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OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

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Data Warehousing Will Destroy Your Soul

BY SUSAN OHANIAN



What's going on here?

Make no mistake: the assault on teachers in New York and Chicago also threatens teachers in Seoul¹ and London and Vancouver.

Worldwide, corporate interests strive to keep teachers intellectually barefoot. They want people who follow the script to train future workers for the global economy.

My bumper sticker reads *Republicans/Democrats: Same shit, different piles*. These two halves of the Corporate Party showed corporate loyalty by passing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 by huge margins.

When this happened, Kathy Emery, my co-author for *Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* noted, “When Ted Kennedy and George Bush agree on something, you need to worry about who the man behind the curtain is.” While writing our book, it became clear to us that the men behind the curtain are the members of the Business Roundtable.

People are so used to thinking of issues as right wing and left wing that they miss the corporate wing. In the name of preparing students for “the 21st century workplace,” the Business Roundtable (BRT) wrote the NCLB Business Leaders Toolkit, urging CEOs to take advantage of this “exceptional window of opportunity...[to] act strategically and with a common voice.”

In addition to declaring all public schools failures, opening the door to vouchers and privatization, the Business Roundtable plan also paved the way for school-to-work plans sitting on the back burner ever since President Clinton failed to get the national test he wanted.

By 2000, the Business Roundtable had managed to create an interlocking network of business associations, corporate foundations, governors’ associations, non-profits and educational institutions. This network includes the Education Trust, Annenberg

Center, Harvard Graduate School, Public Agenda, Achieve, Inc., Education Commission of the States, the Broad Foundation, Institute for Educational Leadership, federally funded regionally laboratories and most newspaper editorial boards.

In December 2008, former IBM CEO Lou Gerstner called for the abolition of all local school districts, eliminating local decisions regarding standards, teacher selection, and curriculum choice. He wrote, “Establish a National Skills Day on which every third-, sixth-, ninth-, and twelfth-grader would be tested against the national standards.”²

Fellows like this show us why John Dewey said that “democracy must be reborn with each generation.”

Obama, Duncan — progressive?

Some of the fiercest advocates of retrograde school reform in the U.S. claim the label of “Progressive.” Just take a look at the Center for American Progress.

In 2005, Senator Barack Obama’s first speech on education was written by the Center for American Progress. The title, “Teaching Our Kids in a 21st Century Economy,” should be a warning.

Anytime someone in your house starts talking about 21st century skills, lock up your kids, and count the silverware. Obama’s speech called for instituting tougher standards and testing, creating mammoth data surveillance systems, paying teachers based on student test scores, and so on.

As a Presidential candidate, Obama repeated this message via satellite hookup at the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) convention in 2008 in Chicago. In the presence of the Obama aura — even via a video hookup — union delegates were unwilling to say, “Hell, no!” to his program for de-professionalizing teaching. Instead, they stood and applauded. I was there, bearing witness.

Currently, Obama’s Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s call for recruiting and training new, highly-qualified teachers for some of the hardest-to-teach classrooms in the country denies that highly qualified teachers already exist in these schools, denies that the problem is poverty, not teachers.

Duncan’s strategy in Chicago was to establish “turnaround” schools, meaning clean a school of all staff. Bring in Teach for America and other recruits without teaching certificates.

As Gerald Bracey recounted in the Nov. 2009 *Bracey Report*,³

[W]hen a school goes through turnaround, it loses the social fabric an experienced and professional staff provides. As the nation witnessed the horrific stomping/beating death of a Christian Fenger High School student on YouTube, they saw a “turnaround” become the deadliest school reform of all. Writing in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, high school teacher Deborah Lynch pointed out⁴ that “reform” at Fenger meant “dumping all the staff, even the engineers,” thereby removing human capital from the school:

“We have relationships with kids who may not even have another adult in their homes, or their lives. It’s called human capital. We know brothers and sisters... We ask them how their sick mother is or how their job search is going... We give them bus money when they have forgotten theirs. We share our lunches with those who missed breakfast. We kid them, we laugh with them, we exhort them to do better, to get to school on time, to work hard... Oh yes, and we teach them. Yet you have to have a relationship with these kids in order to teach them.”

The school website indicates that along with extensive building renovations, “a highly talented faculty and staff were hired.” This means that when student Derrion Albert was killed, no one in this turnaround school had known the kids for more than three weeks. *This is the concerted policy of the U. S. Secretary of Education.*

Even when a teacher isn’t in a turnaround school, she faces assault by NCLB rules which force teachers to be script readers. To receive NCLB money, schools promise to use only certain approved programs and most of these programs are scripted — detailing what to say, and when.

