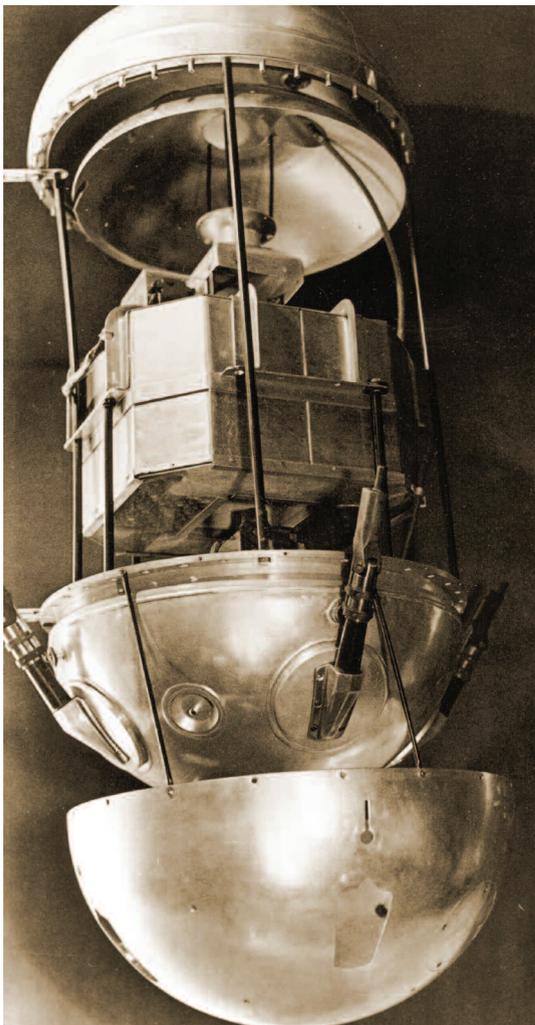


# The First Time 'Everything Changed'

*Mr. Bracey looks back at an event in the Fifties that seemed to change everything for the U.S. as a whole and for U.S. education in particular. Working his way forward to the present day, he makes it clear that the time when everything changed also marked the point at which things started staying the same.*

BY GERALD W. BRACEY



View of Sputnik 1 courtesy NASA

**B**Y SUNDAY, October 6, 1957, most Americans had concluded that the beep, beep, beep from that thing called Sputnik, a manmade satellite that the Russians had supposedly sent into orbit on Friday, was not a hoax, not an electronic Potemkin Village, a product of what we would today call “special effects.” Initially, the idea that Russian technology could surpass ours was unthinkable. And our brains’ repression of Sputnik’s reality was abetted by the implications that the putative orb carried: if they can send this thing over our heads, they can also attach an atomic bomb and drop it in our laps.

“Soon they will be dropping bombs on us from space like kids dropping rocks from freeway overpasses,” said Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson.<sup>1</sup> Writer Tom Wolfe described it this way: “Nothing less than *control of the heavens* was at stake. It was Armageddon, the final and decisive battle of the forces of good and evil.”<sup>2</sup> According to journalist Paul Dickson, ministers spoke of the Second Coming, and at least one said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if He appeared today.”<sup>3</sup>

## THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, 1957

Once the world realized that Sputnik was not a swindle, people had to explain how a technologically backward nation such as the Soviet Union could have accomplished such a feat. Maybe the

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Russians had spies and accomplices in the West. Maybe our fat and lazy materialism had done us in. Maybe. But with remarkable alacrity a dominant theory emerged: the Russians beat us into space because they had better schools.

In some cases school critics blamed themselves for allowing progressive educators generally and the advocates for “life adjustment” education in particular to “fool the American people into believing that education can safely be left to the ‘professional’ educators. . . . The mood of America has changed . . . I doubt we can again be silenced.”<sup>4</sup> The speaker here was Adm. Hyman Rickover, an ardent advocate for a more traditional education. At that moment, the progressive movement was in tatters. It was badly fragmented and had taken major hits from Rickover and from Albert Lynd’s *Quackery in the Public Schools*, Robert Hutchins’ *Conflict in Education*, Mortimer Smith’s *Diminished Mind*, Rudolf Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, and, especially, Arthur Bestor’s *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Public Schools*.

*U.S. News & World Report* ran an interview with Bestor in late 1956 under the title “We Are Less Educated than 50 Years Ago.”<sup>5</sup> After Sputnik, it brought him back for “What Went Wrong with U.S. Schools.”<sup>6</sup> Bestor eschewed two common descriptors of life adjustment education — “flapdoodle” and “gobbledygook” — and said simply that, “in the light of Sputnik, ‘life-adjustment education’ turns out to have been something perilously close to ‘death adjustment’ for our nation and our children. . . . We have wasted an appalling part of the time of our young people on trivialities. The Russians have had sense enough not to do so. That’s why the first satellite bears the label ‘Made in Russia.’”

No doubt Bestor believed what he said. Many people believed it. But it was utter nonsense. The U.S. could have beaten the Russians by over a year. Dwight David Eisenhower *chose not to*.

## WERNHER VON BRAUN SPEAKS

Various public explanations for the Sputnik debacle came from no less a figure than former Nazi and rocket expert Wernher von Braun:

The main reason is that the United States had no ballistic missile program worth mentioning between 1945 and 1951. These six years, during which the Russians obviously laid the groundwork for their large rocket program, are irretrievably lost. The United States went into a serious ballistic missile program only in 1951. . . . Thus our present dilemma is not due to the fact that we are not working hard enough now, but that we did not work hard enough during the first six to ten years after the war.<sup>7</sup>

Von Braun did not point fingers — in public — at the dysfunctional squabbling involving the Army, Air Force, and Navy. Each service had a rocket program, and each jockeyed for which would get into orbit first. The civilian coordinating agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), would not exist until late 1958. At a secret briefing to Army officials three weeks after Sputnik orbited, von Braun did point to how scattered the programs were: “About a year ago I saw a compilation of all guided missile projects, which — at one time or another — had been activated in this country since 1945. I doubt if you will believe it, but the total figure was 119 different guided missile projects!”<sup>8</sup>

Von Braun also did not mention how American scientists had neglected their homegrown rocketry genius, Robert Goddard. Von Braun had used Goddard’s inventions to develop the V-1 “buzz bomb” and the far deadlier, supersonic (and therefore silent) V-2 rocket that slammed tons of explosives into England during the late stages of World War II. But in 1920, when Goddard, under the aegis of the Smithsonian Institution, announced that he had invented a rocket that could explore deep space and might reach all the way to the Moon, a *New York Times* editorial scoffed at the possibility. Everyone knew a rocket would be useless in a vacuum. Goddard, said the editors, “seems to lack the knowledge ladled out daily in high schools.”<sup>9</sup>

The *Times* had nothing more to say about Goddard’s folly for 49 years. Then, on 17 July 1969, Apollo 11 sent Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins hurtling toward the Moon. The *Times* referred to its 1920 editorial and commented, “The *Times* regrets the error.” Goddard died in 1945.<sup>10</sup>

But these were all public explanations. Von Braun himself knew differently. The real reason for the Russian primacy we might call “Ike think.” On 20 September 1956, von Braun’s group, the Army Ballistic Missile Agency in Huntsville, Alabama, launched a four-stage Jupiter-C rocket from Cape Canaveral. The first three stages attained an altitude of 862 miles, a speed of 13,000 miles per hour, and a range of 3,355 miles. All records. Its fourth stage could have slipped from gravity’s grasp and attained orbit. That is, if the fourth stage had contained rocket fuel. But the fourth stage was filled with sand.

