors" are likely to be even greater when applied to teachers working with students in our most difficult schools—after all, research has well documented that these students come to school carrying the baggage of poverty-related problems that generate such measurement errors. Mathematician John Ewing warned recently in an article titled "Mathematical Intimidation" that value-added measures are not appropriate to determine teacher quality and that data are being misused to intimidate the unwary. Ewing was especially scornful of the way teachers in Los Angeles were brow-beaten by journalists from the Los Angeles Times, wielding ratings declaring them to be "ineffective," despite the ratings of their principals and other evidence of their quality.

Furthermore, the more that policymakers attach high stakes—rewards and punishments—to test scores, the more they should expect to see cheating, gaming the system, inflated scores, and other efforts to

hit the target. In recent years, even state education departments have gamed the system by lowering the passing mark on state tests, thus lifting their results without improving education.

Once this regime is well established, we can expect to see more attention to basic skills and less time for history, science, the arts, geography, civics, foreign languages, and even physical education. And as test preparation intensifies, we can expect to see students who master test-taking skills without necessarily becoming better at reading and mathematics. After nine years of NCLB, remediation rates in college have not declined. Some districts and states are producing higher test scores but no better education because students are learning to pass the state tests but are not learning to comprehend complex material that requires background knowledge, nor have they mastered the mathematics required for entry-level courses in college. As the economy continues to favor the college educated and the set of "21st-century skills" taught therein, our poorest and most disadvantaged children will continue to be dealt a losing hand.

Another hallmark of federal policy in this administration is punitive action against low-performing schools. When the

President and the Secretary saluted education officials in Rhode Island for threatening to close the only high school in the state's poorest urban center, they sent a message that was heard across the nation: Schools that have low scores should be shut down or turned into charters or privatized; their staffs should be fired. (Central Falls High School in Rhode Island was not closed, but large numbers of teachers quit and the school continues to be troubled by dissension and mistrust between teachers and administrators.) The problem with these approaches is that there is no evidence that any of them will consistently produce better education for the students in those schools. Closing a school is no guarantee that whatever replaces it will be better. Most of the schools that are identified as low-performing are sure to be schools that enroll large numbers of poor students, students who speak limited English, students who are homeless or transient. By its words and actions, the administration seems to assume that a school gets low scores because it has a bad principal or bad teachers.

But the staff may be heroic in the face of daily challenges; they may be operating with fewer resources than schools in affluent neighborhoods. Absent individual evaluations, it seems unfair to conclude that the staff is failing.

No nation with a high-performing school system is following the policies advocated first by the Bush administration and now by the Obama administration. High-performing nations make sure that students have access to a rich and balanced curriculum, not just a steady diet of test preparation and testing. High-performing nations do not test every student every year, nor do they rely so heavily on standardized, multiple-choice tests. High-performing nations place their bets on a strong and well-prepared education profession. They prize highly educated teachers and treat them with respect. They insist on having principals who are experienced educators. And at the same time, our own policymakers seem to be promoting the de-professionalization of education, as more districts hire noneducators as superintendents and create programs to train newcomers and inexperienced teachers to become principals. This approach is not a good bet for the future.

If we are serious about improving our schools, we must select well-educated teachers, give them the support and men-

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tors they need to succeed, and make sure that they are evaluated by principals who are themselves master teachers. We must insist that all students receive a curriculum that inspires a love of learning, one that includes the arts, history, science, civics, and other important and engaging studies. We must use tests for information and diagnosis; we must use them as part of an improvement strategy, not as a means to hand out money or pink slips. We must stop blaming educators for the social ills that get in the way of learning.

The work of school improvement involves small victories and occasional defeats. We must forego the search for silver bullets and dramatic transformations. Such strategies produce spectacular gains and equally spectacular losses in the financial markets. But these are risks we cannot take with our children, our schools, and our communities. Above all, we must treasure public education as one of the prime elements

of our democracy. We must not privatize it or give it away or outsource it. Nor should we set unrealistic goals that demoralize and punish those who do the daily work of schooling.

In this important work, the federal government certainly has an important role to play. Since 1965, the federal government has been responsible for supporting equitable funding for districts with many poor students, ensuring the rights of students with disabilities, defending the civil rights of students, making college financially accessible to greater numbers of students, and supplying accurate information and research about an American education. It does not have all the answers. We must take care not to invest our hopes in unproven, untried strategies.

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