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Deron R. Boyles

Georgia State University, dboyles@gsu.edu

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Institutes, Foundations, & Think Tanks
Conservative Influence on U.S. Public Schools

Philip E. Kovacs & Deron Boyles

Georgia State University

In the middle of the “liberal” Clinton years, Stefancic and Delgado (1996) wrote presciently of a future dominated by ultra conservative ideology, established and maintained by well-funded think tanks.

Black misery will increase. The gap between the rich and the poor (already the highest in the Western world) will widen. Women’s gains will be rolled back, foreigners will be excluded...Conservative judges, appointed by conservative presidents with the encouragement of a conservative Congress, will repeal prisoners’ and children’s rights, and narrow women’s procreative liberties. Unregulated industries will require employees to work in increasingly unsafe workplaces, pollute the air and water, and set aside less and less money for workers’ health benefits and retirement. Tort reform will ensure that consumers and medical patients injured by defective products, medical devices, and careless physicians will be unable to ob-

tain compensation. Children will be required to pray in schools, absorb conservative principles of freemarket economics, salute the flag, and learn in English whether they know that language or not. (p. 155)

Other scholars and social commentators have agreed: “Over 30 years after the cowardly murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., black America sits on the brink of collective disaster” (West, 2004/2005). “Income inequality is growing to levels not seen since the Gilded Age, around the 1880s” (Ever higher society, ever harder to ascend, 2004). “As a result of more restrictions on entering the U.S. due to post-9/11 security concerns, fewer foreigners are visiting the U.S.” (Suskind, 2003). The Right controls all three branches of government, and impending vacancies on the Supreme Court threaten *Roe v. Wade*. (Garrett & The Associated Press, 2003). “We have a higher percentage of our population in prison than any other nation. And, we keep building more prisons; in fact, many locales lobby for new prisons as a tool for economic recovery” (Prisons in America, 2003). Unregulated industries, in addition to ripping off millions of people on the West coast in the largest energy scandal ever, continue to pollute the air and water (Bustillo, 2005; North County Times Wire Service, 2005). While corporate executives allegedly throw multimillion dollar birthday parties at their shareholders' expense, their associates tell us that we cannot afford universal health care (Associated Press, 2005; Clark, 2005). Tort “reform,” one of the pinnacles of George W. Bush’s successful reelection campaign, is now being contested in congress, while at the same time the President works to make tax cuts to the wealthiest permanent (Havemann, 2001; Zion, 2005). Children are not only being forced to absorb free market economics, they are experiencing a freemar-

ket revolution, as neoconservatives work diligently to end public schools as we know them, believing that market-based reform will save our “failing” education system.

While a complete analysis of the effects of conservative think tanks is beyond the scope of this article, we include the above passage as evidence of what, on a broad scale, the “idea brokers” have been working towards. While education is only one area where neoconservative think tanks seek to influence public policy, it has become the issue for many neoconservatives. In this article, we focus on four think tanks—The Manhattan Institute, The American Enterprise Institute, The Heritage Foundation, and The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation—and what they are doing to reshape public schools in ways more suitable to neoconservative and corporate ends. Our goal is to problematize and critique the assertions of these think tanks, with the hope of generating a counter-narrative to their bold and influential proclamations.

A Brief History

Quite simply, think tanks are nonprofit organizations that both produce and rely on research and expertise to aggressively influence the public, political leaders, and policy. (For lengthier definitions, see Abelson, 2002; Rich, 2004). While most claim to be nonpartisan, part of the requirement to remain tax-exempt, the institutes we focus on support legislation that furthers a neoconservative agenda. It should be noted here that Left-leaning think tanks do exist, but they are outnumbered 2 to 1, outspent 3 to 1 and have failed to counter the advocacy or activity of the Right (Rich). “Con-

servatives,” explain Stefancic and Delgado (1996), “tend to have more money than liberals. They raise it more effectively and spend it more wisely than their counterparts on the left” (p. 142). As a result, the voice dominating discourse over public education in America has a distinctly neoconservative tone.

Things were not always this way. Before the 1960s there was a healthier balance of institutes representing a host of viewpoints. In fact, the first think tanks were progressive. Rich (2004) traces the beginning of the conservative think tank explosion to Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential defeat, after which the business community committed itself to influencing national policy. “For scholars of modern conservatism,” writes Rich, “the emergence of conservative think tanks, in particular, is attributable to the efforts of conservative intellectuals along with corporate and ideological patrons, who formed think tanks and other organizations in order to disrupt the political status quo” (p. 32).

Disrupting the status quo was contingent upon increasing the number of corporate representatives in Washington. As a result, the number of trade associations with offices in the District of Columbia went from 99 at the beginning of 1960 to 229 by the end of the decade (Rich, 2004). An increased number of “agents” in the capital guaranteed corporate access to policy makers. While access is one matter, influence is entirely another. To shape policy in manners favorable to their needs, corporations sponsored research, rewarding individuals whose work furthered their various causes (Rich), one of which was, and continues to be, ending the government “monopoly” on public schools.

Central to corporate needs is deregulation, less interference by the government in business affairs. In the mid-1970s, William Simon, former Secretary of the Treasury in both the Nixon and Ford administrations and head of the ultraconservative John M. Olin Foundation, called on business leaders to support and finance a “counterintelligentsia” which would check the activities of “leftist” universities, considered by many on the right to be dens of socialism (Spring, 2001). Not limiting himself to a counterattack, Simon “urged the business community to support intellectuals who advocated the importance of the free market. Simon called on businesspeople to stop supporting colleges and universities that produced ‘young collectivists by the thousands’ and media ‘which serve as the megaphones for anticapitalist opinion’” (p. 38). A number of wealthy foundations, corporations, and individuals responded, and conservative activists continue to echo Simon’s words, blaming left leaning teachers’ colleges, among others, for public education’s “failure” (e.g., D’Souza, 1991).

Tactics and Techniques

Since Simon’s clarion call, the Right has grown stronger. Today the actions of neoconservative think tanks continue to further a corporatist agenda, inhibiting participatory and deliberative democracy by dominating the discourse that influences agenda setting. Because neoconservative think tanks are so well funded, they have freedom, access, and influence that the average American citizen simply does not have. Indeed, they have freedom, access, and influence that the so called “liberal intelligentsia” can only dream of. For example, The Heritage Foundation (n.d.b) spent over \$34 million to influence policy in 2003 alone. Of that figure, more than \$14 million went to research, \$6 million went to media and government rela-

tions, and an additional \$7 million went to educational programs. (The remaining \$6 million and change went to "supporting services.") One can't help wondering what liberal minded scholars might actually be able to accomplish given such budgets, which include over \$2 million a year for conferences and an additional \$2 million for "fringe benefits."

With mammoth budgets to support them, scholars at think tanks have freedoms and opportunities that university scholars do not have. Andrew Carnegie and Robert Brookings, founders of two of the oldest American think tanks, "believed that by establishing an environment where academics would not be distracted by teaching responsibilities but could focus entirely on research relevant to public policy, think tanks could play an important and much needed role in policy making" (Abelson, 2002, p. 10). Today's think tanks are no different, and, in addition to being "freed" from teaching, think tank scholars do not have to advise students, grade papers, fight for department funds, or compete for grant funding.

Ample free time allows for not only research but advocacy, another activity that distinguishes scholars at think tanks from scholars at most universities. For example, J. P. Greene, who, along with two assistants, runs the Manhattan Institute's Education Resource Center, produced 13 "studies" in two years. And last year alone, according to a recent article in Education Week, Greene's team "published 43 newspaper opinion pieces and was cited on radio, on television, or in print more than 500 times" (Cavanaugh, 2004). Additionally, according to his biography on the Manhattan Institute's Web site (<http://www.manhattan-institute.org/>), Greene's work was cited four times in the Supreme Court's *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*

school voucher decision, the decision that declared vouchers constitutional. Greene's aggressive marketing confirms Rich's (2004) finding that "think tanks most successful at conveying their ideas, at least through national newspapers, are conservative, marketing-oriented think tanks." William Baroody of the American Enterprise Institute (as cited in Rich) declared, "I make no bones about marketing. We pay as much attention to the dissemination of product as to the content."

Additionally, conservative-owned publications like *The Weekly Standard*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* routinely publish and cite the works of conservative think tanks, ensuring that their message reaches, and influences, nationwide audiences. Kohn (2004) notes that "the demand for accountability didn't start in living rooms; it started in places like the Heritage Foundation" (p. 20). Thanks to its enormous budget and ties to media moguls, including Rupert Murdoch, the Heritage Foundation can make sure that every living room hears what its advocates have to say, repeatedly. "After a time," notes Kohn, "even parents who think their own children's school is just fine may swallow the generalizations they've been fed about the inadequacy of public education in general" (p. 20). In addition to publishing in the mainstream media, scholars at conservative think tanks produce their own journals and routinely write for one another. For example, Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and a fellow at the Hoover Institution, will write pieces for the American Enterprise Institute and members of the American Enterprise Institute will return the favor, or they might simply write articles together. Their focus on marketing and their dedication to spreading neoconservative ideology distinguishes think tank "scholars" from scholars working at universities.

While we acknowledge that to some degree all scholars are advocates, the goal of university research is scholarship, whereas the goal of conservative think tanks is developing and promoting monolithic, self-serving narratives. Scholars of conservative think tanks put advocacy first, which colors their “research.” That is, they know what they want to find before they even begin looking. Advocates passing themselves as objective scholars are obviously problematic. One concerned scholar is Andrew Porter, president of the American Educational Research Association. Porter believes that in order “to bring about educational change, I believe advocacy is required. And I would hope that advocates would look to educational research as one source of the basis for their advocacy...In education research, however, I think there’s no room for advocacy” (Viadero, 2002). Unfortunately, “scholars” at some institutes blur or cross the line between the two, ignoring academic conventions in order to produce “research” that meets their needs.

Most academic journals have a system of blind, peer review, where research is vetted by several scholars before being published. However, some conservative researchers, like Chester Finn, “don’t have much use for peer review in education research” (Viadero, 2002). In fact, Finn himself, with the help of Diane Ravitch (one of Fordham’s founding scholars), conducts the “peer review” for Fordham reports (Viadero). This is akin to letting Firestone test its own tires and is problematic given the fact that institutes like The Fordham Foundation are growing increasingly powerful in the world of education reform. If their “research” and their reports merely reflect predetermined positions, then think tanks do not produce scholarly reports, they produce propaganda for like-minded policy makers.

For these neoconservative think tanks, advocacy is more important than accuracy, and making “marginal” improvements in their review process would mean “risking the timeliness and relevance of [their] publications” (Viadero).

In addition to being well funded and prolific, “scholars” at conservative think tanks have connections to and within government, allowing them direct access to, and influence on, policy makers. The Heritage Foundation (among others) has an entire department that serves as a liaison with Capitol Hill (Rich, 2004). Additionally, think tanks provide scholars for testimony before both the House and Senate. Newt Gingrich (2002) represented the American Enterprise Institute and, echoing William Bennett from two decades ago, testified before the Senate that failing to increase math and science scores was a national security threat. Krista Kafer (2002) of The Heritage Foundation spoke before the House Budget Committee Democratic Caucus, claiming that increasing funding will not help solve education’s woes. Importantly, she supports her findings with the work of Eric Hanushek of the University of Rochester. She failed to tell the committee, however, that Hanushek is also a Senior Fellow at the neoconservative Hoover Institution and a member of Hoover’s Koret Task Force on K-12 education.

Indeed there is a symbiotic relationship between these neoconservative think tanks and both the White House and Capitol Hill. While scholars from these institutes are invited to speak to Congress, they also return the favor, inviting representatives to think tank supported seminars and conferences (Abelson, 2002). Additionally, many think tank “scholars” have worked as administrative assistants to various policy makers. In some cases, as with Finn,

Ravitch, and William Bennett, they have served as under-secretaries or secretaries of education in the U.S. Department of Education. Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House, still has contacts on the Hill, and Lynn Cheney, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, does not have to go far to get the ear of the current Vice-President. The State Department sponsors the Diplomat in Residence Program where “diplomats can, between assignments, take up residence at think tanks to write, conduct research, and deliver lectures” (Abelson, p. 81). Or, if they are invited, policy makers and congressional staffers can attend one of the Hoover Institution’s exclusive seminars in Palo Alto, California. The Hoover Institution explains that “these meetings and seminars are now playing a critical role in the ongoing dialogue between scholars and policymakers, which is so important to the effective development and implementation of legislative and executive department policies and programs” (Abelson, p. 81). When influential politicians or journalists need extra persuasion to attend seminars, think tanks will pay them to attend. Such was the case with the Manhattan Institute and *The Bell Curve*, a book that claimed African Americans and members of lower social classes are intellectually inferior to others (Spring, 2001). Spring notes that individuals were paid \$500-\$1,500 to attend a seminar discussing the research behind the book.

The Dialogue: Under-finance and Over-regulate

Though they may disagree on minor issues, the think tanks included in this study share a common, neoconservative vision. That vision, thanks to exorbitant funding and access to mainstream media, policy makers, Supreme Court justices, and others, ultimately undermines a pluralistic and participatory democratic social order, whitewashing individuality and seriously inhibiting criticality. Recall

the tenets of corporatism: It is an ideology that is paternalistic, worships a particular form of reason, ignores individuals, privileges a narrow, nationalistic, uncritical history, and places the needs of the market before the needs of individuals (see Boyles, 2000; Engel, 2000; Saltman, 2000; Saltman & Gebbard, 2003).

In public schools neoconservatives seek to impose a corporatist ideology via a return to basics and increased standardization. Individuals who oppose a return to basics and increased standardization are “defenders of the status quo,” despite the fact that for the past 50 years education has been dominated by essentialism and a “return to basics.” Teachers, students and schools must, according to neoconservatives, be held accountable, via a testing “regime,” for their failure to meet state and federal standards. Workloads for teachers and students should be increased, days extended, discipline rigidly enforced, and patriotic values inculcated, according to neoconservative logic. If teachers and schools fail to meet these demands, the private sector should take over. In fact, all of our educational “problems” could be solved if Americans were given the “right to choose” better performing schools. While private schools and private organizations (like William Bennett’s K12.com) may receive public funds, under no circumstance are public schools to receive any additional funding

We turn now to the individual organizations seeking to “reform” our “failing” public schools. We include one or two issues from each think tank in an effort to reveal and critique what neoconservative think tanks collectively put forward.

Jay P. Greene
&
The Manhattan Institute

The Manhattan Institute, located in New York City, recently celebrated its 25th anniversary of “turning intellect into influence” in a number of areas, most notably education. “There is a direct connection,” notes Spring (2001), “between the educational policies of the Bush administration and the policies advocated by the Manhattan Institute.” The policies advocated by the institute (regulation, “choice,” testing, etc.) reflect its corporate backers and their capitalist ideology. Indeed, Manhattan’s board of trustees reads like a Who’s Who of the corporate far right and includes William Kristol, founder of the neoconservative journal *The Weekly Standard*, James Piereson of the John M. Olin foundation, Byron R. Wien of Morgan Stanley, and Peggy Noonan, a well known conservative pundit (Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, n.d.). In addition to publishing numerous books, the Manhattan Institute publishes *City Journal*, which, proclaims Noonan, is the “best magazine in America” (Magnet, 2005).

According to the Manhattan Institute's (n.d.) own Web site, “Combining intellectual seriousness and practical wisdom with intelligent marketing and focused advocacy, the Manhattan Institute has achieved a reputation for effectiveness far out of proportion to its resources.” Part of its effectiveness is attributable to the efforts of Jay P. Greene and the Education Research Office in Davie, Florida. It is from this office that Greene, an individual with no K-12 teaching experience, and his team produces multiple reports, opinion pieces, and commentary on K-12 reform. There are a number of reasons to

explain their ability to reach nationwide audiences; recall that his work was cited, by his estimate, over 500 times in one year. The Education Research Office uses large sections of text in different articles so that they can use the same paragraphs in multiple publications. Such was the case with the New York Post's "Small Classes: Union Scam" (Greene & Forster, 2003c) and "Smaller Classes Mean Less-Qualified Teachers" (Greene & Forster, 2003d), which appeared in the National Post 4 months later. In addition to using the same paragraphs in various articles, Greene and team member, Greg Forster, have published the same article under a different title, as they did with The New York Sun's "Teachers Unions v. The Teachers," which appeared February 21, 2003, and "Widespread Exploitation: How The Teachers' Unions Take Advantage of Their Own Members," which appeared eleven days earlier on The National Review Online (Greene & Forster, 2003a, 2003b). The two used the same technique in the months preceding the 2004 election, when, despite the requirement that nonprofits remain non-partisan, they published three pieces dismissing Kerry's plan for improving low income students' access to college. Those three articles, which were word for word the same, appeared in the Tallahassee Democrat, the Los Angeles Times, and the Myrtle Beach Online (Greene & Forster, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). While it may not be uncommon for multiple outlets to use the same story, this type of "flooding" allows a few individuals with narrow viewpoints to influence opinion nationwide.

In addition to inundating the mainstream media with his opinions, Greene produces several "working papers" each year. Similar to Finn, Greene downplays the importance of peer review, noting that the reviewers can be biased, add little to a report's accuracy, and

“above all, the process is slow” (Cavanaugh, 2004). One non-peer-reviewed working paper, co-authored with Greg Forster, is titled, “The Teachability Index: Can Disadvantaged Students Learn?” (Greene & Forster, 2004d). This study purports to show that “on the whole, students are easier to teach today than they have been at any time in the past thirty years” (p. 13). Combining sixteen social factors “that researchers agree affect student teachability” (executive summary; Greene and Forster do not provide the names of the researchers who agree that these are 16 critical social factors.), Greene and Forster ultimately conclude that “some schools rise to the challenge of teaching disadvantaged student populations while others do not. In particular, school choice and accountability testing both lead to higher student performance relative to student teachability levels” (p. 13). Importantly, the authors suggest “that what schools do makes a big difference in how much students learn, independent of inputs to the system” (p. 13). The inputs Greene and Forster refer to here are money and a student’s background.

These are exciting results for conservatives like John Boehner (R-OH), Chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. After reading Greene’s findings, his office released a memo to the press which claimed “the Manhattan Institute study greatly undermines arguments being made this month by a collection of left-wing political groups that have launched an assault on the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act in their quest for lower education standards and spending without accountability” (Committee on Education and the Workforce, 2004). Boehner issued a challenge to the National Education Association, MoveOn.org, “and other left-wing anti-parent political organizations to address [the report’s] findings.”

“The Teachability Index” is a perfect example of corporatist ideology permeating educational research and the schools it should serve. It undermines individuality by assuming all students everywhere can be neatly categorized and objectively measured, claims money has no effect on and cannot help public education, and “proves” high standards are closing achievement gaps. The “working paper” is riddled with oversimplifications, assumptions, and errors. To begin with, the “index” fails to take into account multiple factors, including, but not limited to: television, radio, and video game consumption, personal motivations or setbacks, the number of hours one, both, or no parents work, whether or not and how often parents read to their children, differences in prenatal care, the amount of lead in drinking water, the growing number of families who live at or below the poverty line, community differences for helping families who live below the poverty line, and the great disparity between states and communities who have high performing or low performing schools. In short, the study assumes one type of student who can be neatly characterized by 16 preselected traits: individual circumstance is not factored in. Once individual difference has been eradicated and a host of other issues ignored, these researchers are free to determine that, because these students are all “teachable,” the blame for “failing” schools must fall on the schools and teachers.

Greene and Forster (2004d) also claim that “poverty has declined considerably” (p. 2) and “huge increases in resources are producing no improvements in student achievement” (executive summary). Here the two mislead both their readers and the policy makers they actively influence. The poverty rate has remained between 11% and 15% since 1970, though in the last two years it has in-

creased dramatically (<http://www.census.gov/> see also Barang, 2004). The wrongheaded notion that spending has doubled (or tripled if you believe Manhattan Institute researcher, Sol Stern, 2004) without an increase in student achievement is common to most neoconservative educationists. What they ignore are several important facts: Student enrollment, including non-English speakers, has increased significantly; services for the disabled have improved and increased significantly; spending on technology has increased significantly; and, thanks to think tanks like the Manhattan Institute, spending on testing has increased significantly.

Finally, Greene and Forster (2004d) claim that choice and accountability are more important than inputs like money and student background. Lara-Cinisome, Pebley, Vaiana, and Maggio (2004) show that Greene and Forster's claim, at least for children living in Los Angeles to be wrong. In their study, *Are L.A.'s Children Ready for School?*, they show that a mother's educational attainment and neighborhood poverty greatly affect whether or not a student is "ready" for school. If a child enters school with several strikes against her, is she as "teachable" as Greene and Forster claim? Not if you believe the Rand report. How, one wonders, does "raising the bar" help a student who lives below the poverty line, without health insurance, with one parent, who did not finish high school? Are we to believe that simply switching schools would mitigate all of these "strikes"? Greene and Forster certainly think so, and thanks to their marketing efforts, the chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce has a "study" to support his own beliefs.

Frederick M. Hess

&

The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research

Located in Washington, DC, American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is one of America's oldest, largest, and "most respected" think tanks. "The institute publishes dozens of books and hundreds of articles and reports each year, and an influential policy magazine, *The American Enterprise*. AEI publications are distributed widely to government officials and legislators, business executives, journalists, and academics; its conferences, seminars, and lectures are regularly covered by national television" (AEI, n.d.). Additionally, AEI's 50 resident scholars and fellows are "augmented by a network of more than one hundred adjunct scholars at universities and policy institutes throughout the United States and abroad. AEI scholars testify frequently before congressional committees, provide expert consultation to all branches of government and are cited and reprinted in the national media more than any other think tank" (AEI).

At AEI, Frederick M. Hess is the director of Education Policy Studies and executive editor of the journal, *Education Next*. He is also a faculty associate at Harvard, a prolific author and frequent speaker. Hess offers his own views on a number of educational issues, including, but not limited to, increased use of technology, "choice," standards, accountability, poor teaching quality, overpaid teachers, "being mean," and "closing the gap." Collectively, Hess's work suffers from the same myopism revealed in Greene's "teachability index." All students, everywhere, are essentially the same, and given tougher standards and the same content, all students will undoubtedly succeed. It is an attitude shared by E. D. Hirsch (1997) who,

writing for *The American Enterprise*, argues that “the best practices of educational conservatism are the only means whereby children from disadvantaged homes can secure the knowledge and skills that will enable them to improve their condition.” While we believe that, to a certain degree, knowledge and skills can enable individuals to improve their conditions, neither of the two exist alone in a vacuum: Their attainment, or pursuit, is contingent upon other factors, like the condition of the individual child, and the child’s home, school, and community.

Hess, however, disagrees: Thanks to “accountability,” anyone from anywhere, given the right “motivation,” can succeed. “Performance based accountability,” writes Hess (2003), “promises to ensure that every student, regardless of background, masters crucial knowledge and skills. But to realize that promise, accountability needs to be coercive, that is, it must confront failure with real consequences for both educators and students.” Note here that it is the teachers and the students who are failing, not the educational system at large, not the economic system, which requires a steady 13% of its participants to “fail,” and not the policies of the administration, which might actually be setting students, teachers, and schools up for failure. Of equal import is Hess’s solution, coercive accountability, what he calls “being mean.”

“Mean accountability . . . uses coercive measures—incentives and sanctions—to ensure that educators teach and students master specific content . . . such levers as diplomas and job security are used to compel students and teachers to cooperate” (Hess, 2003, p. 23). Mean accountability appears to be a return to the good old days when the teacher walked the room with a rod, “compelling”

students to learn. Hess believes that “mean accountability [laying on the rod] gives the school and district leadership personal incentives to seek out and cultivate excellence” (p. 23). The rod, to continue the metaphor, is now in federal hands, and the incentive is not losing one’s job or federal funding. Under these circumstances, districts and teachers have no choice but to follow federal guidelines, which, in short, require all students to “master” testable, “essential” skills, gleaned from a core curriculum. Noting that teachers and administrators may be reluctant to follow along, Hess believes that in order “to overcome such resistance, we need to make inaction more painful than the proposed action. In education this means making a lack of improvement so unpleasant for local officials and educators that they are willing to reconsider work rules, require teachers to change routines, assign teachers to classes and schools in more effective ways [and] increase required homework” (p. 24). Cutting elective classes when students have not mastered the basics is also recommended. This is not unlike management requiring employees to work through lunch when annual productivity demands are not being met.

While we don’t place a higher value on “electives” like P.E. than basic literacy, we do believe children should be given ample time to exercise. Unfortunately, thanks to the efforts of Hess and other “get tough” managerial-minded-educationists, P.E. is disappearing while obesity rates rise (Caprio & Genel, 2004; Rothstein, 2000). In this mad rush to raise scores, policy makers have ignored other dimensions of what it means to be human. This does not trouble Hess at all; he believes that education officials must “designate a prescribed body of content and objectives to be tested. Such a course necessarily marginalizes some other goals, objectives, content, and

skills” (Hess, 2003, p. 24). Marginalized by necessity—thanks to the efforts of neoconservatives who view children as cogs in an industrial machine—are objectives, content, and skills more in line with a participatory democracy. These might include parents, students, and teachers negotiating various curriculums, objectives like getting children involved with their communities or reducing cases of Type II Diabetes, content that touches on controversial historical facts, and skills that include critical thinking and analysis.

These democratic ends do not appear to be of much concern to Hess, who has a particular and narrow definition of what constitutes an American public school. He (2004) argues, “Public schools should teach children the essential skills and knowledge that make for productive [not critical or engaged] citizens, teach them to respect [not critique] our constitutional order, and instruct them in the framework of rights and obligations [teach obedience] that secure our democracy and protect our liberty” (p. 436). What strikes us as odd is the notion that we can only secure our democracy and protect our liberty by adhering to compulsory, top-down, punitive reform. In a democracy, individuals would have liberty to decide what they will learn and how they will learn it. Differently, it seems to us that a more authoritarian state would require a limited curriculum delivered under constant surveillance, which does not seem far off from where NCLB is taking our schools.

Hess, writing with Chester Finn (Finn & Hess, 2004), acknowledges--indeed seems to celebrate--the fact that NCLB “puts federal bureaucrats in charge of approving state standards and accountability plans” (p. 39). For Hess and Finn, Bush’s reform package does not go far enough. Arguing that “NCLB today is too

lenient about the skills and knowledge that young Americans must acquire” (p. 49), Hess and Finn contend that “Washington should instead offer stricter guidance regarding the essentials that students must master. . . .” (p. 49). The two believe that, despite the fact that “some will decry the prospect of a ‘national curriculum’ even in math and reading, most Americans would likely welcome a single set of academic standards in these most basic of skills. . . .” (p. 49). The problem here is twofold and at least initially paradoxical. That is, for conservatives to advocate a centralized, federal government role in telling states and citizens what they can and cannot do seems to run afoul of the very conservative ideology both Hess and Finn would otherwise maintain. Secondly, given the fact that the percentage of voters who favored NCLB fell from 40% to 36% between 2003 and 2004, their assumption seems erroneous, made only more so by the increase in the number of individuals who opposed the law, from 8% to 28% in the same period (p. 47). The number of state legislatures considering bills or resolutions criticizing the law was 21 as of April 2004 and certainly does not appear to support their argument (p. 46).

Chester Finn Jr.
&
The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

In 1996, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation hired Chester Finn Jr. to become president and chief executive officer of what is today the preeminent think tank for neoconservatives concerned with educational reform. Unlike the other think tanks in this study, the Fordham Foundation (n.d.) focuses exclusively on education, and thanks to

the efforts of its president and staff, is the only think tank in direct control, due to new charter laws, of local public schools. The foundation's mission is to "advance understanding and acceptance of reform strategies that incorporate [six] principles: . . . dramatically higher standards, an education system designed for and responsive to the needs of its users, verifiable outcomes and accountability, equality of opportunity, a solid core curriculum taught by knowledgeable, expert instructors, [and] educational diversity, competition, and choice." In addition to forwarding these principles, the foundation argues against two specific reform strategies that, "in [their] experience, simply do not work to change institutions, alter behavior, or boost academic achievement" (Finn, 2002, p. 6). The two reforms actively opposed by Fordham Foundation are increased funding and more "expertise" in the present system.

The irony here is that the Fordham Foundation, a group of experts, now "sponsors" charter schools in Dayton, Ohio; part of that sponsorship involves "properly using federal and state dollars" (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2004). One wonders how much of that "use" involves paying members of the Fordham Foundation, rather than elected school board officials, for governance of Dayton's charter schools. Given Finn's declaration that school boards are "major bulwarks of the status quo," and, as an outdated institution, the school board is "worse than a dinosaur," and "more like an education sinkhole," Finn must be delighted that control of funding is now in the hands of Fordham experts, rather than democratically elected officials he calls "dinosaurs" (as cited in Gehring, 2003). Further, while Finn claims more money will not help solve problems in education, his organization provided \$650,000 in grants to individual schools between 1997 and 2001, helped raise an additional

\$100,000 to start one specific school at the turn of the millennium, and launched an “incubator” for charter school creation (Finn, 2002). That “incubator” was later incorporated into the Dayton Education Resource Center (ERC), housed in the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce. “In the first three years of its operation, TBF [Thomas B Fordham] expects to fund the ERC to the tune of \$375,000. In late 2001, the ERC also received a \$700,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education to train others in creating new school incubators and to write a guide about the incubation of schools” (Finn, p. 46).

Unfortunately for the children attending Dayton’s charter schools, charter schools show no better “results” than other public schools, despite the money, the expertise and the “research” sponsored by Fordham and other neoconservative think tanks. One example of such “research” is Terry Ryan’s findings. “When Dayton youngsters attending charter schools are compared with those attending district schools,” writes Ryan (2004), “we find that the former achieved at a higher level in 2004 on every subject tested by state proficiency tests in grades 4 and 6.” Ryan’s findings are not surprising given Fordham’s significant financial investment in these schools. The problem with Ryan’s “in-house” research is that it is contradicted by the most recent report released by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). According to the NAEP, the reading and mathematics scores for fourth grade students with similar racial/ethnic backgrounds were not measurably different between those attending charter or public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). In fact, the “study found lower overall mathematics performance in charter schools than in other public schools” (p. 10).

In addition to channeling money away from traditional public schools, the Fordham Foundation actively seeks to transform history and civics standards across the country. In a recent report titled “Terrorists, Despots, and Democracy: What Our Children Need to Know,” the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (2003) stipulates guidelines for preparing tomorrow’s citizens. This preparation, we hope to show, requires a certain type of history and civics and a specific sort of lens for viewing events, both past and present. Further, the history is one sided, the civics removed from the community, and the lens tinted, favoring an uncritical examination of the events that have shaped our world both before and after 9/11. While we do not condone the actions of terrorists or despots, we do believe it is dangerous to assume a one sided and restricted analysis of the causes and effects of both. Benjamin Franklin believed that a society that trades freedom for security deserves neither. We concur. Requiring students and teachers to follow a neoconservative script in order to secure our country’s borders seems counter-intuitive to the freedom and liberty we are currently using our military to spread. Despite the assertions made by several authors in Fordham’s report, there are a number of ways free people might interpret the events of the last five years, especially 9/11 and “Operation Enduring Freedom,” and it is in the best interest of the United States that we remain free to do so.

In his introduction, Finn (2003) laments that constructivist pedagogy has resulted in teachers seeking “to turn children into junior foreign policy advisors whose expression of ‘opinions’ about Iraq and Bush and war are the chief classroom objective (p. 11). In short, these are children who might mature into adults capable of critical partici-

pation in a democratic social order. Finn wonders if these children have the essential knowledge on which to base their opinions, asking “How many American youngsters can even find Iraq on a world map? How many know its history, its ethnic make-up, how the Ba’ath Party came to power, and what sort of ruler Saddam Hussein was?” (p. 11). These are fair questions, and we encourage asking them, but what questions will be omitted if Finn’s larger point prevails? His questions assume that the answers will justify the U.S. invasion and will support the conservative administration to which he is arguably beholden. But there are other important questions unasked by Finn. Why, for example, did the CIA aid Hussein for so many years? (*The Devil in the Details: The CIA and Saddam Hussein*, n.d.). Has the United States supported other tyrannical regimes only to later regret such support? Where are the weapons of mass destruction that were used as a catalyst in the argument for sending U.S. men and women to die? These are questions that, when explored, result in a very different understanding of America’s past and present and are therefore questions teachers of today’s civics (if Finn and likeminded “reformers” have their way) would not be allowed to ask, given that exploring such questions would arguably undermine uncritical acceptance of and support for U.S. involvement in other nations’ affairs. In his contribution to Finn’s manifesto, Victor Davis Hanson (2003) notes that “not all cultures are equal in their moral sensibilities; few dictators, theocrats, tribal leaders, or communists welcome the self-criticism necessary for moral improvement” (p. 23). We agree with Hanson, and that is why it is imperative that American teachers and classrooms remain free to demonstrate the very self-criticism he lauds.

The second section of the report focuses on how to teach our children about terrorism, despotism, and democracy. Criticality is subsumed under accountability, and inculcating patriotic values remains the primary focus. Indeed one contributor, Jeffrey Mirel (2003), cites the work of George S. Counts, an individual vilified by conservatives of his day for declaring that teachers should impose democratic values. Counts was writing in 1941, in the face of growing danger, just a few months before Japan provoked America into another war. Two years later, in the midst of a global campaign against imperialism and fascism, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to force children to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Given the nature of our enemies then, the court's ruling seemed appropriate for a country dedicated to freedom of thought and speech. Today's Far Right, however, wants to do more than require the pledge. If Lamar Alexander (2003), former Secretary of Education and current Senator from Tennessee, has his way, American students will be asked "to stand, raise their right hand, and recite the Oath of Allegiance, just as immigrants do when they become American citizens" (p. 44). That oath, notes Alexander, requires students to "agree to bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law" (p. 44). If our enemy "hates our freedom," as president Bush declared not long after 9/11, then what does teaching our children about democracy by forcing them to intone oaths and fight against their wills indicate?

The report's concluding essays cover "what teachers need to know about America and the world," and E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (2003) offers his views in "Moral Progress in History." Hirsch works from an assumption adhered to by many on the Right, namely, that our enemies are religiously motivated and they hate our freedoms. Indeed he be-

believes all American teachers should know (believe?) this. At the same time, he argues that there are several American ideas that are “foundations of our freedoms.” These include “the right to be left alone, and to think, and to speak as we wish—always with the crucial proviso that our actions do not restrict the right of our fellow citizens to do the same” (p. 73).

Should American teachers be allowed to think that our enemies might be acting for other reasons? According to the Center for Foreign Relations, the attacks had nothing to do with our freedoms or religion but were responses to American support for oppressive Middle Eastern regimes like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.; Lest this nonprofit be dismissed as partisan or irrelevant, we note here that Walter Russell Mead, a senior fellow at the Council for Foreign Relations, contributed an essay to the Fordham, 2003, report.) While we don't necessarily agree with this conclusion, we include it here as evidence that intelligent individuals “know” that the terrorists might have been acting for reasons other than religious or social ones. Hirsch undermines what he calls the “foundations of our freedoms” by restricting his fellow citizens—teachers and students—from thinking and speaking in a fashion that doesn't correspond to his way of interpreting “moral progress in history.” The entire “testing regime” called for by NCLB runs counter to the democratic ideals Hirsch and other neoconservative visionaries purport to uphold, as the methods and techniques that are concomitant with “testing regimes” ultimately limit innovation, free thinking, discourse, criticality, individual and community needs, and multiple ways of knowing “truth.” If a foreign government imposed a specified history on our population, one that ultimately inhibited individuals from making informed and critical

choices, we might, in the words of William Bennett, consider it an act of war.

**Krista Kafer
&
The Heritage Foundation**

The Heritage Foundation has been working to transform the American social and political landscape since 1973. They are a self-labeled “conservative” think tank “whose mission is to formulate and promote conservative public policies . . .” (The Heritage Foundation, n.d.d). Heritage’s staff “with years of experience in business, government and on Capitol Hill—don’t just produce research. [They] generate solutions consistent with [their] beliefs and market them to the Congress, the Executive Branch, the news media and others” (The Heritage Foundation, n.d.a). The Heritage Foundation believes “that ideas have consequences, but that those ideas must be promoted aggressively. So, [they] constantly try innovative ways to market [their] ideas” Like the other think tanks covered so far, those “innovative ways” include inundating the media, the government, and anyone who will listen with “research” consistent with their corporatist ideology.

Krista Kafer has been The Heritage Foundation’s Senior Education Policy Analyst since 2001. Before taking her position at Heritage, Kafer worked with U.S. Rep. David McIntosh (R-Ind.) who was then serving as a member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. As McIntosh’s legislative director and senior legislative assistant, Kafer “drafted and helped promote legislation intro-

duced in the committee and also analyzed all proposals considered by the committee, preparing background reports, briefing materials and speeches addressing the full range of education policy considerations” (The Heritage Foundation, n.d.c). Prior to her work with McIntosh, Kafer served with another member of the Education and Workforce Committee, Rep. Bob Schaffer (R-Colo.). Although Kafer writes on a number of issues, we will focus on her assertion that U.S. schools are failing and her promotion of NCLB as their obvious savior. While her support for the act is by no means unique to Heritage—all of the think tanks in our study defend Bush’s legislation—her biography reveals that she “produced two papers that helped define the lines of debate over what was to become ‘The No Child Left Behind Act....’” She may, therefore, have more at stake than others in seeing it work.

Advocates of NCLB generally operate from the assumption that drastic measures are needed to save our “failing” schools. Scholars like J. P. Greene, Chester Finn Jr., Frederick M. Hess, and Krista Kafer are fond of pointing to various tests and bemoaning America’s poor performance. “Time grows short for those who work and attempt to learn in America’s classrooms,” wrote Kafer (2001), “Every day, they fall further behind. Achievement levels have remained stagnant or worse over the last 35 years. International tests show American students trailing badly in math and science. Worse, the longer our children stay in school, the further behind they fall in comparison to their peers in other nations.” The rhetoric of these doomsday-educationists is enough to make any concerned parent worry. Unfortunately, the repetition of their sentiments across multiple media outlets all but guarantees the effect explained earlier by Kohn. If parents hear the same message repeatedly, they are

likely to begin questioning their own schools, even if those schools are doing an excellent job educating children. With representatives before Congress, with paid scholars and paid pundits repeating the distress call, it eventually becomes a given that “our schools are failing, our schools are failing” (see Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

Of course, not everyone thinks so. David C. Berliner, for example, has spent the past decade debunking the myth that American schools are failing, at least when the debate is limited to test scores (see Berliner & Biddle, 1995). In a paper prepared for the Iowa Academy of Education, Berliner (2004) uses recent national and international test scores to show that, on average, “America’s schools have been improving steadily for at least 30 years” (abstract). Pointing out that the average SAT score on the verbal section was the same in 1981 and 2002, Berliner breaks the scores down according to racial subgroups, revealing that “American Indian high school test-takers, as well as students of Mexican descent, and the great majority of all test takers, white students, each gained an average of eight points over that time period. Puerto Rican test-takers gained 18 points. Black high school students gained 19 points. And Asian high school students gained 27 points” (p. 5). Because more nonwhites are now taking the test, and nonwhites for a variety of reasons generally score lower on standardized tests, the overall SAT average looks stagnant, when in fact scores for all races have been on the rise. Another national test shows similar results. On the NAEP, an assessment cited repeatedly by neoconservative think tank scholars, scores for all racial subgroups rose between 1978 and 1999 in reading, math and science (p. 7).

If one disaggregates test scores according to race and class, it is clear that, while some specific schools might be failing, others are doing exceptionally well on a battery of tests and various comparisons. On international scales, when white students are separated from black, and the middle and upper classes are separated from the poor, American schools are doing much better than other nations. On the math section of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), for example, white students “would have ranked as about the seventh highest scoring nation in the world, beaten handily by only Japan and Korea” (p. 10). In science “our white students would have ranked fourth in the world against students from other developed nations” (p. 10). In reading “our white students rank second in the world....” (p. 11). Black and Hispanic students, generally scored near the bottom. Despite the glaring contradiction between white and black scores, “colorblind” researchers can still look at Americans with a straight face and declare that “in 2004, discrimination is not a central problem affecting educational outcomes” (Thernstrom, 2004).

On the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) similar results can be seen. Berliner (2004) cites one extraordinary example of a group of wealthier public schools in Illinois who banded together, called themselves the “First in the World Consortium,” and competed in TIMSS as a separate nation. “Statistically, The First in the World Consortium was beaten by only one nation in mathematics, and it was not beaten by any other nation in science!” (p. 11). Separating scores along state lines reveals more of the same. “In science, 26 nations outperformed Mississippi, and 37 nations beat the District of Columbia. But only one nation, Singapore, scored above Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts,

Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Wyoming” (p. 12). One wonders which students Kafer (2003) was talking about when she told a group of House members that “despite the fact that Americans spend more on education than most industrialized nations, our children have fallen behind many of their international peers on tests of core academic knowledge, particularly in math and science.” Was she speaking of poor American students, black American students, or students in northern Illinois? She certainly wasn’t speaking about America’s Advanced Placement Students, who outperformed the rest of the world in physics and calculus (Orlich, 2004).

Despite the fact that our schools, on average, are not “failing,” NCLB has been implemented to save them. While Krista Kafer (2003) believes in the “promise” of NCLB, arguing that “the support for accountability and reform is strong” and “NCLB is making a difference” in our troubled schools, the amount of research, the number of complaints, the volume of negative press coverage, and the angry reactions by state and national legislators from across the political spectrum indicate otherwise. In terms of holding schools accountable until all students are proficient (at taking tests), NCLB must be labeled an abject failure. As Orlich correctly points out, “there are not adequate fiscal, human, and social resources to create fifty state systems of education that ensure 100 percent of all students passing one high-stakes test.” The notion that 100% of American students will be proficient in all subjects is a noble dream, but one unattainable in a country where 1 in 5 children live below the poverty line. The federal government has indeed raised the bar, but it has done nothing for those individuals who cannot jump over it, except to “hold them accountable” for not jumping high enough. If

schools fail to meet federal demands, they will be turned over to private management, as if the private sector is going to work to alleviate the causes that result in so many children being left behind. It is not, however, just students and teachers from poor districts who are failing to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). For a variety of reasons, formerly “excellent” schools from Tennessee to California are failing to meet AYP; in the state of Georgia alone 63% of schools failed because of attendance problems (see Fusarelli, 2004). Some teachers and administrators, perhaps acting out of desperation, have resorted to changing test answers, coaching during the test, giving out tests in advance, and prohibiting weaker students from taking exams in order to keep their schools running (Grow, 2004).

While many of the proponents of NCLB initially trumpeted its emphasis on choice, even they concede that the law has done little to increase options for students who attend schools that fail to make AYP. Hess and Finn (2004) lament the fact that out of the “5.6% of eligible students [who] requested transfers to higher-performing schools in 2003-2004...fewer than one-third of those (just 1.7% of eligible students) ultimately transferred” (p. 37). Part of the problem is that they have nowhere to go and no way to get there. Administrators from schools making AYP are not likely to (a) accept students who might bring scores down, (b) have the money to hire additional teachers, or (c) have the desire to add portable classrooms. One solution is “vouchers” for private schools that, under free market logic, would never turn down money. Kafer (2004) points out that the average cost of sending a child to private school (\$4,689) is actually cheaper than the cost of public school (\$7,524). Of course, she bases her comparisons on research done by the Cato Institute,

a “libertarian” think tank that lists ending public schools as one of its primary projects. On the other hand, CNN’s Jeanne Sahadi (2003) shows median tuitions for private day schools to be between \$11,650 for first graders and \$15,000 for high school students. Given those prices, it is unlikely that the parents who need vouchers the most would be able to use them for private schools, especially if they had more than one child. Charter schools are another option, if one looks past their dismal test scores. Of course, one must also look past stories of charter schools closing, as was the case twice this past year in the state of California where two separate charter companies folded, leaving over 6,000 students without schools (Dillon, 2004; Herndie, 2004). The choice for most American students is to stay exactly where they are, and even if they were free to move about the country, the idea that simply shifting students from point A to point B would take care of deeper issues behind school and student “failure” is so wrongheaded it seems ridiculous to have to point it out. But when dealing with individuals who see and market accountability and choice as the gates to “edutopia,” sometimes pointing out the obvious is a necessary task.

Conclusion

The clearest indicator of NCLB’s failure also serves as a tidy conclusion to the issue of neoconservative ideology and its influence on educational policy. At the turn of the new year, news agencies across the country revealed that “the Bush administration paid a black pundit [Armstrong Williams] \$240,000 to promote [NCLB] on his nationally syndicated television show and to urge other black journalists to do the same” (Toppo, 2005). Lost in the excitement

preceding the presidential election was a similar story involving the promotion of NCLB with taxpayer dollars. A New York public relations firm, Ketchum (the same firm involved with Williams), received nearly \$700,000 dollars to produce a video “news release” promoting NCLB (Davis, 2004). Oppressive regimes use propaganda to convince the public of that which is not so (Freire, 1970). According to Melanie Sloan of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington and Nancy Keenan of the People for the American Way, both the paid commentator and the “news” video qualify as propaganda (Davis; Toppo). Neoconservative think tanks, using corporate, foundation, or individual donations to deceive the public is one matter, but the use of tax dollars to promote neoconservative, corporatist ideology is entirely another. It is illegal, and technically, it is fascist, for fascism obtains when public funds directly support corporate needs.

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