



New York University
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School of Education
Department of Culture and Communication
239 Greene Street, Suite 739
New York, NY 10003-6674
Telephone: (212) 998-5182 YC

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July 15, 1997

Mr. Gordon Ambach
Council of Chief State School Officers
By fax
Washington, DC

Dear Gordon,

I wanted to let you know that I have resigned from the National Test Panel overseeing the development of national tests. I thought it important to let you know why.

As you may know, I enthusiastically supported the President's plan to create a national test based on NAEP for individual students. However, when I met with the President, the First Lady, Secretary Riley, and others on March 5, I strongly urged that the development of the national tests be placed under the supervision of the National Assessment Governing Board. I believe that NAGB is exactly the right institution to oversee this process, because it is the authorized governing body for NAEP, and because it is bipartisan and broadly representative.

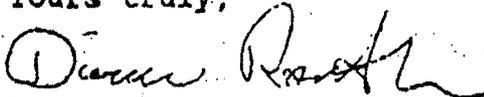
At that time, I was assured that the Administration would consider asking Congress to expand NAGB's authorization to include oversight of this national testing program. However, to my knowledge, nothing has happened to implement this.

I continue to believe that NAGB, which is legally responsible for NAEP, should oversee the national tests. I fear that the end result of the current policy will be to weaken NAGB and to politicize national testing. This would be a terrible price to pay for haste in developing the test.

For these reasons, I do not wish to be part of the National Test Panel.

I would appreciate it if you would share my letter with other members of the panel.

Yours truly,


Diane Ravitch

cc: Secretary Richard Riley

Educator resigns from panel creating achievement tests

Says administration politicized process

By Carol Inners
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Education historian and scholar Diane Ravitch has resigned from a panel charged with overseeing the development of voluntary national achievement tests, saying the Clinton administration is trying to "politicize national testing."

"I support the idea of national tests, but it should be done correctly, not in this hasty way and without a credible governance process," Mrs. Ravitch, a former assistant secretary of education in the Bush administration, said yesterday in a telephone interview.

After a March meeting at the White House with President and Mrs. Clinton and Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, Mrs. Ravitch was appointed to the National Test Panel, assembled by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and MPR Associates, a California-based consulting firm.

Wilmer Cody, commissioner of education in Kentucky and former superintendent of schools in Montgomery County, is chairman of the 16-member panel given the job of drawing up a blueprint for national tests in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade mathematics. It meets yesterday at the Watergate and will meet again this morning.

The Department of Education, which is overseeing development of the tests, plans to hold hearings on the reading and math tests of the 28-year-old, congressionally mandated National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Mrs. Ravitch believes the development of the national tests should be placed under the supervision of the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) "because it is the authorized governing body for NAEP and because it is bipartisan and broadly representative," she said in her July 15 letter of resignation to Gordon Ambach, executive director of CCSSO.

She said she was assured that

the administration would consider asking Congress to expand NAGB's authorization to include oversight of the national testing program.

"If it is going to become part of a long-term testing program, it should be non-political, and that didn't happen," she said.

Mrs. Ravitch, a professor at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, also worries that giving the Department of Education oversight over the new tests "runs the risk of weakening NAGB's control of NAEP."

Chester E. Finn Jr., former assistant secretary of education in the Reagan administration, agrees with Mrs. Ravitch's assessment that the Clinton administration "seems less inclined than it was before" to turn over the new national tests to NAEP and NAGB. Both have supported national tests with the caveat that oversight be assigned to NAGB or other bipartisan, nonpolitical body.

"The danger is that we will end up with national tests that are lamentable in terms of what they test," said Mr. Finn, now president of the Fordham Foundation.

Officials at the White House and Education Department did not return calls seeking comment on Mrs. Ravitch's resignation.

Rep. Bill Goodling, Pennsylvania Republican and chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, opposes individual testing. He said he hopes to stop the national tests in two ways:

"We want to try to earmark the money the secretary would have to spend on this for something else so it's not available for developing national tests, and I'm preparing a 'sense of Congress' resolution which says: Suspend any planning and development until there's explicit statutory authority from Congress."

"It's politically foolish to try to bypass Congress," he said.



Rep. Charles E. Schumer and Wayne LaPierre

Gun debate b

By Rowan Scarborough
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

It wasn't on pay-per-view and nobody lost an ear. But the National Rifle Association's director and his chief congressional opponent yesterday staged a yelling, finger-pointing debate.

The National Press Club faceoff was billed as a civil discussion on the finer points of gun control. Is the Brady law alive or dead? Do guns, or people, kill people?

