



Education reform, school vouchers and privatization in the USA

BY BILL BERKOWITZ

When President George W. Bush rolled out his “No Child Left Behind” education reform plan several months ago it was praised by his conservative supporters.

Nina Shokrai Rees—at the time an education specialist with the conservative Heritage Foundation and currently an advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney—saw Bush’s proposal as an opportunity to remake the role of the federal government.

“Standards, choice, and fiscal and legal autonomy in exchange for boosting student test scores increasingly are the watchwords of education reform in America,” Rees commented. “The principle can be used in programs that apply to whole districts as well as entire states. Importantly, it lays the groundwork for a massive overhaul of education at the federal level in much the same way that welfare reform began.”

Revised education bill emerges from the House

The proposed bill changed dramatically by the time the United States House of Representatives approved the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization Bill* by an overwhelming 384-45 vote in late-May. The Senate takes up the Bill sometime in June and it may yet undergo more changes before it reaches the president’s desk.

Will the final product be, as the Bush administration claims, the most sweeping set of reforms enacted in the past several decades? Or is it a great “surrender” to liberal interest groups, as some on the right are now characterizing it? Is it a step, albeit a small one, along the road toward the privatization of the public education system in the United States? And finally, does this legislation fundamentally alter federal/state relations?

The House version of the bill contains a laundry list of initiatives, with its main focus on standardized testing and holding school districts accountable for academic performance. The bill requires annual reading and mathematics tests in grades three through eight. For the first time, it provides options for public funding of private tutors for children attending “failing” schools or for these children transferring to a different public school.

School vouchers, the use of public funds for private and/or religiously based schools—the controversial centerpiece of Bush’s original plan—was removed from the House bill. Two amendments were voted down: one providing up to \$1,500 for students in failing schools to attend private schools, and another establishing a \$50 million demonstration project to assess the effectiveness of vouchers.

This virtually eliminated the possibility that Congress will act on school vouchers during this session.

Despite the absence of any school voucher provisions, President Bush called the House vote a “giant step toward improving America’s public schools. The education reforms adopted today build on the principles of accountability, flexibility, local control and greater choices for parents.”

Betrayal or biding time?

For many conservative groups who vigorously support the president, including the Heritage Foundation, the Federalist Society, the Family Research Council and Concerned Women for America, dropping school vouchers was discouraging.

The Federalist Digest said it signified the “disembowelment of Mr. Bush’s ‘bipartisan’ education plan.” Syndicated conservative newspaper columnist Robert

Novak attributed the changes to President Bush’s “desire for bipartisanship at any cost.”

Given their heightened expectations, it’s understandable that conservatives felt betrayed. After all, they had come a long way from previous years when they routinely called for decreasing the federal role through disbanding of the Department of Education (see box overleaf). During the presidential campaign, they dropped that demand in deference to Bush’s campaign strategy of moving to the center on education issues. In its place, school vouchers became one of the cornerstones of the conservative education agenda.

In his analysis of the revised education bill, Michael S. Greve claims that without vouchers giving parents the power to leave the public schools behind, “the chance for meaningful federal education reform has come and gone, not to return for another decade or so.”

Greve, writing for *The Weekly Standard*, says that “the administration’s vow to sign whatever education ‘reform’ Congress might produce has enabled the education cartel to recapture a big portion of the added funds in this very round of legislation.

Not all criticism of the bill comes from conservative quarters. Barbara Miner, managing editor of the Milwaukee-based independent quarterly journal, *Rethinking Schools* and co-editor of the book *Failing Our Kids: Why the Testing Craze Won’t Fix Our Schools*, generally supports a strong role for the federal government. Miner believes the emphasis on standardized testing is shortsighted, woefully inadequate and racially biased, and in no way measures critical thinking skills.

Miner points out “standardized tests have their origins in the Eugenics movement

earlier in this century and its belief in the intellectual superiority of northern European whites. In fact, standardized testing in our schools didn't really exist until it was decided that IQ and similar tests were a valid way to identify 'superior' and 'inferior' students."

She notes, ironically, that the bill's testing provisions have elicited little but silence from the religious/radical right, "which in the past has likened federal calls for tests and standards to federally mandated mind control."

Vouchers still critical

For conservatives, school vouchers could accomplish several long-term goals, reducing public education funding and diminishing the political clout of national teachers' unions. Conservatives claim that these labor organizations are the main impediment to educational reform.

When federal dollars are transferred from the public to the private sector—often to religiously oriented schools—these schools are less subject to the regulatory oversight, including teacher qualifications, financial accountability and the development of curricula that are applied to the public schools.

The national reversal of President Bush's vouchers initiative came just after the crushing defeat of two very well funded state voucher ballot initiatives in the November 2000 election cycle: the "Kids First! Yes!" initiative in Michigan and Proposition 38 in California. Still, proponents remain convinced vouchers are the wave of the future.

The vouchers initiative is getting generous financial support from a number of wealthy conservative philanthropists, among them Amway President Dick DeVos, who supported "Kids First! Yes!", and Silicon Valley venture capitalist Tim Draper, who bankrolled California's Proposition 38 to the tune of US\$26 million. This kind of support guarantees that vouchers will continue to be at the heart of the conservative education agenda. Additional financial resources from conservative foundations such as the Milwaukee-based Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation help to fuel the movement.

However, according to Terry Moe, a well-respected Stanford University researcher and longtime supporter of school vouchers, the path to vouchers may no longer be through complex statewide ballot initiatives.

Moe, who has received considerable financial support from conservative institutions, has written a new book entitled *Schools, Vouchers and the American Public* which claims "decades from now, vouchers will come to be an integral part of American education."

Moe's analysis is based on 4,700 in-depth telephone interviews conducted in 1995 that probed Americans' attitudes on public schools, private schools, and vouchers. He spent five years analyzing the data. His book concludes that vouchers will come about, through what he calls "normal politics"—that is, legislative action in the states.

The long march towards privatization

The battle over control of America's education system goes beyond the traditional federal vs. state/local government paradigm. The privatization factor, in fact, is "the center piece, the grand prize, of the right's overall agenda to dismantle social entitlements and government responsibility for social needs," says education consultant Ann Bastion, who also is Senior Program Officer at the liberal New World Foundation.

The Education Industry Group's Web site concurs: "Education is one of the hottest investment areas in the economy. Second only to health care as a percent of the GNP, education is being ramped up as the country moves toward greater private sector involvement in its delivery—from preschools to on the job training" (<http://www.eindustry.com>).

School voucher initiatives help power the drive towards privatization. Through vouchers, much of the \$650-plus billion-dollar public education "industry" could be open to private corporations—a notion that entrepreneurs and policy experts at conservative think tanks once only dreamed about.

For conservatives, the president's education package is a missed opportunity. However, high-stakes

standardized testing may pave the way to school vouchers and serve as a stalking horse for privatization.

As test results are gathered and analyzed, more and more under-funded public schools could be classified as "failing." It might become apparent that hiring tutors or moving to a better school is not a real option for most under-served children. This could trigger a renewed call for school vouchers—in essence a short, albeit formidable step towards privatization.

In the current climate of de-regulation, the role of the federal government will be dramatically reduced if the private sector takes over a big part of public education. (6)

The federal role in education in the USA

In the USA, the responsibility for education lies primarily with the states.

Over the years, the federal government's role in education has grown significantly, overcoming many obstacles set up mainly by conservatives concerned with maintaining the status quo, including racially segregated schools. It wasn't until 1965 when the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, engineered and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, signalled that a sea change in education policy had taken place.

The Act ushered in an era of increased federal funding and involvement in many federally mandated education programs.

The U.S. Federal Department of Education became an independent entity only during President Jimmy Carter's administration in the 1970s.

Increasing the federal government's role in education has consistently been opposed by conservatives—an opposition that was reiterated by the Republican Party platform of 2000, which terms education "a state, local, and family responsibility, not a federal obligation."