

A Letter to America

Excerpt from Chapter 3: Leaving Every Child Behind

Every US President since the 70's has confidently stepped up to the plate to improve our public education system. Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush 41, and Clinton have all been in the batter's box and taken their swings. None have made any substantial improvement in the problem. So now we have President George W. Bush. It is his time at the plate. Fortunately, he has tackled this problem before as Governor of Texas. He has a history of improving education.

The education problem in Texas was monumental. Throughout the Sixties and Seventies Texas routinely ranked 49th in education, ahead of only one state--Mississippi. Governor Bush fought for educational reform on many fronts. First, he lent his considerable clout to a 1984 law designed to end social promotion, a law that had not been well enforced. In 1999 Bush pushed a law through the legislature that requires every child in the state to pass the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Test (TAAS). While well-intentioned, the implementation of this law has been a problem. On the surface, the TAAS program seems like an excellent idea: every child in the state of Texas will be taught the necessary skills and information to pass a demanding test of their basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills. Additionally, the law made passing this test a high-stakes enterprise for both school systems and students: schools were punished if their students did not do well on the tests. After three years of a school's poor performance, students at that school would be given a \$1500 school voucher that could be used to finance their going to any other school they felt would teach them more effectively. Failing students would be required to repeat the grades in which they failed TAAS tests. So, students were also punished for not performing well on their tests. Whenever the stakes are high, it is human nature to try to cut corners to gain an advantage; educators and students in the State of Texas are no different. Many schools began teaching to the test; students spent an entire school year prepping for TAAS, and many other educational experiences or programs were eliminated. Sadly, there have been reports of students' cheating on the tests as well. After a few years, student test scores on the TAAS did improve, suggesting that our students are learning and retaining more. But

during the same time our students' scores on the college entrance exams—the SAT and the ACT—did not change at all. Moreover, an increasing dropout rate in the cities of Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio probably skewed the test results; for if these students had stayed in school and taken their TAAS tests, their scores, most likely, would have lowered those cities' and the state's overall test score average. It would seem that in the case of this particular educational reform, which appeared to be dramatically effective, Governor Bush's efforts made no significant, measurable improvement. He may, in fact, have hurt what was still good in Texas' schools. To continue our baseball analogy, Governor Bush whiffed on a fastball down the middle.

Once Governor Bush became President Bush, he promised that the educational reforms he had instituted in Texas would be implemented nationwide. This policy became known as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). This education initiative, which was passed by both houses of Congress, has several important points. First, No Child Left Behind calls for increased accountability on the part of schools for their students' performance. Sanctions such as money being taken from the school's budget and placed into the parents' hands are to be imposed upon schools with high failure rates. Secondly, parents will have the ability, using federal and state dollars, to remove their children from schools with persistently poor test results and to transfer them to better public schools or charter schools.

Several aspects of No Child Left Behind do not seem to make sense. First, is its inflexibility: NCLB doesn't recognize the personal and individualized nature of learning. Ethnic background, family circumstances, a child's own motivation, and teamwork between school and family all affect a child's progress as a learner. But under NCLB schools are rated and sanctioned based upon the average performance of their entire student body. What happens to schools that have high numbers of minority students, or students who are immigrants? In Chicago, for example, 40% of the students in a public school called Waters speak English as their *second* language. How can anyone reasonably expect a school with this kind of teaching burden to score as well as a public school from an affluent neighborhood in which all the children and their parents are native speakers? High failure rates are a serious problem in any state or city that has a large immigrant population. According to a *Time* article, in California, for example, 45%

of the schools did not make the NCLB grade last year. In Chicago, another ethnically diverse area, thousands of students did not make the grade.

Another problem with No Child Left Behind is the simple fact that there are not enough places in the better-performing schools for would-be transfer students. For example, in Chicago last year, there were only 1000 spots in the “better” schools into which students (15,000 asked) might transfer. The fact is, at least for the time being, there are not a lot of passing schools with a large number of empty chairs waiting for students to fill them.

So the list of failing schools—what I call “the humiliation list” --is unimaginably long. This is a list, however, that the Bush administration hoped would cause a public outcry and act as a stimulus for local school systems around the country to work harder to reform. But if most schools are on the list, where is the shame? If the mandate of NCLB is simply unattainable for most schools, why would they even try to reform? It seems that President Bush has taken another big swing at the education ball and has come up empty.

Much of the public debate or outcry about No Child Left Behind has focused on the expense and inflexibility of it for administrators (not, surprisingly, on its impact on the nation’s children). NCLB has a lot of hidden costs which the states must absorb. Extra testing and system-tracking cost millions of dollars. Where is the money going to come from? Many states are already facing budget shortfalls as it is. Moreover, federal funding appears to be about \$15 million short of what is needed to properly implement NCLB. One legislator, James Dillard of Virginia, who is a former teacher, has led an effort to change the law. Dillard has met with Department of Education officials on a number of occasions in order to try to broker some kind of flexibility in the NCLB package. He even met with White House officials, but Dillard reports they simply stonewalled him. In response, Dillard supported a resolution in the Virginia state legislature asking Congress to let Virginia be exempt from NCLB. In the resolution NCLB was called “the most sweeping intrusion into state and local control of education in the history of the United States.” Unfortunately for the Bush administration, Representative Dillard and Virginia are not the only voices calling for major changes in

NCLB. Twenty states have jumped on the anti-NCLB bandwagon. Utah has passed a bill that has made it illegal to spend state money on NCLB.

As I have already made clear, at the core of the NCLB fiasco is testing. Nowhere in President Bush's speeches, however, has he made a convincing argument that testing equals learning. Scanning the White House web pages on education, I was unable to find an argument that even touched on this subject. NCLB simply assumes that testing equals knowledge; it presents no evidence in support of this assumption. If, as is now the case, scholars can not agree on whether or not the prestigious SAT, which has a seventy year history, is an effective measure of students' learning, then state tests, which are just now being developed and refined, are certainly in trouble. According to a March 4, 2001, article in *Time Magazine*, "it's getting hard to find an admissions officer anywhere who says a SAT score alone tells you anything important."

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