After a polite lunch, the NRA's Wayne LaPierre and Rep. Charles E. Schumer, New York Democrat, cut to the chase.

"The problem is you want to take away every American's firearm in the country and I'm not going to let that happen," Mr. LaPierre bellowed at a man whose passion is gun-control laws.

Then he turned to the radio and TV audience and declared, "This is a freedom we have, a freedom to own a firearm under the Constitution. Do you want to give that freedom up because they won't enforce the gun laws? ...

"Let's prosecute the bad guys. Let's stop beating up on the NRA."

Mr. Schumer is as skilled at defending gun laws as Mr. LaPierre

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is in process ment's gun Mixing the Brook Mr. LaPie "an old ca "I have said. "I ad are a way he's saying use the sa attacks yo just yell at He ac member tred of the Such a become c the NRA t "We're who belie

Democrats reject offer to set deadline

By Nancy E. Roman
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The chairman of the Senate Rules and Administration Committee has offered Democrats a definite cutoff date for the investigation of the Louisiana Senate race in exchange for six new FBI agents to probe charges of fraud.

Sen. Wendell H. Ford of Kentucky, the ranking Democrat on the committee, called the offer "outlandish" and said he has not responded with a counteroffer.

Democrats want to clear the name of winner Mary L. Landrieu and end the investigation into the election that brought her to Washington by a margin of 5,759

votes that the investigation has not borne the fruit they sought. But they blame the Democrats for tying up the early part of the investigation with procedural maneuvering and pulling out before it was over.

Woody Jenkins, the Republican whom Mrs. Landrieu defeated, insists that the \$250,000 and two months spent on the probe have only skimmed the surface of the wrongdoing he says turned the election.

"What are they [Democrats] afraid of?" said a frustrated GOP Senate aide close to the investigation.

The rules committee yesterday

who pre charges, n proved an been dispr going after senator wi voice contr age as mes chance of

Their conversations concluded with the Democrats turning the Republicans down flat.

"They offered me some outlandish deal," Mr. Ford said, refusing to elaborate. He and Sen. Robert C. Byrd, West Virginia Democrat, scoffed about parts of the proposal.

Mr. Warner has avoided the press, in part because his own caucus is divided over how to handle the issue. One camp is convinced that corruption skewed the election, robbing Mr. Jenkins and the GOP of a Senate seat. They believe that the Democrats are blocking a fair investigation just as they are

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wanted to hear. But it would be obtuse not to give at least a little credit to the civil rights law. —

The 1996 federal welfare law is the most recent effort to change fundamental aspects of human behavior by altering the incentive system. It assumes that those who have depended on welfare, confronted with the elimination of permanent subsidies for idleness, will find jobs. The likelihood of this project's succeeding is an issue on which reasonable people may at this point still differ. But it might work. It's not crazy to hold out some hope.

In any case, it's beyond dispute that government does sometimes induce people to behave. But when its object is to improve them on the inside, to motivate them to be good, to teach them to think about the long run, to stay away from drugs and crime and promiscuity, and sit quietly in school and listen to the teacher,

then it is playing against very tough competition.

A decade or so ago, when George Latimer was mayor of St. Paul, Minnesota, he summed up his philosophy of government in two sentences that would be difficult to improve upon: *Don't look for problems. Look for opportunities.* Teenage pregnancy and terrible test scores may be the most frightening conditions in an urban community, but that in itself doesn't make them the most appropriate targets for benchmark commitments or innovative experiment. The best target may be graffiti, or classroom vaccination, or even computers in the state library system. The best target is something the society knows how to deal with.

The most intractable problems of American society are entitled to some respect—more than we typically give them. Recognizing that fact is the beginning of public-policy wisdom. ♦

THIS ISN'T ONLY A TEST

By Chester E. Finn Jr.

The saga of national education testing won't surprise those who have watched other reformist projects turn sticky and foul after brushing against the twin tar babies of the federal government and the education establishment. Once again, a worthwhile idea for upgrading American education is being muddied beyond recognition.

The tale begins in the 1980s, when governors like Lamar Alexander and Bill Clinton realized that the effort to reform U.S. schools and boost student achievement would never get far until clear academic standards were set, solid tests put in place, and real accountability mechanisms installed. It's impossible to make a successful journey if you cannot state your destination and have no markers of progress along the way. Nor should one expect much from school-choice policies—vouchers, charter schools, and the like—absent clear information for parents on the performance of individual schools.

The federally funded testing program called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) had long reported only nationwide averages rather

than offering a sense of the differences among the various states and school districts. By 1988, NAEP was changed to permit state scores and comparisons between states; and in order to distance it from the tar babies, an independent governing board was appointed to oversee the testing. For two years, I had the privilege of chairing that board, and we sought to ensure that the assessment content was sound, the tests challenging, and their results reported in relation to standards (how well *should* kids be doing in 8th-grade science or 4th-grade reading?) instead of simple averages and percentiles.

In 1989, George Bush and the nation's governors met in Charlottesville. There they set ambitious national education "goals" to be attained by century's end. Gov. Clinton, especially, toiled into the wee hours to draft them. Yet one essential ingredient was still missing: standards-based tests that would allow for comparisons between school systems, schools, and schoolchildren. A governor could find out from NAEP how his state was doing but not how Memphis was performing as opposed to Nashville, much less Nashville versus Milwaukee. Nor could the Robinson family see how little Jonah and Jonetta were doing compared with how they ought to be doing, or

Chester E. Finn Jr.'s "Education: The Era of Big Government Is Still Here" appeared in our June 2 issue.

whether the Franklin School had higher achievement than the Jefferson.

There are hundreds, even thousands, of extant tests, but none of them was—or is—quite right. The “standardized” kind that most school systems use doesn’t actually contain any standards—and is prey to the notorious “Lake Wobegon” effect whereby everyone is told he is above average. State testing programs don’t allow scores to be compared across jurisdictions. Even NAEP is still barred from reporting on units smaller than whole states. College entrance tests such as the SAT and ACT aren’t taken by everyone—and in any case they are no help in the elementary and middle grades.

U.S. testing in 1997 resembles a faulty model-airplane kit in which the pieces cannot be fitted together. Yet for those who believe in standards-based tests, test-based accountability, and results-based education reform, this is a plane that needs to fly.

In 1991, Bush and then-education secretary Lamar Alexander proposed a new nationwide testing scheme called “American Achievement Tests,” but Congress would have none of it. NAEP’s governing board suggested that NAEP tests be made available for district and school-level testing, but the education establishment—and commercial test publishers—rose up in outrage. The independent board was punished for its hubris in 1994, when Congress stripped away much of its independence.

Re-enter Bill Clinton, first with a wretched program called Goals 2000 that was long on federal control of state and local reform plans but short on testing and accountability, and then, just this January, with a proposal for national testing.

Initially, Clinton’s January proposal seemed modest and workable. He offered the states voluntary tests of 4th-grade reading and 8th-grade math—nothing more—based on the tests and standards already in use by NAEP at the national level. At little cost to themselves (there would be a federal subsidy, of course), states could use these tests to find out how their school systems, schools, and children were doing. The tests would also be accessible to individual communities, private schools, someday even parents.

Gov. John Engler immediately signed Michigan up, and several other states have since agreed to join. Clinton is barnstorming the land to recruit more. Judging from the many presidential events and

speeches in which it now stars, the testing plan has become one of his top education priorities.

Alas, the plan had one surpassing flaw. While it was said to be “based on” NAEP’s carefully developed tests and standards, Clinton was not actually going to use those tests and standards, nor did he propose to entrust the new venture to the board I once chaired. Rather, the Department of Education—without explicit congressional authority—would use discretionary dollars to launch the test-development process by contracting with a private organization. The independent board would control neither test content nor standards. Instead, the executive branch would.

Immediately, the scholar Diane Ravitch, the Education Leaders Council (a group of state education officials who don’t toe the establishment party line), and I urged the administration to reconsider. We said that national testing had merit—but that anything so sensitive as these tests must be run at arm’s length from the government and education-establishment tar babies. It also seemed that Congress should have something to say about the arrangements for so momentous a shift in American educational federalism.

There has been no effort to address our concerns. The Education Department has been rushing to put the original plan into operation. The independent board has been marginalized. Congress has been stuffed. Critics have been ignored. And to the extent that one can forecast real harm from procedural missteps, damage lies ahead. As often in education-reform efforts, the procedure has been hijacked by the tar babies. The hijacking takes the form of contracts that are already being signed with neither congressional approval nor independent oversight.

The main contract so far is with the Council of Chief State School Officers to develop test specifications. “The chiefs,” as they’re known in educator-land, are the Washington-based association of state superintendents, and they form one of the establishment’s most change-averse crews. The chief of the chiefs, Gordon Ambach, is a former New York state commissioner of education, staunch advocate of a larger federal role in education—a key backer of Goals 2000, for example—and a veteran federal grant-getter. He and his group have an ancient and cozy relationship with the Education Department and can be counted on to do its bidding, down to such particulars as Spanish-language math tests and other worri-

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some wrinkles in the Clinton plan.

A Berkeley, Calif., consulting firm has been engaged to help the chiefs with this project. They've named three new panels: two "content committees" to shape the reading and math exams and a "National Test Panel" to advise on the whole process. (A fourth committee, to furnish "technical" advice, will appear any day now.) Several meetings have been held, and draft specifications are due this month. By September, the Education Department will let contracts for actual test preparation. A huge consortium of private test-makers and publishers is positioned to get the job—at a pricetag rumored to be near \$50 million. The plan is to have these tests ready to roll in 1999.

For a new federal project, it's moving extraordinarily fast, apparently so that binding commitments can be made during the current fiscal year and before Congress cranks up to do anything. (House education-committee chairman Bill Goodling, himself a former school superintendent, dislikes tests that allow children and schools to be compared and has tried—so far without success—to attach a killer amendment to various bills.)

In truth, it's moving far too quickly for something as momentous as national tests in a country that never had anything of the sort before. But haste isn't the main problem. What's most alarming is that these tests will be creatures of the education establishment and prone to its postmodern curricular faddishness.

Consider these clues:

First, the contractor is in charge of its own advisory committees. Rather than an independent board that sets policies and tells the contractor (and the executive branch) what to do, the chiefs—in consultation with hierarchs at the Education Department—have their own handpicked panels, yet remain free to ignore them.

Second, the committees are narrowly based. Whereas NAEP's independent board contains governors, business leaders, local school-board members, and parents, the chiefs' new National Test Panel consists almost entirely of experts, interest-group representatives, and—surprise—several chiefs. Nobody knows whether it is bipartisan.

Third, and most worrisome, the two subject-matter

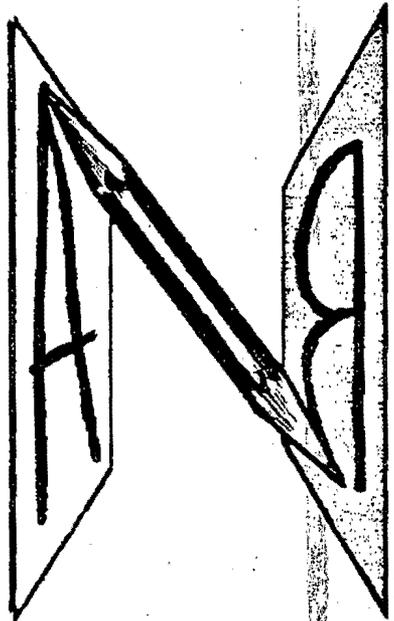
committees, for reading and math, include only educators and experts; there's not a "consumer" or employer in the lot. And while each group contains some well-regarded scholars and teachers, each is also tilted toward today's dominant educationist bias: the theory of teaching and learning known as "constructivism." That's the approach in which children are expected to create their own meaning and teachers are supposed to "facilitate" learning instead of directly instructing their pupils in worthwhile knowledge. Constructivism is heavy on "critical thinking" and "problem solving" but light on specific knowledge and basic skills. It doesn't so much care whether you know something as whether you can look it up. It doesn't judge certain

information to be important and certain books to be best, but, rather, partakes of fashionable academic relativism. It's friendly to "whole language" reading, wary of systematic phonics; it asks children to guesstimate the solutions to math problems and discounts the importance of correct answers. Tests grounded in this philosophy will be applauded by the ed-school professoriate and the deconstructionists, but they won't test the sorts of things that a governor like Engler—or, once, Clinton—really wants the children of his state to know.

Am I reading too much into lists of panelists? Probably not. People I respect in math and reading who have eyeballed these lists use words like "disaster" to describe the tests and standards

that they expect to emerge.

If national testing is headed that way, the country would be better off without it. Congress should apply the brakes before a wreck occurs. Then maybe—just maybe—let a different driver take a turn at the wheel. If a fully independent version of the board I chaired in the 1980s were put in full charge, the risk of crashing would be reduced. Alternatively, the whole idea might be privatized, turned into a commercial (or philanthropic) testing program that picks up Clinton's basic concept but with no government entanglement or federal funds. We *still* need a means to compare achievement across state borders. But it's worth doing only if the twin-tar babies can be avoided. The one thing indisputably worse than no national tests would be bad national tests.



Kevin Chapwick

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For 50 Years, Discovering Possibilities



Educational Testing Service 1997 Annual Report