

Make Room at the Table For Teachers

The NEA leadership needs to be less concerned about allying itself with corporations and more concerned with supporting the teachers it represents, the authors assert.



BY SUSAN OHANIAN AND PHILIP KOVACS

Some will rob you with a six-gun, and some with a fountain pen.

— *Woody Guthrie*

Some will rob you with an act of Congress.

— *Educator Roundtable*

IT DOES not surprise us that we have much in common with the NEA leadership. After all, a number of Educator Roundtable founders have a long history of strong union activity. We agree with Joel Packer when he argues correctly that NCLB “is not working,” that the AYP (adequate yearly progress) policies are “fundamentally flawed,” and that the legislation is “an unfunded, unfair, and unattainable mandate that largely labels and punishes schools and denies all children their basic right to a great public school.” Despite these statements, we fear that the NEA leadership — by insisting that it cannot work to dismantle NCLB and replace it with an education policy more suitable to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — teeters close to moral bankruptcy.

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We call on union leaders, members of Congress, and their Business Roundtable allies to do something radical: we ask them to listen to the highly qualified teachers who work with children every day. People who claim to care about the survival of public education need to know that No Child Left Behind is sucking the very life’s blood from our profession, demanding that teachers become readers of scripts rather than professionals engaged in the critical work of educating the children in their care.

As long as union leaders refuse to insist that teachers’ voices be brought to the forefront in curriculum decisions, teachers remain muzzled and impotent. Make no mistake about it: this silencing of teachers is catastrophic to the health of our nation. What is at stake is not only the status of teaching as a profession but the very future of a generation of children who are being regimented into Stepford automatons. Finding little resistance from educators, corporate reformers have replaced the language of growth, development, creativity, ingenuity, and responsibility with words straight from the factory floor: performance, accountability, standardization.

An education system that valued the informed voices of America’s teachers would look much different from the system that teachers and students currently suffer

under. And it is time to give teachers the respect that most of them deserve, by inviting them to become central figures in shaping classroom practices and local education policy.

We make these issues quite clear in our petition (see the sidebar, page 273) and on our website, though Mr. Packer continues to push the NEA lie that our organization does not “propose any positive changes or alternatives.” The duplicity here is twofold:

1. Mr. Packer was privileged to witness our earliest conversations and knows exactly what our proposed “positive change” is: give teachers a genuine voice in policy setting, implementation, and evaluation.

2. The NEA leadership agrees with that position. As Mr. Packer put it:

We know that top-down programs and mandates developed by those far removed from the classroom don't work. Programs that actively involve educators and parents in shared decision making with their school leadership and that include support from the federal government — through technical assistance and useful educator-friendly guides to best practice — should be the focus of the next ESEA.

Note the use of the phrase “the *next* ESEA.” Don't they mean “the fixed NCLB”?

The NEA leadership cannot use the acronym NCLB because they know what we've maintained for the better part of a year: NCLB will never allow the type of shared decision making that the NEA leadership correctly calls for. NCLB is premised on the belief that teachers and administrators are primarily the problem and not worthy of being part of the solution. This is a fundamental tenet of the law.

Furthermore, NCLB mandates a predetermined path to educational salvation — regardless of what parents or teachers might desire — as “failing” schools must follow NCLB's sanctions, sanctions that ultimately lead to the firing of the very teachers and administrators that the NEA leadership claims to support. If “the next ESEA” is going to support teacher collaboration and agenda setting, we must first dismantle NCLB so that teachers have the freedom to engage in such work.

Mr. Packer claims that “there is no chance that Congress will repeal NCLB.” Here we urge the NEA leadership to join the nation's children and revisit their history books. Doing so will help them recall that there was “no chance” that the flat Earth orbits the Sun, “no chance” that slavery would end, “no chance” that women would vote, “no chance” that a Rosa Parks would refuse to go to the back of the bus.

Unfortunately, as national data suggest, it may be that children aren't learning this history, as a myopic

focus on raising scores in math and reading (reading, not literacy) has led to a reduction in time spent wrestling with the past. Given that poor and minority students suffer the most from curricular erosion, they may never learn that the phrase “there is no chance” is generally uttered by those who fear precisely the opposite.¹

The number of people calling on Congress to repeal — not patch up — the legislation grows daily, increasing the chance that NCLB will be replaced with educator-led reform. Moreover, the people calling for an end to NCLB are not fringe radicals, angry leftists, or accountability-phobic laggards. Recently Paul Houston, the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, used the pages of this journal to argue that “while there are aspects of the law that could be fixed, there are flaws in it that are so fundamental that there is not enough paint and spackle in the world to make them presentable.”² His conclusion:

The great danger we face is that, in our rush to build skills, we undermine our wisdom. Then we will all be left behind. For that reason NCLB needs to be deposited in the dustbin of history, and Congress, with the assistance of educators and other citizens, needs to think more broadly and deeply about how to build on and make use of the talents of our poorest citizens.³

While the NEA leadership ignores calls from such luminaries as Paul Houston, they cherry-pick from the work of others. Mr. Packer closes his piece by quoting from the work of the highly respected and nonpartisan educational researcher Richard Rothstein. We believe the NEA needs to revisit this work. Rothstein calls NCLB and its philosophical underpinnings “fraudulent.” He worries over the “unjustified sense of failure and humiliation for educators and students” caused by NCLB. He points out that proficiency for all is an “oxymoron.” Writing in *Education Week*, he states baldly:

The No Child Left Behind Act cannot be “fixed.” It gives us a “sense of urgency for national improvement” at the price of our intellectual integrity, and an unjustified sense of failure and humiliation for educators and students. It's time to return to the drawing board.⁴

When a researcher says “cannot be fixed,” it is generally bad form to use his words in an argument calling for a “fixed” NCLB. One does not “return to the drawing board” to fix. We return to the drawing board when we are ready to start over.

Given widespread and growing opposition to the law, why is the NEA leadership taking the organization down such an unpopular path? Perhaps it is the leadership's proximity to the very people and organi-

zations it should be protecting its membership from. The NEA is a member of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a corporate-funded think tank that pushes a standardized curriculum with standardized assessments while giving lip service to such “life skills” as having the financial, economic, and business literacy skills to make wise decisions. Not wise enough to recognize when democracy has been subverted in the name of profit, of course.⁵ Other members of the partnership include:

- Apple
- AT&T
- Blackboard, Inc.
- Cable in the Classroom
- Cisco Systems
- ETS
- Intel Foundation
- LeapFrog SchoolHouse
- McGraw-Hill Education
- Microsoft Corporation
- Oracle Education Foundation
- Pearson Education
- Texas Instruments
- THINKronize⁶

According to Apple’s Steve Jobs, “What is wrong with our schools in this nation is that they have become unionized in the worst possible way.”⁷ We are unclear as to what, exactly, the NEA and Apple do together in the partnership, but it seems clear to us that the hundreds of millions of dollars that corporations such as McGraw-Hill, Pearson, Oracle, ETS, LeapFrog, and Blackboard earn from NCLB’s mandates make NEA’s participation in the partnership problematic at best.

Who on that list benefits from more tutoring, more testing, more forced use of unproven technology? Certainly not teachers or students. Certainly not communities. Certainly not democracy.

Given that no research supports the use of standardized tests to engender a more intelligent, critical, engaged, compassionate, or reflective citizenry, and given that recent research shows that outsourcing public education to private tutoring companies does nothing to help students learn more, we believe the NEA leadership owes its members an explanation of its support for a think tank calling for both. We’d like a clear explanation as to why the NEA leadership supports legislation that subjects students and teachers to unproven tests and worthless tutoring.

It is time to respect the informed decisions of classroom teachers and to stop paying outside testing companies to produce measurements that have been shown to be poor indicators of student success.⁸

Mr. Packer warns that “those who do not articulate a positive set of changes to the law will simply not be at the table in negotiating improvements to it.” We suggest that the NEA leadership heed Malcolm X’s warning: “Sitting at the table doesn’t make you a diner, unless you eat some of what’s on that plate.” We wonder if the NEA leadership understands how the members feel as they watch their union leaders scramble for a place at a table whose functionaries would relegate teachers to the role of a subservient, script-reading, clean-up crew. Perhaps it is frustration with the NEA leadership that has led thousands of members to reject their national leaders and set up their own campaign to eliminate NCLB.⁹

We’d like to extend Mr. Packer’s useful table metaphor and recommend a scientific study showing that people get more out of a meal — physiologically and psychologically — when they enjoy the food.¹⁰ We are sure that children get more out of school when they enjoy being there, and we are sure that teachers are able to better use their talents when they can enjoy being in healthy and supportive classrooms.¹¹ Cognitive scientists certainly know this to be true.¹² We wonder, then, why the NEA leadership ignores the way NCLB squashes the joy out of school, causing children to vomit¹³ and driving highly qualified teachers from the profession in droves. Here are some comments gleaned from those who have signed on to our petition:

• My daughter entered teaching 10 years ago with a real determination to help children in impoverished areas and a real gift to accomplish this. I am really afraid that NCLB has finally made her lose her teacher’s soul.

A Petition Calling for the Dismantling Of the No Child Left Behind Act

1. You may not agree with every point on this document, written trying to take into consideration as many complaints as possible. If you agree with one, please sign and then spread the word. 2. Conservatives and Liberals wrote this legislation, many with the best of intentions. As laws do not always look the same once they are enacted, we need reflective legislators to help us replace NCLB with educational policy more suitable to life, liberty, and happiness. 3. We are not opposed to federal support of public education, and we do not oppose ESEA. We support teachers and students, and both suffer under NCLB. 4. Teachers have written us asking if they can be fired for signing. This is still the U.S.A., and teachers are entitled to voice their opinions, just do it from your home. 5. Want to do more than sign a petition? Switch your e-mail address to "public" and we will add you to our mailing list, or register at www.educatorroundtable.org.

To: U.S. Congress

We, the educators, parents, and concerned citizens whose names appear below, reject the misnamed No Child Left Behind Act and call for legislators to vote against its reauthorization. We do so not because we resist accountability, but because the law's simplistic approach to education reform wastes student potential, undermines public education, and threatens the future of our democracy.

Below, briefly stated, are some of the reasons we consider the law too destructive to salvage. In its place we call for formal, state-level dialogues led by working educators rather than by politicians, ideology-bound "think tank" members, or leaders of business and industry who have little or no direct experience in the field of education.

The No Child Left Behind Act

1. Misdiagnoses the causes of poor educational development, blaming teachers and students for problems over which they have no control.
2. Assumes that competition is the primary motive of human behavior and that market forces can cure all educational ills.
3. Mandates data-driven instruction based on gamesmanship to undermine public confidence in our schools.
4. Uses pseudoscience and media manipulation to justify pro-corporate policies and programs, including diverting taxes away from communities and into corporate coffers.
5. Ignores the proven inadequacies, inefficiencies, and problems associated with centralized, "top-down" control.
6. Places control of what is taught in corporate hands many times removed from students, teachers, parents, local school boards, and communities.
7. Requires the use of materials and procedures more likely to produce a passive, compliant work force than creative, resilient, inquiring, critical, compassionate, engaged members of our democracy.
8. Reflects and perpetuates massive distrust of the skill and professionalism of educators.
9. Allows life-changing, institution-shaping decisions to hinge on single measures of performance.
10. Emphasizes minimum content standards rather than maximum development of human potential.
11. Neglects the teaching of higher-order thinking skills which cannot be evaluated by machines.
12. Applies standards to discrete subjects rather than to larger goals such as insightful children, vibrant communities, and a healthy democracy.
13. Forces schools to adhere to a testing regime, with no provision for innovating, adapting to social change, encouraging creativity, or respecting student and community individuality, nuance, and difference.
14. Drives art, music, foreign language, career and technical education, physical education, geography, history, civics, and other nontested subjects out of the curriculum, especially in low-income neighborhoods.
15. Produces multiple, unintended consequences for students, teachers, and communities, including undermining neighborhood schools and blurring the line between church and state.
16. Rates and ranks public schools using procedures that will gradually label them all "failures," so when they fail to make adequate yearly progress, as all schools eventually will, they can be "saved" by vouchers, charters, or privatization.

This has been a year of frustration, admonitions from her administration to “not ask questions, not express concerns, and don’t think,” and hours of having to surreptitiously try to provide children what they need to learn to read. NCLB *must* be dismantled before all of our excellent teachers lose their teachers’ souls. — *Donna Schofield*

• I am witnessing the demoralization of a good teaching staff due to NCLB. I’m also seeing valuable, experienced teachers opting for early retirement because they can’t bear to do what is wrong for the students they love. I know of many young teachers who are tempted to seek jobs in more affluent school districts so that they can try to keep the passion to teach rather than have it “beat” out of them by the dictates of NCLB. — *Sheryl Loomis*

• I am retiring early primarily due to the manner in which I am forced to teach and assess. I don’t teach much reading anymore; I am too busy testing children. I have read the comments of others who have signed and agree fully. There must be a better way than NCLB. Fund education the way it should be so that there are less than 20 students in each class, with enough updated computers to meet the needs of today’s children. Give teachers some control over what goes on in our classes. We feel we are fleeing a sinking ship, after giving our entire lives to our students and our profession. It is a sad way to end a career. — *Wendy Lego*

• As a past teacher of the year I am greatly distressed over NCLB. The program was rigid and removed the teacher from the equation. I resigned after 40 years of teaching. I had several more good years of teaching left in me but I quit due to the very narrow scope of NCLB. There is way too much testing on beginning learners! — *Judith Depew*

• This act killed thinking in the classroom — it is why I left the classroom after 23 years of teaching elementary school. — *Karen Kolar*

We have documented hundreds of teachers who are leaving or thinking of leaving the profession because of NCLB’s premises, mechanisms, and goals. If we understand Mr. Packer correctly, the NEA has also documented hundreds of stories from affected educators.

Is anyone in the NEA leadership reading them? Is anyone listening to the teachers they are supposed to be working for?

The ultimate outcome when highly qualified teachers leave classrooms — especially those in low-income neighborhoods — is quite clear, and the NEA leadership knows it. As Mr. Packer phrases it, “NCLB is presenting real obstacles to achieving the original purpose

of ESEA.” We will never achieve ESEA’s goals when current legislation undermines them.

To err is human; to admit it, remarkable. As early supporters of NCLB, the NEA leadership must stand tall and own up to its error. The sooner the leadership accepts this and supports replacing NCLB with legislation more teacher-, student-, and community-friendly, the sooner we can return to the original intent of ESEA. When the NEA leadership argues that NCLB is “an unfunded, unfair, and unattainable mandate that largely labels and punishes schools and denies all children their basic right to a great public school,” we want to be hopeful. But actions speak louder than words, and the NEA leadership’s decision to side with corporate reformers rather than with the teachers who pay their salaries — but certainly not their dinner bills — says a great deal about the priorities of the organization. Our hope now is that the leadership will abandon its “stay the course” philosophy and listen to the teachers, educational luminaries, and thousands of concerned citizens calling for a new direction.

1. For a heart-wrenching account of NCLB’s effects on poor and minority students, see Linda Perlstein, *Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).

2. See Paul D. Houston, “The Seven Deadly Sins of No Child Left Behind,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2007, p. 744.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 748.

4. See Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder, “‘Proficiency for All’ Is an Oxymoron,” *Education Week*, 29 November 2006.

5. For more on the organization’s goals, see www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=120.

6. For the complete list of members, see www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=81&Itemid=82.

7. See Gregg Keiser, “Jobs Bashes Teachers Unions,” *PC World*, 20 February 2007, available at www.pcworld.com/article/id,129214-c,current_events/article.html.

8. For the most recent study showing grades given by teachers to be more accurate predictors of college success than the SAT, see Saul Geiser and Maria Veronica Santelices, “Validity of High School Grades in Predicting Student Success Beyond the Freshman Year: High School Record vs. Standardized Tests as Indicators of Four-Year College Outcomes,” