

## Neoliberalism and the control of teachers, students, and learning: The rise of standards, standardization and accountability in the United States

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Over the last several decades, education in the United States has undergone a profound transformation as control over schools shifted first to the state and then the federal government. In the not so distant past, students attended the school to which they were assigned, learned from teachers who used and adapted the school's and district's curriculum, and were evaluated based on teacher prepared assignments. Now, students often ostensibly choose which school to attend (although advantaged students have significantly more choices than others), and learn from teachers who teach what they think will be on the state's standardized tests. These changes reflect policymakers' greater faith in markets and competition than in teachers and students. However, data from the United States show that rather than improving education, the reforms have harmed academic achievement and increased educational inequality (see Hursh, 2008).

These reforms have come about, in part, because of neoliberal efforts to apply neoliberal principles to all social services, including education. Neoliberals promote the deregulation of the economy, trade liberalization, the dismantling of the public sector and the predominance of the finance economy over production and welfare. Neoliberals have argued that such reforms are inevitable because of globalization. As Norman Fairclough writes, globalization has been hijacked in the service of particular national and corporate interests. Globalization is presented as processes

Without human agents...a process in a general and ill-defined present and without a history (it just is what it "is"), which is universal (or, precisely, global) in terms of place, and an inevitable process which must be responded to in particular ways---an "is", which imposed an "ought," or rather a must.(p. 45)

An exemplar of Neoliberal thinking is Thomas Friedman (of *the world is flat* fame), who in an earlier book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999), argues that globalization requires free market capitalism

The driving force behind globalization is free market capitalism--- the more you let market forces rule and the more you open up your economy to free trade and competition, the more efficient your economy will be. Globalization means the spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every corner of the world. Therefore, globalization also has its own set of economic rules--- rules that revolve around opening, deregulating and privatizing your economy, in order to make it more competitive and attractive to foreign investment. (p. 9)

Such ideas are also reflected in President Bush's public pronouncements, where he has used globalization to defend NCLB, an act that aims to have public schools compete for students in an educational market, in which students and schools are evaluated by scores on standardized tests, and if the schools are found to be failing (and the way in which Adequate Yearly Progress is determined ensures that initially many and eventually most schools are found to be failing) face having their administration and other services, such as tutoring, privatized, and eventually turned into a publicly funded private schools.

In the fall of 2006, Bush stated:

NCLB is an important way to make sure America remains competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We're living in a global world. See, the education system must compete with education systems in China and India. If we fail to give our students the skills necessary to compete in the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the jobs will go elsewhere. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 2)

Bush ignores, of course, that it is his own administration's economic and trade policies that promote outsourcing jobs. It is not that workers in China and India are better educated than in the US, they're just willing to work for less. Bush, like others before him, shifts the blame for the economic stagnation and growing economic inequality in the US on schools, rather than where it rightly belongs.

Instead, what we have seen from the Bush administration are efforts to privatize schooling (through charter schools and vouchers), and to open up schools to market forces and competition. For example, after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the Bush administration collaborated with antigovernment activists to dismantle the public schools and the teachers' union, and replace them with privately administered charter schools. Soon after the hurricane struck, the Bush administration began to work to replace the public schools with charter schools, first by waiving the federal restrictions on charter schools and then granting \$20.9 million to Louisiana for establishing charter schools. At about the same time, the Orleans Parish School Board placed the district's 7,500 employees on unpaid "Disaster Leave" and two months later all the employees were fired, leading to some of the teachers filing a lawsuit and gaining a temporary restraining order. After the restraining order expired, the board again voted to fire the teachers and later allowed the district contract with the teachers to expire. More of the public schools began converting to charter schools, and by June all but four of the 25 schools, helped by an additional \$24 million grant from Secretary of Education Spellings, became charter schools. Most of the charter schools did not open as scheduled and three schools operated by a California corporation had their charter revoked three weeks before opening day, leaving students without a school (Center for Community Change, 2006).

The non-profit group Center for Community Change (2006), working with the New Orleans public high school students, concluded that neoliberal and neoconservative reformers disdain:

the public sector and those who work within it. It is a vision of competition and economic markets. It is a vision of private hands spending public funds. Most disturbing, it is a vision that casts families and students as "customers," who shop for schools in isolation from---and even in competition with---their neighbors. It is a vision, like the game of musical chairs, that requires someone to be left without a seat. (p. 1)

However, the shortcomings of neoliberal policies are increasingly revealed. First, NCLB claims that standardized tests will provide more objective assessments of students learning that can be provided by teachers. Yet, in my home state of New York, almost every recent standardized exam has been criticized for having poorly constructed, misleading, or erroneous questions, or for using a grading scale that either overstates or understates student achievement. Critics argue that exams that students must pass to graduate have had varied degrees of difficulty depending on whether the State Education Department wants to increase the graduation rate and therefore makes the exam easier, or wants to appear rigorous and tough, and therefore makes the exam more difficult. Furthermore, 8<sup>th</sup> grade exams have had an artificially high failure rate so that the Commissioner can blame the increasing drop out rate on middle school teachers rather than acknowledge that the new draconian testing requirements were the

cause. Likewise, scores on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade exams have been going up so that the Commissioner can claim that his policies have been a success.

The combination of standardized testing required by the state and federal government has not achieved their goal of improving student learning and closing the achievement gap. Because many schools, particularly urban schools, must focus on raising test scores in order to avoid sanctions, and other schools with high test scores compete with other high scoring schools, in most schools curriculum and pedagogy have been narrowed and simplified as teachers teach toward the test. Subjects that are either not tested under NCLB, such as art, music, social studies and history, are often given little or no attention. In literacy, elementary schools that receive Federal funding are limited to using the curricula approved by the Bush administration's Department of Education. These are scripted curricula that undermine teachers' skills and knowledge and their ability to respond to differences in students' culture and abilities.

While NCLB proponents argued that the reforms would close the educational achievement gap between the U.S. and other countries, the emphasis on teaching to tests that emphasize recall and factual content seems to have negatively impacted students' abilities to problem solve. On the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA), assessments designed to evaluate students' ability to apply knowledge to new problems, the U.S. has fallen further behind other countries. The U.S. now ranks 21<sup>st</sup> of 30 OECD countries in science and 25<sup>th</sup> of 30 in mathematics (Baldi, Yin, Skemer, Green & Herget, 2007).

A second indicator that the gap between the US and other countries is widening is the astonishing decline from having the highest university participation in the world to 14<sup>th</sup>, a decline that can be attributed to other countries expanding their post-secondary education systems and keeping tuition low. While 60% of U.S. high school graduates go off to university, only 30% gain a baccalaureate degree, significantly fewer than the 50% who earn degrees in OECD countries (Douglass, 2006). Similarly, over the last several decades the percentage of students graduating from U.S. high schools has essentially remained the same while most OECD countries have had substantial increases, therefore passing the U.S. (Forum for Education and Democracy. 2008). In some states the percentage of students graduating from high school has decreased. In New York, for example, the graduation rate hovers just above 50% (Haney, 2003).

NCLB supporters also asserted that it would improve overall student learning and close the achievement gap between White students and students of color. Again, data suggest that neither of these outcomes have occurred. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a nation-wide test given to samples of students, the annual rate of gain on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading and mathematics achievement tests have decreased significantly from the pre-NCLB years (1999-2002) to the post NCLB years (2002-2007). Gains in math scores have declined and gains on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading test have stalled (Smith, 2007). Increases in students' scores have either ended or are increasing at a slower rate than pre NCLB.

Moreover, given the Bush administration's ostensible goal of closing the achievement gap, the university enrollment rates by race and ethnicity reveal that while White, Black, and Hispanics in the late 1970s enrolled in university at almost equal rates, the enrollment gap has increased since then, and particularly in the most recent years for which we have data. The current gap is nearing 20% (Forum for Education and Democracy, 2008, p. 4).

Teachers and parents increasingly recognize that NCLB causes more harm than good. In the annual *Phi Delta Kappan* Poll (2007) on the public's attitudes toward the public schools conducted in June, 2007, 40% of those polled have a 'somewhat or very unfavorable' opinion of NCLB while 31% had a 'somewhat or very favorable' opinion.

Also, the more familiar respondents were with NCLB, the more negative their view. Given that those with an unfavorable opinion had increased from 31 to 40% over the previous year, it may well be the case that over 50% of people now hold an unfavorable view. Consequently, even though NCLB was up for reauthorization this fall, the Republican president and Democratic congress were not able to act on it and NCLB continues, temporarily, as is. However, the new president and congress, beginning in spring 2009, will need to either reform the act or scrap it all together.

*The Forum for Education and Democracy* is just one of the groups offering proposals for how federal education policy should change under the new administration. *The Forum* is an education think tank composed of professors and former teachers dedicated to renewing America's commitment to strong public schools and they recently released their report *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education* (2008). The report reveals the harms caused by the last quarter century of education policies, but particularly since NCLB.

In response, they argue that the federal government should focus on ensuring equal educational opportunity and building educational knowledge for good practice.

They outline specific proposals for teacher preparation and continuing professional development, reorganizing schools to build on teachers' expertise, multiple assessments, equalizing school spending, for improving post-secondary education, and educational research. They also argue that investing in education is necessary if we are to counter the increasing number of students who are dropping out of secondary schools and ending up unemployed or adding to the largest prison population in the world. Currently, one in 100 Americans are incarcerated and 'several states are now spending as much on corrections as they do on higher education and the nation is spending about \$44 billion annually on corrections' (Forum for Education and Democracy, 2008, p. 9), an increase of over 900 percent between 1980 and 2000 (p. ix).

What is needed, then, are educational, economic, and social policies that restore the government's central role in providing the structural and human conditions for developing strong schools, healthy families, and productive workers. To do otherwise will only continue to leave children behind.

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