Eisenhower had fretted over the military’s ability to determine Russian troop and submarine movements and bomber and missile capabilities. He was especially anxious about a possible surprise attack. The initial solution to improved intelligence was the U-2, a plane that soared above Russia’s air defenses. But violations

of a sovereign nation's airspace were illegal, making the U-2 a legitimate target for Russian surface-to-air missiles. When a Russian SAM managed to shoot down the U-2 piloted by Gary Powers, the U.S. could only plead for his return and negotiate. The Russians eventually swapped Powers for a couple of Soviet spies then in U.S. custody.

Eisenhower's ultimate goal was the creation of a system of spy satellites. But for that, he needed a precedent that would establish a doctrine that deep space was open space, international space. For that, von Braun's Jupiter-C posed a problem. Von Braun's rocket was derived from and looked a lot like his V-2. It was part of the program to produce intercontinental ballistic missiles. Some analysts thought that the Soviets might view *any* orbiting satellite as a threat and not only complain about it but threaten our allies. In an orbiting Jupiter-C, the Russians would also see a vehicle launched by the detested ex-Nazi that was principally a weapon, not an instrument for exploration.

On the other hand, the Navy's Vanguard program was predicated on smaller rockets and lighter payloads, payloads that would clearly announce themselves as instruments of research. Alas, the Vanguard program was behind schedule and, ultimately, behind Sputnik. (Its post-Sputnik failures gave rise to headlines like "Kaputnik," "Floppnik," and "Dudnik." Vanguard's schedule called for a November 1957 launch. This might well have caused the Russians to accelerate their own timetable. Vanguard finally pushed a 31-pound satellite into orbit on 31 March 1958).

Eisenhower was casual about Sputnik. Indeed, his deputy secretary of defense, Donald Quarles, announced that "the Russians have, in fact, done us a 'good turn' unintentionally in establishing a doctrine of freedom of space." Eisenhower wrote, "We felt certain that we could get a great deal more information of all kinds out of the free use of space than they could."<sup>11</sup> It was a wonderful doctrine that opened space up to exploration, but one that educators paid a terrible price for. For his part, Ike was utterly perplexed that the success of Sputnik was seen to reflect a failed public school system.

## SPUTNIK SPEAKS

Signals from Sputnik consisted only of a beep that lasted .3 seconds and a silence of the same duration, but the 184-pound, beach-ball-sized orb still spoke volumes. Physically, the easiest way to send something into orbit is to take it to the equator and launch it due east. That takes maximum advantage of the Earth's eastward spin. The Russians, though, launched Sputnik from south-

ern Kazakhstan at a 65° angle to the equator. This required more thrust, but the resulting orbits carried Sputnik over most of the inhabited world, ensuring more coverage in the world's media. Given Russia's awesome accomplishment, U.S. allies might waver in their support; nonaligned nations might tilt toward Moscow.

When the Russians broadcast the times that Sputnik would arrive over various places, they included its appearance over Little Rock, Arkansas. On September 24, President Eisenhower had ordered troops to escort the nine black students who would integrate Little Rock High School. By announcing Sputnik's arrival times over Little Rock, Moscow attempted to signal to the world that the Soviet Union was the friend of oppressed people everywhere.

And Lyndon Johnson's fear notwithstanding, Sputnik spoke not so much from what it actually was, but from what it portended. "The science of today is the technology of tomorrow," said "father of the H-bomb" Edward Teller. "Many people are afraid we will be attacked by Russia. I am not free of such worry. But I do not think this is the most probable way in which they will defeat us. They will advance so fast in science and leave us so far behind that their way of doing things will be the way, and there will be nothing we can do about it."<sup>12</sup>

More than the events of 9/11/01 or 12/7/41 (to which it was often compared at the time), 10/4/57 meant that everything had changed. U.S. defense was predi-

cated on fleets of bombers stationed around the world. Were they now obsolete? In November 1957, the Soviets launched Sputnik 2, which weighed in at over 1,100 pounds, not counting Laika, its puppydog passenger. On 15 May 1958, Sputnik 3 carried 2,926 pounds into orbit. Sputnik 3 was less noticed by the public than Sputnik 1, but it got more attention from the U.S. military. Sputnik 3 implied that Russia had moved closer to having an operational intercontinental ballistic missile than anyone had previously thought.

### THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, 1957, CONTINUED

None of the technological aspects of the flight troubled Americans' thinking about Sputnik's meaning. It was the schools, stupid. Proof arrived with the issue of *Life* for 24 March 1958.

On the cover, the words "Crisis in Education" were emblazoned in red letters on a black background. The cover featured portraits of two high school juniors, Alexei Kutzkov glaring out from Moscow and an easy-smiling Stephen Lapekas gazing out from Chicago. Inside, pictures showed Alexei conducting complicated experiments in chemistry and physics and reading aloud from *Sister Carrie* in his English class. Out-of-school pictures showed him playing chess, standing in front of a bust of Russian composer Mikhail Glinka at a concert, and reading from an English/Russian phrasebook while riding the metro to a science museum. Text under pictures of two teachers indicated that they taught Alexei material considered too advanced for U.S. high schools — organic chemistry and the theory of mathematical inequalities.

By contrast, Lapekas is seen at a typewriter ("I type about one word a minute," the caption quotes him) and retreating from a geometry problem on the blackboard (caption: "Stephen amused class with wisecracks about his ineptitude"). A picture of Stephen standing in front of the class reading from *Victoria Regina* is shot over a girl's shoulder and reveals her looking at *Modern Romances* magazine. Out-of-class pictures show Stephen walking his girlfriend to school, swimming (11 hours a week, says the text), and dancing in rehearsal for the school musical (for two months, the text advises).

The litany of charges was almost endless. The Soviet Union was producing twice — or was it three times? — as many engineers and scientists as we were. The average Soviet student was years ahead of even the brightest U.S. high-schoolers. Not enough math and science were being offered in our high schools. Gifted students were being neglected. Other European countries' educa-

tion systems were superior to our own. Schools were suffused with anti-intellectualism.

Bestor, a history professor, claimed that "we are less educated than 50 years ago." He claimed that the percentage of high school students taking some science had dropped from 84% in 1900 to 54% in 1950; math-taking had plummeted from 86% to 55%. For a historian, this was a remarkable statistical lapse. Apparently, Bestor was not aware that in 1900, the high school graduation rate was 7%. It would hardly be surprising that students in such an elite group would be studying mathematics. By 1950, the graduation rate had moved past 60%.

The response of educators to such claims was relatively lame. For some of the claims there were no handy numbers. Paul Elicker, executive secretary of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), offered one of the more elaborate rebuttals. Elicker showed that the millions of men who were tested by the Army in World War I posted a grade level of 6.8, while those tested for World War II scored at 10.5.<sup>13</sup> This refuted, Elicker argued, Bestor's charge that we were less educated now.

Elicker also observed that we didn't have much reliable information about the Russian schools and related NASSP's experience of serving for 10 years as the agency to select a dozen public school students to study at a "high-ranking" school in England. "They held their own with their English schoolmates," he wrote. Not exactly overwhelming evidence, but indicative of the difficulty in making any compelling data-based comparative statements in those days.

As for the neglect of the gifted, Elicker pointed out that the number of programs for gifted-and-talented students was growing. Moreover, a Carnegie report from 1908 revealed large percentages of students admitted to elite schools with "conditions." At Harvard, for instance, 49% of freshman had conditions, while at Yale the figure was 58%. Students with "conditions" would today be called students in need of remedial courses. Elicker observed that, at these schools in the 1950s, there were no students with conditions. Finally, this "'scholarless' American public high school" was also the greatest supplier of those tapped for the learned society Phi Beta Kappa.

