

# THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

## Presidential Politics, Crazy Talk, And Preparing for Life in a Post-NCLB World

BY BOBBY ANN STARNES

I AM A NEWS junkie — a watcher of cable network news; a reader of blogs, websites, and newspapers; and a big fan of YouTube. For some time, I've been feeding my habit by watching Presidential campaign shenanigans. Things have been humming along rather nicely for about a year. Candidates and their surrogates have been blustering about some issues — same-sex marriage, immigration, stem cell research, and granting clemency. And they and the press have shown intense interest in John Edwards' \$400 haircut, Rudy Giuliani's divorces, the illegal immigrants mowing Mitt Romney's grass, Dennis Kucinich's UFO sighting, and whether Barack Obama is "black enough." But, much to my surprise, they have seldom discussed education.

I *always* get nervous when politicians express interest in education. They seem to know so little and to have even less interest in learning more. But they always want to help. The last time they "helped," the congressional brain trust created the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Looking at the result, I'd say education has had just about all the political help it can stand. In fact, if our public schools get much more of this kind of help, they might just collapse.

So I was watching the Republican Presidential candidates debate the other day, and I heard the strangest thing. When NPR moderator Carolyn Washburn asked participants to comment on the obstacles to high-quality education, I braced myself. Fred Thompson huffed, "The biggest obstacle . . . is the National Education Association. The NEA." Ah, yes. The good ole NEA, the terrorist organization, education's own Evil Empire. They're always a good target. However, I've never seen the organization — the *union* — display enough muscle to

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get adequate pay for its members. Yet this mild-mannered organization somehow musters the strength to all but stop NCLB? I doubt it. But it is a convenient answer to the question if you have no other.

Alan Keyes disagreed with Thompson. According to him, the obstacle is the "activist judges" whom we have "allowed . . . to drive God out of our schools." Now, I'm pretty sure I spend a lot more time in schools than Keyes does, and I have to say that I see God's presence quite regularly. In fact, I recently watched from my seat in the audience as three kings entered stage left and moved slowly toward a babe in a manger while a fifth-grade choir belted out "We Three Kings." It was a public school Christmas pageant. That's pretty much God stuff, I'd say. So, Keyes can relax.

As they continued, I began devising a game in which I rewarded myself with a rich, dark chocolate every time one of these debaters responded with tired and hollow rhetoric about the global economy and high-quality education and school choice. That's when the moderator called on Mike Huckabee. When he spoke, the vision of stuffing myself with chocolates disappeared.

Education, he said, "is really a state issue . . . not a federal issue, and the worst thing we can do is shift more authority to the federal government."

"Amen," I heard myself say aloud — being, as I am, in favor of bulldozing the U.S. Department of Education, at least figuratively. Then it happened. He said something so strange that I expected to hear Rod Serling's voice welcoming me to the Twilight Zone.

"We need to personalize the learning for the student," he said. "We have 6,000 kids every day drop out in this country," he continued. "They drop out because they're bored to death."

Let me say that again. Mike Huckabee, a major Republican Presidential candidate, actually said, "They drop out because they are bored to death." Not because they don't get tested enough or because their schools didn't make adequate yearly progress or use a Reading First program. They drop out because they are bored. Given that NCLB has been in control of education for years, it must mean that Huckabee believes that the programs and practices supported by No Child Left Behind bore students. I can vouch for that! But when *he* said it out loud on national television, well, I was sure a lightning bolt would strike him dead.

But he didn't stop there. "They're in a 19th-century education system in a 21st-century world. If we really are serious, first of all, we make sure we build the curriculum around their interests rather than push them into something they don't care about . . ." I was shocked. Is he suggesting an interest-based curriculum? And is

he calling NCLB a 19th-century education system?

And there was more. "I'm a passionate, ardent supporter of having music and art in every school for every student at every grade level," the rock band guitar-playing candidate said. "If we don't develop the right side of the brain with the same level of attention as we do the left side, the logical side of the brain, we end up with a bored student."

At that moment, I expected the broadcast to be interrupted by a news bulletin reporting that Hell had actually frozen over.

I was feeling pretty fine — better than if I had eaten a pound of chocolates. A Presidential candidate actually supports sane educational practices such as personalized teaching and learning, interest-based curriculum, and bringing the arts back into schools. I became so delirious that I even began to think he might suggest such radical practices as reinstating elementary school recess and naptime for 4-year-olds.

The next day, pundits called Huckabee's comments "a little crazy." Hadn't he implied that kids would do better in school and be less apt to drop out if their interests had something to do with their school experience? Why, that's just plain crazy talk. Crazier even than Kucinich's UFO experience. It was so crazy that the pundits, drawing from their deep educational knowledge base, advised Huckabee's opponents that education could be his Achilles' heel. "Attack him there," they said.

Unfortunately, my enthusiasm about Huckabee died a quick death when I visited his website. Although he made a strong commitment to the arts, there was no mention of students' interests or boring instruction. I guess he had heard the pundits. Moreover, his discussion of educational priorities focused on the same tired stuff we always hear from politicians — testing, more testing, merit pay, school choice, and business leaders' need for skilled workers. And then there is that little thing about how he doesn't believe in evolution.

Politicians can say what they want about NCLB. They can cherry-pick data, fund research guaranteed to get the results they want, and create a need for expensive educational programs that don't teach children to read and write. And they can do all of this without any pesky accountability. Even after more than a hundred national organizations have signed a statement calling for fundamental change in the law and after the National Conference of State Legislators has given it a scathingly negative review, Presidential candidates and other politicians promise they will fix NCLB.

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings isn't worried about NCLB's flaws. After all, according to her, NCLB is "like Ivory Soap: it's 99.9% pure. There's not

much needed in the way of change." I don't know if she is delusional or in denial.

And President Bush has no reason to call for changes when recent test scores, according to his interpretation, provide "proof that NCLB is working." Of course, his interpretation is not universally accepted. FairTest reports that scores "show educational improvement *slowed* significantly since NCLB went into effect" and that children were actually making greater gains in the three years pre-NCLB than they have since.

And even that old terrorist and NEA president Reg Weaver says, "[We] are not arguing with the goals. [We] are not arguing with accountability. But . . . something needs to be done to fix this law." Not exactly the rhetoric of a man responsible for sabotaging NCLB.

Among those who talk about how we might fix the law is John Edwards. However, he voices doubts about whether that is possible. Edwards sees two Americas and two American education systems. The first of these Americas is preparing students to be somewhat like computers without operators. That is, to be collectors of data that they are unable to use in creative ways.

But in the other America — the America of Plenty, where most children score well on the tests of middle-class learning and where Reading First never shows its ugly face — students are being taught how to use the data, how to create and manipulate it, how to go far beyond it. And with the constant emphasis on preparing children for the work force, it is easy to imagine that one America is being prepared to work for the other. Perhaps there are those who believe that children in that first America should be satisfied with that.

Some say the fix will come in the form of more funding. According to them, the law itself is a stellar accomplishment. This, of course, is a position held primarily by those politicians who helped create the law but are not disciples of President Bush, who failed to "fully fund" it. When I hear this, I'm always reminded of the well-known catch phrase — and popular bumper sticker — coined by James Carville in Bill Clinton's successful Presidential campaign: "It's the economy, stupid." In this case, I think the bumper sticker should read: "NCLB: It ain't the funding, stupid." The problems are so deep and wide that no amount of money could have prevented its downfall.

Let's face it. No Child Left Behind is dead. No one can fix it, nor should anyone try. Let it rest in peace. Move on beyond denial and blaming and begin planning for life in a post-NCLB world. We can do that, I think, if we help politicians find another cause, something else to help just like they've helped education — perhaps Halliburton, Big Oil, or Fox News. **■**

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