

The Post-Election Politics of Education

By Victoria M. Young

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In the 1980's, **corporate-politicos and the National Governors Association waged a silent coup in taking over this nations public schools improvement.** Their actions unraveled improvements of the 70's, devalued the teaching profession, and further limited learning opportunities particularly for underprivileged children.

Costs have risen dramatically as more tax dollars enter the pockets of private testing companies, publishers, supplemental service providers, charter management organizations, and "non-profits" (good and bad). Meanwhile, true "achievements" changed very little.

These "reformer's" actions culminated in the 2001 national policy dubbed "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) with its reliance on the theory of standards and testing. We people have accepted this — it's not right. In my state, ALL of Idaho's congressional members voted YEA. Despite the fact that **three in four Americans do not think NCLB has helped their schools**, these representatives have never been asked to publicly explain their vote, yet the law itself calls for accountability.

According to the rule of law, the acknowledged **problems with NCLB should have been addressed by congress in 2007. It didn't happen.** Their incompetence now provides us with the opportunity to set straight the role of the federal government in education, and, to demand that the institution of public education serve our country's children well, something our lawmakers have failed to do by both their actions and in-actions. Children can't wait.

If the politicians in charge believe, like our Idaho superintendent of schools does, that "we have no way of identifying who needs remediation (learning problems cured) along the way" without more standardized tests, they don't comprehend the basics of teaching or understand testing. **Standardized tests are "summative."** They are a final accounting of knowledge only. They don't necessarily provide information useful for individual students, consistently get information back in a timely fashion, or test for skills acquired.

As education historian Diane Ravitch has written, "The public thinks the tests have scientific validity, like that of a thermometer or a barometer ... But **test scores are not comparable to standard weights and measures**; they do not have the precision of a doctor's scale or a yardstick."

During the learning process, **tests given by teachers addressing what is taught are called "formative."** They are used to detect misunderstood or missed concepts immediately thus avoiding costly "remediation." Pushed into prepping for standardized tests, there's less time for formation of good thinking processes on the part of students, or meaningful testing by teachers.

The truth? Politicians are directing public education. **The bonding of politicians to corporations, and entrepreneurial and political interest lobbying groups puts our children squarely at the mercy of politics.** But is the NCLB law worth our efforts to make it right?

In 1965, the intent of federal education law was to help fund children's needs targeted at areas in our country serving significant numbers of poverty-stricken children, Title I schools. Research showed these children are left behind educationally by their local districts and states. When funding of schools is based too heavily on property taxes, which are lower in poorer communities, inequalities in "inputs" occur. These "inputs" are things like books, the best educators, and appropriate class sizes in addition to the buildings themselves.

According to this 1965 law, **testing was to be in an appropriate manner to evaluate the effectiveness of specific programs designed for those in need, not the costly across-the-board method we now use.** Today, with lawmakers across the country needing to make cuts, we don't have the flexibility to cut testing

costs. What is the right thing to do?

If we believe that corporate America and politicians know best how to run schools, we must elect well-informed representatives capable of thinking like professional educators — or **take the politics out of this essential service**. Until we can accomplish the latter, education should be an election issue. Yet, as Nick Anderson stated in the Washington Post (11/4/10), “Education was barely an issue in the campaign.”

In that same article, *Divided Congress may be fertile ground for No Child reform*, Jack Jennings from the Center on Education Policy predicted that unseating Obama in 2012 trumps the issue of NCLB and “...we’re headed for deadlock for a couple years. **I can’t see them (GOP) wanting to give him a victory on education.**”

Victory? **Improving education for our country’s children is a political victory, not an essential service**. We accept “our representatives” using our children as political pawns? It’s disgusting. It’s a betrayal. It has got to stop.

The people of this country must face the real problems and give consent to the direction we should take. That’s what you call “choice.” But the **rumor is that “the powers that be” do want to move ahead on NCLB, without any further public input. We trust that they now know what they are doing?** And they can do it right? There is no proof of that.

The true indicators of the quality of our system, rates on drop-outs, graduates, adult literacy, college enrollment, degree completion, and the financial efficiency of the system, are what we must know to be fully informed. **Test scores are no longer relevant**. What is relevant is how we use what we know to move our system forward again.

A desire to improve our schools doesn’t guarantee a solid vision upon which to lead. Whether or not you want to face the fact that we are at our educational “tipping point” is up to you. Secretary of Education Duncan admits “We’ve flat lined” academically but he thinks it’s because “We rested on our laurels, taken our eye off the ball.” I think it is because **our “leaders” have set the wrong goal for the American education system**. No Child Left Behind provides the platform upon which that debate should occur.

We can’t predict a child’s future but we sure as hell can use what we know to get the law right this time. For starters, **we need a voice in deciding the goal**. Do we want to guarantee that all children can do well on tests? Or do we want our system to provide “a chance for every child to be educated to the limit of his talents” (John F. Kennedy 6/11/63)?

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