Still, inattention to the gifted became one of the major post-Sputnik themes among reformers. The *Life* comparison of Lapekas and Kutzkov was just the opening round in a five-part series. The third in the series centered on the neglect of gifted students in American schools and described the plight of Barry Wichmann of Rockwell City, Iowa (population 2,333 then; 2,088

now). Barry had an I.Q. of 162, which made him a mystery to both his parents and his school. The article emphasized his loneliness and inability to fit in. "I want to like baseball," he sighs at one point. One of Barry's teachers complained that she had five students with reading difficulties, leaving her little time to cope with his needs. His problems appear to have been complicated by what he later found out was dyscalculia, difficulties with numbers similar to dyslexia.

Befriended by the *Life* reporter and assisted by a move to Winchester, Virginia, where he fit in better, Barry finished high school, graduated from nearby James Madison University, and eventually obtained a Ph.D. in clinical psychology.<sup>14</sup> Lapekas became a Navy pilot and then had a 30-year career as a commercial pilot for TWA.<sup>15</sup> Kutzkov's fate remains unknown, although an English journalist told Lapekas' son that Kutzkov works for the Russian equivalent of the FAA.

### THE CRITICS SPEAK, AND SPEAK, AND SPEAK

Sputnik set a nasty precedent that has become a persistent tendency: when a social crisis — real, imagined, or manufactured — appears, schools are the scapegoat of choice; when the crisis is resolved, they receive no credit.

Two years before the 1969 Moon shot, schools came under fire for the urban violence then sweeping the nation. Fred Hechinger, education writer for the *New York Times*, took a jaundiced view of that attack:

Almost 10 years ago, when the first Soviet Sputnik went into orbit, the schools were blamed for America's lag in space. Last week, in the Senate, the schools were blamed for the ghetto riots.

In each case, the politicians' motives were suspect. Their reflex reaction, when faced with a national crisis, is to assign guilt to persons with the least power to hit back. The schools, which are nonpolitical but dependent on political purse strings, fill the bill of emergency whipping boy.<sup>16</sup>

In 1969, a mere 12 years after Sputnik, Americans landed men on the Moon and returned them safely to Earth. The Moon is a heavenly object that the Russians, for all their superior schools, vaunted technology, and numerous attempts never managed to even *hit*.

No one suggested that improved schools might have had anything to do with the mission's success. And no doubt they didn't. As *Kappan* editor Stanley Elam pointed out in a gutsy piece, all 53 NASA scientists and engineers who responded to a PDK survey had finished high school before 1958. (I say gutsy because Elam titled the article "The Schools Behind the Masters of the



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Moon” and published it in the September 1969 issue. That issue would have been ready to go to press *before* Armstrong took a “giant leap for mankind.” The success of Apollo 11 was by no means assured, as those of us can attest who held our breath in the long silence on July 20 before hearing, “The Eagle has landed.”)

In the early 1980s, America’s captains of industry had grown lazy about making steel and building cars, while the Germans, Koreans, and especially the Japanese had zipped ahead of us. Must be the schools. “If only to keep and improve on the slim lead we retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system,” intoned the authors of that golden treasury of spun statistics, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983.

By 1992, Japan had discovered that the Emperor’s Palace and grounds really *were* more valuable than the entire state of California. Japan’s bubble had burst, and its economy was in freefall. It has only recently recovered. All during the 15 years of recession and stagnation, Japan’s kids continued to ace tests, but their stellar academic performance didn’t goose their economy.

And U.S. schools in the meantime? They bore the brunt of continual grouching that lousy schools are producing a lousy work force. This complaining lasted through the recession that cost George H. W. Bush a second term. By the time Bill Clinton entered the White House in 1992, though, things were looking better. By

February 1994, the *New York Times* felt comfortable running a long story under the headline “The American Economy, Back on Top.”<sup>17</sup> Three months later, IBM CEO Louis Gerstner took to the *Times* op-ed page with “Our Schools Are Broken.”<sup>18</sup> This hypocrisy elicited a bit of acid in response from Stanford University professor Larry Cuban:

For the last decade, U.S. presidents, corporate leaders, and critics blasted public schools for a globally less competitive economy, sinking productivity, and jobs lost to other nations.

Why is it now with a bustling economy, rising productivity, and shrinking unemployment, American public schools are not receiving credit for the turnaround?<sup>19</sup>

### THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, 2007: FEAR MONGERING

In 2007, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Center for American Progress, the National Center on Education and the Economy, the Broad Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have set up the public schools once again. If the subprime mortgage debacle sends us spiraling into recession, educators can expect to take the hit.

In February 2007, *Leaders and Laggards* appeared jointly from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Center for American Progress (CAP).<sup>20</sup> Seeing these two institutions partnered struck David Marshak of Seattle University as odd, and he queried John Podesta, President Clinton’s former chief of staff and now executive director of CAP:

Your Center for American Progress claims to be “a progressive think tank dedicated to improving the lives of Americans through ideas and actions. We are creating a long-term, progressive vision for America — a vision that policy makers, thought leaders, and activists can use to shape the national debate and pass laws that make a difference.”

Yet you are hawking a report on public schools created by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which has been an enemy of progressive political innovations since its inception. . . . They opposed Truman and Kennedy and Johnson and Carter — and yes, Clinton. Have you forgotten so quickly?

Podesta replied:

We, of course, are well aware of the U.S. Chamber’s history and current policy positions, 99% of which we disagree with. Nevertheless, we decided to engage in this project because we thought it would be useful in moving a progressive education agenda forward. . . . You may disagree with our tactics in trying to find common ground with people we naturally disagree with, but we did it because we

thought it was an important step in addressing the needs of the neediest kids in our country. We may be wrong in that judgment, but we are not naive.<sup>21</sup>

We are not naive? But there is nothing “progressive” about the agenda despite Podesta’s claims to the contrary. The first half of his speech announcing the report could have been written by Herb Walberg or Eric Hanushek. Progressive? If they’re not naive, one must consider the possibility that their motives are not benign. Most of the research that supports the litany of problems Podesta clicked off in his talk was conducted by critics seeking alternatives to public schools.

As with all such reports, *Leaders and Laggards* pitches strong on rhetoric, bats weak on facts:

The measures of our educational shortcomings are stark indeed; most 4th and 8th graders are not proficient in either reading or mathematics. Only about two-thirds of all 9th graders graduate from high school within four years. And those students who do receive diplomas are too often unprepared for college or the modern workplace.

Despite such grim data, for too long the business community has been willing to leave education to the politicians and educators — standing aside and contenting itself with offers of money, support, and goodwill.

The first allegation is true — most fourth- and eighth-graders are not proficient in either reading or math. At the ceremony announcing the report, Podesta declared, “It is unconscionable to me that there is not a single state in the country where a majority of 4th and 8th graders are proficient in math and reading.”<sup>22</sup>

“Unconscionable”? Let me suggest a few hours with my book *Reading Educational Research: How to Avoid Getting Statistically Snookered*. It is organized around 32 Principles of Data Interpretation, and Principle 23 states: “If a situation really is as alleged, ask, ‘So what?’” This principle does not call for a smart-alecky so-what response, but advises readers not simply to assume the worst, but to examine the implications of the situation.

If Podesta were to do that, he would discover that *there is not a single country in the entire world where more than one-third of the students are proficient in reading, there are only six nations where a small majority of students are proficient in mathematics, and there are just one or two nations where a majority are proficient in science.*

To draw such a conclusion, we need to examine American performance on the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) tests alongside American performance on either TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study) or PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). One can then

estimate how other nations participating in those two studies would have performed had they taken the NAEP assessments.