To maintain NCLB purity, schools hire teaching “coaches” to patrol the hallways to make sure teachers are on the right page all through the day.

Of course this defies any kind of pedagogical justification, but also consider the psychology of the matter. In *Stumbling on Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert provides a clue as to why this is psychologically wrong: “Toddlers squeal with delight when they knock over a stack of blocks, push a ball, or squash a cupcake on their foreheads. Why? *Because they did it, that’s why. The room is different because I was in it.*”

Because I was in it.

Surely, if we are to call ourselves teachers, our classrooms

must reflect our presence. We must not camouflage our identity with a McGraw-Hill script.

Sitting at the table even if the food is rotten

Finding no help from unions that refuse to negotiate on curriculum or teacher autonomy, hundreds of thousands of teachers feel this is the only choice: Follow the script or get out.

When Educator Roundtable website (www.educatorroundtable.org/) launched a petition calling for the end of NCLB,⁵ the NEA, the largest of the U.S. teacher unions, objected. They complained, "We have to keep a seat at the table." We argued about the issue in *Phi Delta Kappan*.⁶ Now, complaints to our professional organizations about their participation in the latest follow-up project, the Common Core Standards, are met with, "We are fortunate to have a seat at the table."

In 2003, my website won the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) *George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language*. Now, NCTE won't even print a small news item that a member has started a website opposing those Common Core Standards: www.StopNationalStandards.org.

Even when the food is rotten, people don't want to walk away from that corporate-politico table. For some, there are money possibilities — grants and consulting. But for most, it's both the lure of sitting with power and the timidity of standing up to power and saying "No." It matters not to the teacher organizations that they sit at the table despite clear teacher opposition to NCLB.

I would be willing to give up part of my salary to help cover the Federal money lost if our district told the Federal Government we are not going to comply with the onerous NCLB standards.

— *Education Roundtable Petition signer #15,462*

NCLB breaks children's hearts.

— *Education Roundtable Petition signer #17,788*

I look for the day when teachers unions and professional organizations will promote transparency about the corporate connections underlying national education policy.

Data warehousing will destroy your soul

A contributor to *Work America*, a newsletter of the National Alliance of Business, expressed the prototypical desire of the corporate-politico:

- I dream of the day when I can go to a knowledge systems integrator, specify my needs and have them put all the partners together to deliver the people I need.
- Applying the principles of the material supply chain to the process of lifelong learning is a cost-effective, efficient way businesses can ensure that worker knowledge is put to use to help companies' bottom line.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan has absorbed this mentality with gusto. At a May 29, 2009 press conference he declared, "We have to be transparent about data. We have to raise the bar so that every child knows on every step of their educational trajectory what they're going to do."

These folk haven't a clue. Not a clue. For starters, they haven't figured out that a teacher can teach and teach and teach. But it still doesn't mean the students will learn it — not on schedule, anyway.

In Chicago, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his team⁷ hooked up 9th and 10th graders in advanced classes to beepers and beeped them during the school day, asking kids to answer questions in a provided booklet, questions which asked what they were thinking about at that time. As it happens, while a teacher lectured 27 students on Genghis Khan's invasion of China and the conquest of Beijing in 1215, only two students mentioned China: One was thinking about a meal he'd had the night before in a Chinese restaurant and the other wondered why the men used to wear pigtales. Nobody mentioned Genghis Khan.

No teacher is surprised to hear this.

Nonetheless, data-driven decision-making means the computer tallies a kid's responses to shoddy standardized test questions and the teacher is supposed to make the results the basis of her teaching. Everything that happens in school is supposed to increase students' performance on those state tests.

One chapter in the 502-page tome *Handbook of Data-Based Decision Making in Education*⁸ leads off with this exaltation of data offered by *Education Week*:

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Imagine an afternoon when a teacher can sit down at a computer desktop and quickly sort through reams of data she'll use to plan lessons for the next day....She'll compare every student's achievement against state standards to decide which students need review and which ones are ready to move on....That technological capability can only be found in the rare classroom today, but some experts say that such a data-rich approach to instruction will soon be common place.

Yes, just imagine it. The authors view this positivist, technocratic view of teacher decision-making as something every teacher should strive for. Such "planning" assumes:

- state standards cause learning;
- achievement tests test those standards;
- student scores on achievement tests reveal something important about what a student knows; and
- students learn what teachers teach.

Education Week also exults, "Aldine (Texas) is striking because the district leaves so little to chance when it comes to student success.... It takes little time for a visitor to Aldine to see the heavy emphasis that is placed on preparation for state tests. Computer programs scroll through lists of practice questions. Printers spit out scores for teachers to review. Timed practice quizzes help students prepare for the real thing."

Keeping teachers-on-script paid off for Aldine. After four times placing as a runner-up, they are the 2009 winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education. Maybe we should organize a campaign to send the Broad Foundation a few million copies of the Chinese proverb: *A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.*

We should follow David Berliner's lead in challenging conceptions of data. On a C-Span TV interview, Berliner gave his definition:⁹

Questioner: Your anecdotes. . . .

David Berliner: I'd like to call these data.

In the same vein, Dora Chaplin, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology, General Theological Seminary, New York City,

observed, “Our Lord said, ‘Feed my sheep’; he did not say, ‘Count them.’”

Amen

Taking a look at test questions

Standardistos who decry educators who “make decisions based on intuition, gut instinct, or fads,”¹⁰ take the content of standardized tests as a given. For seven years, I’ve run a website documenting the outrages offered by standardized tests. I have documented in chilling detail how schools have become test prep boot camps for test questions that are just plain loony.

Here’s an item from a test given to every fourth grader in New York State — the test that determined whether a student advanced to 5th grade. After reading a passage about how pretzels are made, fourth-graders were asked:

The best source of information about the history of pretzels would probably be

- a) a cookbook
- b) an almanac
- c) an encyclopedia
- d) a daily newspaper

If you think you know the answer to his question, try looking up “pretzel” in the Encyclopedia. Nothing. In an article about bagels from the Dec. 31, 2003, *New York Times*, I did find a pretzel mention: “It wouldn’t be Philadelphia without soft pretzels.” More searching produced one sentence that might qualify as “historical”: *Old-time pretzel makers dipped the pretzels into a lye solution*. I found it in my kitchen in *A World of Breads* by Dolores Casella.¹¹

Everything about this item is emblematic of the hubris embedded in standardized tests. Item writers with no connection to real children in real classrooms, or even, it seems, any connection to real pretzel history, invent inaccurate and devious and just plain stupid material.

No wonder they insist on keeping tests secret. The teacher who is informed by computer printout that Johnny missed this answer won’t know a thing about his reading comprehension, but she’s ordered to base her lessons on the data provided.

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With a high school diploma at stake, Florida high schoolers were quizzed about a reflective meditation on moose tracks in Alaska. I wrote the author, sending him the goofy questions. He was astounded.

Now you know why it's a felony for teachers in Florida and in many other states to look at the tests. Test makers and the state officials who buy their product don't want word to get out about the specific content of these tests. But how professional can it be to base your lesson plans on test items you can't examine?

In Aberdeen, Washington, a fourth grader was suspended from school because he refused to answer the writing prompt directing him to compose a story about what would happen next if he saw the principal flying past the window. Despite urging from his teacher, his principal, and his mother (who was summoned to school), he didn't pick up the pencil.

He was given a five-day suspension — with a letter stating, “The fact that Tyler chose to simply refuse to work on the WASL, after many reasonable requests, is none other than blatant defiance and insubordination.” Tyler explained, “I couldn't think of what to write without making fun of the principal.”

I have a massive collection of outrages from teachers and parents about children vomiting on tests, children curling up in a fetal position and sobbing for a parent, children in Sunday school forming a prayer circle and praying their teacher won't be fired because they didn't do well enough on the test.

In Tennessee, where teachers are forbidden to talk to students taking the test, a teacher received an official letter of reprimand for comforting a sobbing child by saying, “Do your best.” Do you want someone in charge of your children who doesn't stop for tears?

High stakes standardized tests should come with a warning letter for parents to sign:

WARNING: Experts on child development have determined:

- This test may cause your child to vomit, have palpitations, nightmares, and school phobia.
- This test will make your child feel insecure, ignorant, and helpless.
- This test will distort your child's understanding of why people read.

- This test has no academic value. Nobody but \$8-an-hour test correctors get to see your child's answers.
- Because of this test, your child will no longer have recess.
- Because of this test you will become the warden of homework mania.
- By taking this test your child becomes the property of the state.

Joel Klein, the Chancellor for New York City, the largest public school system in the U.S., acknowledged that parents express concern "about the stress — they say there's too much high-stakes testing. But our kids are going to grow up in a world with high-stakes testing at every level, high-stakes challenges in a very aggressive global economy."

So the philosophy here is to make the kindergarten child's life miserable, and then he'll be ready to accept misery as an adult.

The Human Capitalists

"No excuses" is the mantra of the Human Capitalists. Place blame for lack of success on the teachers and the schools.

"No excuses" ignores poverty. They ignore the fact that half of American children receive food stamps. Adults who grew up in poverty are more likely to have impaired physical and mental growth, lower academic achievement, and to remain impoverished.

They ignore the Surgeon General's Report that says one third of all poor youngsters ages two to nine have untreated cavities. They pay no attention to the 12-year-old in Washington D.C. who died of an abscessed tooth, or that his 10-year-old brother had six abscessed teeth.

What human capitalist neoliberal reformers can't fathom is that good teaching is much more like a Chinese lyric painting than a bus schedule. You can't chart a kid's learning by taking his temperature or by getting a computer to track where he puts an apostrophe at 10 a.m. on Monday.

Data and knowledge are not the same thing. The late Gerald Bracey offered a neat recap: "There is a growing technology of testing that permits us now to do in nanoseconds things that we shouldn't be doing at all."¹²

Teaching is the messiest occupation imaginable, and with all the current hoopla for data warehousing, someone needs to speak

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for a metaphysics of quality. We teachers need to tell our stories. That's why I offer Michael's asparagus letter¹³ every chance I get.

When I announced to my 7th and 8th graders, who as a group, tested out below the 20th percentile in reading, that we were going to exchange notes every day, kids looked at me like I was nuts. And Michael was the loudest complainer.

But I was tough. . . and persistent. . . and the lure was when a kid wrote a note he got one back. Before long, Michael was hooked. During the winter, as I complained a lot about shoveling sidewalks, Michael's notes advised me to just take the months as they come. As spring approached, I began mentioning that for me the first sign of spring was the asparagus ads in the newspaper. Kids thought this was a hoot — such a typical teacher remark. But they also began tearing ads out of the daily newspapers we received and leaving them on my desk — who could find the best asparagus buy for Ms O.

Michael won. He wrote me a long note about going to Boston to see a dolphin show and insisting that his family take time out from their busy schedule to visit a market so he could check the price of asparagus. He wrote, “\$1 a pound. But Boston is a long way to go for asprgs.”

Every time I talk to teachers, I show them Michael's letter. I don't have to explain things or apologize for the spelling. Teachers instantly recognize it as testimony to what we're about. Not quantifiable value-adding, but heart, faith, and grit. And do I dare add love?

When Michael graduated from 8th grade, his mother wrote me a lovely letter, thanking me for all I'd done. She told me she was going to phone, but Michael urged her to write. He said, “When you care about somebody and when you're going to say something important, you write a letter.”

This is what I mean when I say you can only teach who you are. And if you try to teach while submitting to a script dominatrix, then you lose not only your professionalism, but also your soul.

And there's more. Today, Michael is a chef in an upscale restaurant, making a whole lot of money. And I claim partial credit for his success because, after all, I introduced him to an interest in asparagus.

Today, Michael, who exhibited the classic signs of dyslexia, would not pass the New York Regents exam and would be denied

a high school diploma, thus making him ineligible for work as a chef. Or automobile mechanic; baker; broadcast technician; or dozens of other occupations.

To be a teacher these days, you have to decide who you're willing to obey.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In October 2007, the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union asked me to go to Seoul and warn their political leaders about the dangers of NCLB.

² Gerstner, L. (2008, December 1). *Lessons from 40 years of education 'reform.'* *Wall Street Journal*.

³ Bracey, G. (2009). *Bracey Report*.

⁴ Lynch, D. (2009, October 2). "Safety at Fenger Yields to Reform." *Chicago Sun-Times*. Retrieved October 3, 2009, from <http://www.suntimes.com/news/otherviews/1802256,CST-EDT-open02.article> (Link no longer active as of November 1, 2009.)

⁵ <http://www.educatorroundtable.org/petition.html>

⁶ Ohanian, S. and Kovacs, P. (2007, December 1). *Make Room at the Table for Teachers*. Phi Delta Kappan

⁷ Csikszentmihalyi, M, Rathunde, K., and Whalen, S. (1993). *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Kowalski, T. J. and Lasley, T. J., ed. (2009), *Handbook of Data-Based Decision Making in Education*. New York: Routledge

⁹ Berliner, David. (2007. April 28). C-Span.

¹⁰ Datnow, A. and Park, V. "School System Strategies for Supporting Data Use," in Kowalski and Lasley, ed. (2009) *Handbook of Data-Based Decision Making in Education*. New York: Routledge.

¹¹ Casella, D. (1966). *A World of Breads*. New York: David White, p. 277.

¹² Mathews, J. (2006, November 14). Just whose idea was all this testing? *The Washington Post*, .

¹³ Ohanian, S. (2001). *Caught in the middle: Nonstandard kids and a killing curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.