The eminent psychometrician Robert Linn outlined this procedure in 2000.<sup>23</sup> The most thorough linking between TIMSS and NAEP was performed recently by Gary Phillips, formerly acting commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics, who is now with the American Institutes for Research. No one would accuse either of these analysts of being a flake or an apologist for the public schools. Using Linn’s technique, Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder made the connection to PIRLS as well as TIMSS.<sup>24</sup> In an unpublished analysis, I’ve done the same. My estimate finds only one nation, Singapore, with a majority (51%) proficient in science, but Phillips’ study places Taiwan in that category as well. Phillips’ study finds six nations with a majority of students proficient in math.<sup>25</sup>

The kicker, though, lies in that word “proficient.” Podesta doesn’t know what it means. The Chamber doesn’t know what it means. The Business Roundtable doesn’t know what it means. Secretary Spellings doesn’t know what it means. *No one* knows what it means. But when people say most of our students are not “proficient” in reading, they are implying that the kids can’t read. They imply that the students are functionally illiterate, that “basic” — the level below proficient — is a worthless, failing level, especially in the face of that all-devouring monster, the global economy. But consider how NAEP defines the basic level for fourth-grade reading:

Fourth-grade students performing at the basic level should demonstrate an understanding of the overall meaning of what they read. When reading text appropriate for fourth-graders, they should be able to make relatively obvious connections between the text and their own experiences and extend the ideas in the text by making simple inferences.<sup>26</sup>

It looks to me like people who can read materials appropriate to their age at the basic level can *read*. No doubt I would be accused of dumbing down America to suggest a focus on the basic level, but, in 2005, the percentage of fourth-grade white students who were proficient was 41%, up from 35% in 1992. For Asians, the figure was 42%, up from 25%. For blacks, it’s 13%, up from 8%. And for Hispanics, it’s 16%, up from 12%. As long as we target “proficient,” we assure ourselves of a round of flagellation every two years. Keep in mind, in the last international reading test, Sweden ranked number 1 (Finland, which would no doubt have

given Sweden its toughest competition, did not participate). But if Swedish kids took a Swedish version of NAEP, only one-third of them would be labeled “proficient or better.”

The rest of Podesta’s comments justifying getting in bed with the Chamber are the same tired, fear-mongering rhetoric we’ve been subjected to since Sputnik.

In its state-by-state analyses, the method by which *Leaders and Laggards* assigns letter grades to states ensures that 10 states get A’s, 10 get B’s, and so forth. The Chamber called this grading on a curve. No matter how well the states might be doing on any absolute scale, the 10 lowest scorers received F’s. This is absurd.

Adjacent states on different sides of a cut point have almost identical scores, but they get different grades. For example, the rankings on academic achievement were constructed by averaging each state’s percentage of students scoring proficient or higher for NAEP grades 4 and 8, in reading and math. Iowa, the lowest state to get a B, had a score of 34.50%; Idaho, the highest state to get a C, scored 34.25%. Illinois, the lowest C state, had 30.25%; Missouri, the highest D state, scores 30.00%. In each case a difference of one-fourth of one percent resulted in a difference of a full letter grade. Ridiculous.

The most recent effort to lay blame for societal problems at the feet of the schools is the “ED in ’08” campaign from Strong American Schools. The Broad Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation front this campaign to the tune of \$60 million. It aims to, in the words of Eli Broad, “wake up the American people that we have got a real problem and we need real reform.”<sup>27</sup> Broad is 73, so he would remember firsthand the events following Sputnik and *A Nation at Risk*. Was he asleep through it all? “I have reached the conclusion,” said Broad, “as has the Gates Foundation, that all we’re doing is incremental.”

Broad and Gates want to force education to the forefront of the 2008 Presidential campaign. It won’t be easy. As Mike Antonucci noted in his July 9 Education Intelligence Agency Communiqué from the National Education Association’s national convention in July, having seven Democratic and one Republican candidate address the convention “compelled them to speak at length almost exclusively about one issue — education — which otherwise gets relegated to a single question during a general debate or town hall forum.”<sup>28</sup>

The ED in ’08 campaign will run radio, TV, and print ads trying to make people fearful about the future. “If candidates aren’t talking about education, they’re not talking about the future,” reads a print ad featuring a photo in which a small hand has just

scrawled “A history of Irak” on a blackboard. “Debating Iraq Is Tough. Spelling It Shouldn’t Be,” the ad chides. It then says, “America’s schools are falling behind.” No evidence is proffered. The ad can be viewed at [www.Edin08.com](http://www.Edin08.com).

We can note in passing that the fear mongers change their data of choice rather expediently. Twenty years ago, or even 10, “falling behind” would have been defined in terms of test scores. But the TIMSS data from 1995, 1999, and 2005 showed American students making larger gains than students in many other nations, so test scores are no longer available as evidence for that charge. Now, “falling behind” usually means other nations have overtaken the U.S. in high school graduation rates — the “fact sheet” at the ED in ’08 website says the U.S. is now 19th out of “the top developed

countries.” (The fact sheet does not define “top developed” or specify how many nations fall into that category.)

The task of making us concerned about the future falls to Roy Romer, a near octogenarian and the former governor of Colorado and former superintendent of the Los Angeles public schools.

**Twenty years ago, “falling behind” would have been defined in terms of test scores. Now it usually means other nations have overtaken U.S. graduation rates.**

In the ED in ’08 blog for May 7, Romer took issue with an op-ed of mine that ran in the *Washington Post*. It was headlined “A Test Everyone Will Fail,” and in it I presented the numbers for how well students in other nations would perform if they took NAEP.<sup>29</sup> Romer presented a less-than-compelling argument that I was guessing and that when you’re “comparing students who take the test vs. students who don’t take the test, you find yourself looking at apples and oranges pretty fast.” He quoted a staffer who claimed that the U.S. Department of Education had been unable to link TIMSS and NAEP. I hope he and the staffer both look at Gary Phillips’ linking study. (The Department of Education first linked TIMSS and NAEP in 1998 in *Linking the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study: Eighth-Grade Results* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Report No. NCES 98-500, 1998.]

Romer also committed that all-too-common logical fallacy among school critics, the non sequitur. He claimed that my op-ed “left the mistaken impression

that American students do just fine when they are compared with students in other countries.” Why is it that, whenever someone points out that the sky is not actually falling, they are accused of alleging that everything is “just fine,” accused of being advocates of complacency, spokespeople for the status quo? This blatant non sequitur is often trotted out to dismiss those who would stem the rising tide of fear mongering.

Among the fear-mongering reports to hit the streets recently was *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, the latest exercise in clever title writing from Marc Tucker.<sup>30</sup> Diane Ravitch (who I think actually did refer to me once as a messenger of complacency) said it best: “Frankly, it is difficult to understand how a commission composed of so many distinguished men and women produced such an ill-conceived document.” *Washington Post* education writer Jay Mathews called the report a walk through “dreamland.”<sup>31</sup> Ravitch echoed Mathews by observing, “There is a line between visionary thinking and pie-in-the-sky-theorizing. . . . *Tough Choices or Tough Times* is most assuredly on the wrong side of that line.” I called it “delusional”<sup>32</sup> and asked, “What were these guys smoking?”<sup>33</sup>

We all had various objections, but the recommendation that unified us in incredulity was the proposal for a set of “Board Exams” that most students would encounter at age 16. How well students performed on these exams would determine what kind of educational experiences would be available to them later. “Students could challenge these Board Exams as soon as they were ready, and they could keep challenging them all their lives, if necessary. No one would fail. If they did not succeed, they would just try again.” The commissioners did not explain how “just try again” would be a different psychological experience from banging one’s head again and again against a high school exit exam.

The Board Exams will have “standards set at the expectations incorporated in the exams given by the countries that do the best job educating their students” (no definition of “best job” provided). But the passing standard is to be set “no lower than the standard for entering community colleges in the state without remediation.” The students whose score is “good enough” (again undefined) can stay on in high school, encounter a second set of exams, and then attend a selective college” (pp. ix-x). The commission claims that, if all its recommendations are adopted, 95% of all students will meet the lower standard. (No mention is made of the other 5%; I speculated that perhaps with *soma* and propaganda, they could be induced to be happy, as in *Brave New World*). Writes Ravitch, “One may safely predict that [those struggling with the lower standard]

will be composed mainly of students who are African-American, Hispanic, recent immigrant, and poor.”<sup>34</sup>

While establishing a rather Huxleyesque new world, the commission projected something entirely different in terms of the work force: “This is a world (the world of the future), in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for *most members of the workforce*” (p. xviii, emphasis added). As I noted in the September 2007 Research column, 76% of the jobs in this nation are in the service sector. That looks like “most members of the workforce” to me. And since the service sector is one of two rapidly growing sectors, I don’t foresee any revolutionary change any time soon.

### THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, 2007: THE LIBERAL ARTS IN PERIL

On 12 December 2006, I attended a conference, “Beyond the Basics: Why Reading, Math, and Science Are Insufficient for a 21st Century Education.” I went with some trepidation, for the conference was sponsored by Chester Finn’s Thomas B. Fordham Institute, heretofore a stalwart supporter of standards-based education. But this conference came hard on the heels of one that Finn had co-sponsored with the American Enterprise Institute, which spent a day showing not only that No Child Left Behind wasn’t working but that it *couldn’t* work. Both conferences were summarized in my February 2007 Research column. I closed another article on the Fordham conference with, “Could it be that some historian will look back on the period beginning in 2007 as Giorgio Vasari looked back on 14th-century Italy and said ‘rinascita’ — renaissance? One can only hope.”

Given the past five years of NCLB, my hopes were not that high, but then I hadn’t expected even as much as I saw at this conference. Most of the day was spent in what I thought were premature and mundane discussions — how to make room for the arts in a crowded day, how to get more arts training into teacher preparation, etc.

But at least one inspirational session emerged. Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts, discussed the power of the arts to unleash the best in us. As one example, he recalled his high school teaching experience when he had students recite poetry. Most of the class mumbled in monotones. But one girl, considered something of the class cutup, gave a powerful reading of the sonnet in *Romeo and Juliet* that leads

to the lovers' first kiss. Her performance animated the rest of the class. To illustrate the impact, Gioia grabbed Finn's arm, pressed him into the role of Juliet and recited the sonnet as the girl had, stopping short of planting his "two blushing pilgrims" on Finn's own lips. This scene can be seen at [www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net). It's not to be missed.

I closed the February *Kappan* column with, "I wonder what, if anything, will come from this." So far the sole development is a book. But given its source — it's co-edited by Finn and Ravitch — it could have important ramifications. It says, essentially, No Child Left Behind is a mistake. Its human cost is too high. Even if the achievement gap is narrowing in reading and math — and it is not clear that it is — it is growing in a much broader sense. (I also make this argument in "Growing an Achievement Gap," *Education Week*, 5 September 2007). In the introduction, Finn and Ravitch write,

Liberal learning is critical to young people because it prepares them for "public life" — not just politics and government, but civic life in which we should all partake. . . .

For such engagements to succeed, one need not have a college degree, much less a Ph.D. But it's close to essential to have a broad basic education. . . . Once upon a time, most U.S. schools sought a balanced education for their students. In addition to the three R's, along with generous exposure to history, math, and science, literature, music, and art, these young people also received training in debate, in deportment, in values and character, and in elocution. One could fairly say they were being groomed for leadership or at least for responsible citizenship.

Even those not so "groomed," however, still learned the great stories of democracy. . . . And they were taught that they could, with learning and hard work, rise above their circumstances. So great are the numbers of those who transcended their origins and upbringing that the story has a name — the "American dream." Its mythos continues today, not because people want to believe in the impossible, but because few of us don't know someone who has "made it" in this fashion. The American dream has a strong basis in reality.<sup>35</sup>

Some may find this exposition too glib, too stark a contrast to, say, *The Shame of the Nation*, Jonathan Kozol's recent exposé of schooling for the poor. Others may find, too, that things were never that good — after all, the exposition does lead off with "Once upon a time." But even so, I think it's important that the book recognizes that whatever the problems of education in the past — the stultifying choral reading that Ralph Tyler recalled, the "grim and joyless" classrooms that Charles Silberman described — whatever ills those symptoms reflected, No Child Left Behind has not been the cure.

Here's Gioia's take:

Today there are two closely related visions of American education in practice. One aims to produce children who pass standardized testing at each level. The other is one that produces entry-level workers for a consumer society. Both targets might be interesting as tactics, *but neither are inspiring objectives for education.*

The 20th century was the American century during which the U.S. was preeminent in productivity, innovation, wealth, and power. The world is a much more complicated place today. The United States is not going to compete with the rest of the world in terms of cheap labor or cheap raw materials. If we are going to compete productively with the rest of the world, it's going to be in terms of creativity and innovation.<sup>36</sup>

Ah! There's that word again. Creativity. Readers might recall that I dwelt on it extensively in the 16th Bracey Report in a section called "NCLB: A Threat to the Nation's Global Competitiveness?" I recounted there the envy Asian educators feel for U.S. creativity and cited Robert Sternberg's warning that massive testing "is one of the most effective if unintentional vehicles this country has created for suppressing creativity."

Finn and Ravitch present chapters derived from discussions at the December meeting addressing various aspects of the problem and potential solutions, and then they return with a summary in which they discern "four disconcerting trends" (pp. 189-91). I list them here, with a brief comment on each:

1. *The gradual death of liberal learning in higher education.* The emphasis is now on career preparation and professional training.

2. *A standards-and-accountability movement increasingly focused only on "basic skills."* State accountability systems obsess about reading and mathematics skills but too often ignore the acquisition of knowledge in other curriculum areas.

3. *Growing support for math and science at the expense of the rest of the curriculum.* Two studies did confirm that, as time for reading and math expanded, time allotted to other subjects shrank.<sup>37</sup>

4. *Widening gaps.* The dominant socioeconomic story of our age is the accelerating advantages of the have-a-lots over the have-littles. Combine this with the first three trends and one sees a widening achievement gap, not a narrowing one.

So how did we get to this terrible place? Frankly, I think we arrived here because too many people who spend little or no time in schools created too much of our education legislation and reform policy. "We should have seen this coming," Finn and Ravitch write — "this" being the constriction of the curriculum. "Insofar as we recognized this, however, we naively assumed

that school days and years would expand to accommodate more of everything; that teachers would somehow become more knowledgeable; and that state and federal policy makers would insist on a balanced curriculum.” Now, that *is* naive. But . . . “we were wrong. We didn’t see how completely standards-based reform would turn into a basic skills testing frenzy or the negative impact it would have on educational quality.”<sup>38</sup>

What next? Hard to tell. Finn and Ravitch mention working with some of the authors to establish some type of organization. One chapter, by David Ferrero of the Gates Foundation, speaks of and appears to pine for reconstituting the Council for Basic Education (co-founded, incidentally, by Arthur Bestor).<sup>39</sup> Of course, it’s only been three years since the council published a report, *Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America’s Public Schools* — and then closed its doors.

## THE CONDITION OF NCLB, 2007

Has student achievement increased since No Child Left Behind? Given the topic of the previous section, this is obviously not the question that matters most. But the achievement question is the one most often asked, and it is the one for which the U.S. Department of Education works most diligently to show the answer to be “yes.” This question also serves as the title of a report from the Center on Education Policy (CEP), whose findings we will take up in a moment. But first a few words about another study that bears on the general issue of increasing achievement.

Both last year’s Bracey Report and my Research column for December 2005 showed how the use of percentage proficient can mislead in reporting both progress and changes in achievement gaps. Derek Neal and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach of the University of Chicago identified another problem with the use of passing rates as a metric.<sup>40</sup>

These researchers first examined test scores of students in one grade under low-stakes conditions. Then they looked at the test scores of these same students at a later grade. But in one group the tests in the later grade were taken under low-stakes conditions and in the other case, they were taken under a high-stakes condition (i.e., after the implementation of NCLB). If high-stakes testing improves outcomes, then those who took the test in the later grade as a high-stakes test should do better than those who took the test in the later grade under low-stakes conditions.

Students in the middle range of achievement who were tested under high-stakes conditions did score high-

er than expected, given the scores of students who took both tests under low-stakes conditions. The researchers emphasize that the effects are small. Students at the highest and lowest ends of the achievement spectrum, though, showed no impact or even a negative impact. The study provides evidence for the effect of a process described by a Maryland teacher:

We were told to cross off the kids who would never pass. We were told to cross off the kids who, if we handed them the test tomorrow, they would pass. And then the kids who were left over, those were the kids we were supposed to focus on.<sup>41</sup>

According to the *Washington Post*, once the kids were identified, “teachers regularly began pulling students from social studies, science, gym, art, and other elective classes to work in small groups to prepare for the test. They used test-prep workbooks and sample material from the state education department’s Web site.”<sup>42</sup>

Those kids are the “bubble” kids, the ones who are perceived to be at risk of failing but also perceived as capable of passing if given extra attention. Jennifer Booher-Jennings reported this phenomenon,<sup>43</sup> and her work was summarized in the December 2005 Research column.

Neal and Schanzenbach argue that their results show that

accountability systems cannot be used to raise the achievement of all students unless these systems are designed in a manner that rewards schools for all improvements in student achievement and not just those improvements that involve crossing a fixed proficiency threshold. . . . NCLB’s use of proficiency counts as the key metric of success almost guarantees that significant numbers of academically disadvantaged students, especially those in states with high proficiency standards, will not benefit and may be harmed during its implementation.

That last part might sound a bit perverse, and it is. States that have higher standards will have more students for whom the standards are unattainable, and these students will suffer the effects of the “triage” decisions as schools try to maximize the number of students who are labeled proficient.

Finally, such a system increases the costs to teachers of teaching in low-achieving schools and therefore makes it harder to recruit good teachers precisely where school systems need them most. Neal and Schanzenbach point out, “If the distribution of initial student ability is worse in school A than in school B, teachers and principals in school A must work harder than those in school B to achieve the same standing under the ac-

countability system, and this should adversely affect the relative supply of teachers who want to teach in school A.” This pernicious outcome could possibly be ameliorated through the implementation of models based on growth and not proficiency counts.

It might be argued that everything will work out in the end because NCLB requires 100% proficiency; therefore, the hopeless kids must eventually be attended to. However, it is now widely accepted that the 100% goal is not attainable, and even some who initially supported it now dismiss it as “just a goal.”

This returns us to the CEP report and its title question: Has student achievement increased since No Child Left Behind? Clearly, if the CEP reports changes only in percentage proficient, it cannot answer the question. The CEP report uses effect sizes as well as changes in percentage proficient, but, alas, it uses them only to confirm or refute the direction of the changes in percentage proficient, not as an independent measure of changes in achievement.

The CEP report ducks the always-thorny issue about effect sizes, “How big is big?” A judgment about the importance of a given effect size is necessarily somewhat subjective. The report notes that Paul Peterson and Martin West discussed a 0.3 standard deviation decline in SAT scores between 1970 and 1982 and a 0.4 standard deviation decline in NAEP high school science and noted that “these trends were considered alarming at the time.” Well, by some people perhaps.

Harold Howe, who co-chaired the panel assembled by the College Board in the 1970s to examine the SAT decline, wrote “Let’s Have Another SAT Decline” in the May 1985 *Kappan* because he believed that the decline was a victory, if only a partial victory, for civil rights as colleges opened their doors wider to minorities, women, and low-income students. I have argued as well (as did the College Board panel) that the extraordinary social upheavals of that period caused a substantial part of the decline. (The NAEP high school science decline, cited by Peterson and West, was not matched by similar declines in middle or elementary grades or by declines in any grades in reading and mathematics.)

In any case, the answer to the CEP report’s question must remain, “We don’t know.” First, depending on the grade and test, only between 22 and 25 states had sufficient trend data to judge whether scores had gone up. Only 13 states had sufficient data to judge whether scores rose faster *after* the enactment of NCLB than before it. (Earlier studies had suggested an overall slowing post-NCLB.)

Depending on test and grade, 10 to 22 states had

moderate-to-large gains that were confirmed by effect sizes in the same direction. (Note that Table 2 on page 35 of the report is somewhat misleading in that the legend reads “Moderate-to-large gain in both percentage proficient and effect size,” but effect size is used only to confirm the direction of the proficient change.<sup>44</sup>) Two to five states had slight gains in percentage proficient confirmed by effect size measures.

Of the 13 states that could measure the rate of gain with effect sizes pre- and post-NCLB, nine had greater gains after the law came into existence.

Alas, as is *invariably* the case with education reform outcomes, the larger gains, both in terms of percentage proficient and in terms of effect sizes, occur at the elementary grades and fade with increasing grade level. For instance, 22 states showed moderate-to-large increases in math at the elementary level, but only 13 posted similar gains at the high school level. In terms of effect sizes, the nine states showing more post-NCLB gains in math showed an effect size of .20 at grade 4 and .06 at grade 10.

There was virtually no relationship between changes in state scores and changes in NAEP scores. Gains in state elementary reading scores correlated at .36 with gains in NAEP grade-4 reading, and this was significant at the .02 level. The other correlations were state middle school reading and NAEP eighth-grade reading (.17), state elementary math and NAEP fourth-grade math (.01), and state middle school math and NAEP eighth-grade math (.13).

A study in the June/July issue of *Educational Researcher* by Bruce Fuller and his colleagues at the University of California at Berkeley repeats information about NAEP that has appeared elsewhere — long-term trend scores are up for reading and up more for math at the fourth-grade level, but not elsewhere.

For the 12 states for which the study has both state and NAEP data, 10 show more yearly gains on fourth-grade math after NCLB than in the period 1992-2002. For all 12, the yearly “gains” in reading slowed — gains in quotation marks because two of the states averaged 0.0 points and six others were actually negative.

Given the studies mentioned above showing increased time spent on teaching reading and math, these results look especially disappointing.

## FEEBLE INSTRUMENTS IN THE NCLB TOOLKIT

In November 2006, the American Enterprise Institute and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation co-sponsored *Fixing Failing Schools: Are the Tools in the NCLB Toolkit Working?* After the first four presenta-

tions, Fordham's Chester Finn announced, "I shouldn't be giving out coffee and sweet rolls. I should be handing out mood-altering pharmaceuticals. Those that deal with depression." The rout was on. Summarizing the day's reports, Diane Ravitch said that the answer had to be "no." Then she got the biggest laugh of the day when she asked, "What reason do we have to believe that Congress knows how to fix the nation's schools?" (See the Research column for February 2007 for a summary of the day.)

In mid-2007, the U.S. Department of Education quietly slipped into publication a report on two of the major tools in the NCLB toolkit: the choice option and the provision of supplemental educational services (SES). If a school fails to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two consecutive years, all children must be offered the option to choose a "successful" school. After three years, SES kicks in. If you think that makes no sequential sense, you're right. In the initial legislation, vouchers entered the fray after three years, but since Sen. Kennedy and the Dems found vouchers unacceptable, the President settled for SES. As of this writing, there is talk of reversing the timing on these two tools.

In contrast to its excitement about the results from NAEP trend data, which set Secretary Spellings crowing that more progress had been made in five years than in the previous 28 combined (in spite of the likelihood that most or all of that progress occurred during the Clinton years), the U.S. Department of Education made very little of the choice report from the RAND Corporation. That's because there's very little that can be made of it.

In the nine big-city districts in the study, only one-half of 1% of eligible students made use of the choice option. The folks at RAND suggested that one reason for this is that many choice options, especially charter schools, predated NCLB, with the implication that choosers had already chosen. This doesn't seem likely to account for much.

More likely is that the RAND study echoes a finding of another study that only 29% of Title I school districts notified parents of their choice option in time for them to use it. One reason for this is that schools didn't know until late in the summer if they had failed to make AYP. And one reason for that is no doubt what Finn had called "the complete inadequacy of the testing industry to live up to the challenge of providing speedy, accurate reporting" of test scores. It also could be possible that few chose to change because, as Jane Hannaway of the Urban Institute had noted at the conference, parents recognized that AYP by itself is not

a legitimate signal of school quality.

In any case, despite the fact that those children who did choose to go to another school chose more racially balanced, higher-achieving schools, they showed no better achievement than those who remained behind in their failing schools.

**Those children who did choose to go to another school showed no better achievement than those who remained behind in their failing schools.**

SES did show some impact — and greater impact for students who had two or more years of tutoring than for those who had only one. However, the effects are mostly small and inconsistent both across and within districts. For instance, in one district (none are identified by name), the overall effect size for math was  $-.01$  at the

end of one year and  $.27$  at the end of two, while for reading it was  $.06$  at the end of one year and  $.01$  at the end of two. One district did post consistent effect sizes across ethnic groups and for students with disabilities that any judge would call "large" (ranging from  $.25$  to  $.72$ , with an average of  $.50$ ), but no discussion is provided as to what that district might have been doing right. Given the enormous sample sizes from some cities, even effect sizes of  $.02$  were often statistically significant.

And even though more students were able to avail themselves of tutoring than of transferring, the proportions are still quite small, ranging from 17% of eligible African American students down to 10% of eligible white students.

## **EVERYBODY LOVES NCLB?**

The year's laughter of a headline about NCLB? This one from *Education Week*: "To Know NCLB Is to Like It, ETS Poll Finds."<sup>45</sup> Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, wryly observed in a subsequent commentary that "having the testing industry study the results of a massive program of testing is like having the cigarette industry do a study of lung cancer."<sup>46</sup> About the only beneficiary of NCLB to date, he noticed, was the testing industry. Thomas Toch of Education Sector chimed in that 23 states had added more than 11 million tests in 2005-06 to comply with the law and that another 11 million would be coming along in 2007-08, when NCLB's science requirement kicks in.<sup>47</sup>

Both Houston and Toch pointed out that one negative feature of the increase in testing was an increase in the number of errors made by the testing companies. Toch also observed that the increased testing demands meant that states were backing away from using performance tests in favor of the quick, cheap, but low-level multiple-choice tests of rote skills. Which brings us back to the Finn/Ravitch laments about the restriction of the curriculum, especially for poor kids. Or, as second-language learning expert Jim Cummins put it, "That means skills for poor kids, and knowledge for the rich."<sup>48</sup>

Actually, the ETS survey's numbers reflect true sleight of hand and manipulation by the Peter Hart and Winston groups, which conducted the survey for ETS.<sup>49</sup> When asked how they felt about NCLB, 41% of respondents supported it, and 43% opposed it. About the same proportion (45%) said that they didn't know much about it. So Hart/Winston, ever helpful, explained it to them:

The No Child Left Behind Act provides federal funds for school districts with poor children in order to close achievement gaps. It also requires states to set standards for education and to test students each year to determine whether the standards are being met by all students. In addition, No Child Left Behind provides funding to help teachers become highly qualified. It also provides additional funding and prescribes consequences to schools that fail to achieve academic targets set by their state.<sup>50</sup>

Money to close achievement gaps? Set standards? Provide funds to make better teachers? Who can oppose such things? A lot of people, it seems. While support for the law rose to 56% after Hart/Winston's "explanation" (22% very favorable, 34% somewhat favorable), 39% of respondents said they still opposed it. My guess is that those 39% already knew more than the explanation, which did not, it should be noted, mention what the consequences of failure could be. In fact, this explanation does not appear in the report published by ETS. You'd need to go to the *Education Week* article to find it. The article's author, David Hoff, said he obtained the explanation from Hart Associates' PR materials.<sup>51</sup>

And if to know it is to love it, one might reasonably expect that those who know it best would love it most. Teachers probably know the law best, and 77% of them opposed it. Ditto another knowledgeable group, administrators, 63% opposed. Given this opposition, the report expresses surprise that only 25% of teachers and 22% of administrators want outright repeals of the law. But repeal does not necessarily follow from opposition. Some 58% of teachers and 52% of administra-

tors want major changes, while 17% of teachers and 26% of administrators want minor changes. Those three categories sum to 100% for each group. In other words, *no one* who works in the field is satisfied with the law. The report does not provide examples of what "major" and "minor" changes might look like.

William Howell of the University of Chicago, Martin West of Brown University, and Paul Peterson of Harvard also conducted a survey, this one for *Education Next* and the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University. Respondents were asked what they thought Congress should do with regard to renewing NCLB. Howell, West, and Peterson manage to pull a favorable NCLB rating out of the hat by lumping "renew as is" with "renew with minimal changes."<sup>52</sup> Some 31% of respondents said renew as is, and 26% said renew with minimal changes. Lumped together, these two categories sum to 57% favoring renewal. Forty-three percent want major changes or no renewal at all. If one were to relocate the "renew with minimal changes" to the other groups, one would get 69% favoring change or nonrenewal.

It is telling that support for renewal was higher when the questioners didn't tell respondents what the question was referring to. If the question did not mention No Child Left Behind by name, but merely referred to "federal legislation that requires states to set standards and test students," 37% said renew as is, and 31% said renew with minimal changes.

Neal McCluskey, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, strongly demurred. "Republicans passed the No Child Left Behind Act, the most intrusive federal education law in American history. Five years later, with NCLB up for reauthorization, they can't jump ship fast enough. . . . In the end, neither Republicans nor Democrats should fight for NCLB. It hasn't helped either party, and it has hurt children all over the country."<sup>53</sup> Or, as public school advocate Jamie Vollmer put it, No Child Left Behind is "taking us straight to hell."<sup>54</sup>

Even one of the law's most ardent supporters, Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) admits,

We didn't get it all right when we enacted the law. Throughout our schools and communities, the American people have a very strong sense that the No Child Left Behind Act is not fair. That it is not flexible. And that it is not funded. . . . I can tell you that there are no votes in the U.S. House of Representatives for continuing the No Child Left Behind Act without making serious changes to it. . . . I have always said that I am proud to be one of the original co-authors of the No Child Left Behind Act. But what I really want is to be the proud co-author of a law that works.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps Rep. Miller didn't see the implication of those last two sentences.

### SOME OLD WINE IN A NEW BOTTLE

As explained in *Slaughterhouse Five*, novels on the planet Tralfamadore are slim volumes of messages that Tralfamadoreans can see simultaneously: "There isn't any particular relationship between the messages except that the author has chosen them carefully so that when viewed simultaneously they produce an image of life that is beautiful, surprising, and deep."

The numbers (messages) that appear in Table 1 are not new, but I happened to arrange them in a way that generated a message that surprised me. The numbers were not assembled in response to a beautiful message. They were assembled in response to a July 19 comment by the Education Trust's Amy Wilkins on the NPR program "On Point." Wilkins said, "Our most affluent kids are getting their lunches eaten by kids in other countries. The system [of schools] we have has not served our children well. There is no point in pouring more federal money into very broken bottles."

On listening to that again the next day to confirm its accuracy, I pulled the scores of U.S. schools from PIRLS and TIMSS and arranged them by the percentage of students in poverty in those schools. I then interspersed these numbers with the scores from the top nations (see Table 1). The percentages that appear in parentheses are the percentage of students who fall into each category. Thus the entry "U.S. <10% (13%)" means that 13% of all U.S. students attend schools where fewer than 10% of the students live in poverty. "U.S. 75%+ (20%)" means that 20% of all U.S. students attend schools with more than 75% of the students living in poverty.

To me, these data present a surprising image.

When I first posted these data on the Web, I received two objections. First, one respondent said that the proper comparison is between affluent students in the U.S. and affluent students elsewhere. The other said that we needed to know what proportion of students in the other nations were living in poverty in order to ensure that the samples were comparable. Both would make interesting comparisons, but neither bears on Ms. Wilkins' contention.

It is important to understand what categories of students are represented here. Remember, the "<10%" category means the 13% of U.S. schools where fewer than 10% of the students attending live in poverty. These are not necessarily the schools with our most affluent students. Indeed, we don't know the socioeconomic

condition of the 90+%. They could all be working class or middle class or affluent or some mix of all three.

There is, in fact, no fully accepted definition of poverty that can be used across countries. The most common definition is that a family with an income less than half the median national income is in poverty. By this definition, the U.S. has the highest poverty rate among 24

**TABLE 1.**  
**U.S. Scores by Percentage of Schools' Students in Poverty**

PIRLS	
U.S. <10% (13%)	589
U.S. 10%-25% (17%)	567
Sweden	562
Netherlands	554
England	553
U.S. 25%-50% (28%)	551
Latvia	545
U.S. overall	542
:	
:	
U.S. 50%-75% (22%)	519
:	
:	
International average	500
U.S. 75%+ (20%)	489
TIMSS, Fourth-Grade Math	
Singapore	594
Hong Kong	575
U.S. <10%	567
Japan	565
Taiwan	564
Belgium	551
U.S. 10%-25%	543
Netherlands	540
Latvia	536
Lithuania	534
U.S. 25%-50%	533
:	
:	
U.S. overall	518
U.S. 50%-75%	500
International average	495
U.S. 75%+	471
TIMSS, Fourth-Grade Science	
U.S. <10%	579
U.S. 10%-25%	567
Singapore	565
U.S. 25%-50%	551
Taiwan	551
Japan	543
Hong Kong	542
England	540
U.S. overall	536
:	
:	
U.S. 50%-75%	519
International average	489
U.S. 75%+	480

OECD nations. However, this definition often says more about income distribution than material deprivation. For example, the U.S. has 17% of its children (aged birth to 17) living in poverty, compared to Hungary's 13%. However, using the less-than-half-of-the-median-income definition, Hungarian families making less than \$7,000 a year are in poverty, whereas the figure for the U.S. would be \$24,000.

The TIMSS data for eighth grade look quite similar to those presented for fourth grade, but the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) mathematics results do not paint as rosy a picture. The National Center for Education Statistics does not report high school scores by eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch because of the prevalence of missing data. However, students in the top SES quartile of U.S. students scored 522.<sup>56</sup> The highest nation scored 544, and 11 other nations of the 41 participants scored between those two points. Thus Wilkins' contention remains false even if we look at the least favorable data.

### **THE CANDIDATES SPEAK: DOES ANYBODY LOVE NCLB?**

If the only information you had on seven of the Democratic candidates for President came from their speeches before the NEA National Assembly in July, you might be forgiven for thinking they were running for President of FairTest. It's hard to imagine more anti-test rhetoric at a FairTest convention. Mike Huckabee,

the only Republican to appear before the NEA, did not join the test-bashers, but even he emphasized the role of art and music, not just reading and math, in his life.<sup>57</sup>

The criticisms represent a sea change in opinion about the law, no doubt occasioned in part by President Bush's flagging popularity. In 2004, the only candidate I heard say that something was conceptually wrong with NCLB was Howard Dean. The rest just mumbled in unison that it needed to be fully funded.

At the NEA Convention, Hillary Clinton said, "Our children are getting good at filling in these little bubbles, but how much creativity is being left behind? How much passion for learning is being left behind?" Joe Biden contributed, "You cannot build a new economy by having our students constantly fill out bubbles."

"Learning is not about filling in the bubbles. It is about connecting the dots," added Chris Dodd.

Dodd, Bill Richardson, and John Edwards attacked specific definitions in the law: Dodd aimed at AYP; Richardson, at the definition of highly qualified teacher; Edwards, at the arbitrariness of using a single cut score. Edwards, Obama, and Richardson attacked the punitive nature of NCLB, saying underperforming schools should be helped, not hurt. Dennis Kucinich and Clinton noted that teachers inspire students as well as transmit knowledge to them. Universal preschool, better teacher salaries, multiple measures for accountability, and growth models of accountability were common themes touched on by the candidates.

One must, of course, take into account the audience to whom the candidates were playing. And there were some statements that clearly came straight from talking points, without actually passing through a brain on the way. Still, these are all public statements that leave a record — clips of all are available on YouTube.

Union-watcher Mike Antonucci noticed an interesting aspect of the audience's reactions to most of the proposals — wild applause. Antonucci mentioned the Constitution's silence on education as a federal function and said of the NEA, "For an organization that espouses local control and vilifies top-down mandates, NEA's delegates cheered rather loudly for candidates who want to insert the federal government into even the most mundane decision-making in their schools." Antonucci felt that Clinton gave the strongest expression of the importance of maintaining local control of education, with Obama a close second.<sup>58</sup>

Richardson was the only one to promise from the podium to make a teacher the secretary of education.

## SO MANY TOPICS, SO LITTLE SPACE

And so we reach the same point as last year, having exhausted space without coming close to exhausting salient topics: dropout rates, job preparedness, charter schools, and so on. This would be true, I think, even if I had not used up a fair amount of space to "celebrate" a 50th birthday. While education does not loom as large in the public mind as health care, the economy, or the Middle East, it occupies much more space in the media than it did 20 years ago, and many more people are now engaged in researching various topics and analyzing various policies.

So it's unlikely that this report will ever return to its fairly broad form. But, then again, maybe it will. It certainly won't happen next year, but I wouldn't be surprised to find myself in 2009 reflecting back on NCLB and paraphrasing Winston Churchill in 1940. Paying tribute to the Royal Air Force's extraordinary performance in the Battle of Britain, Churchill said, "Never have so many owed so much to so few." An '09 "tribute" to NCLB might go, "Never have so many worked so hard to accomplish so little for so few."

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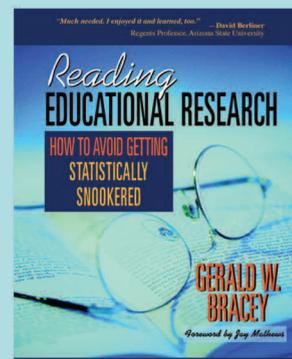
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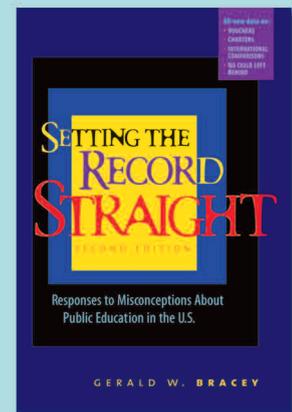
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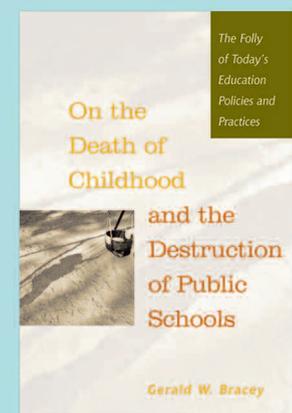
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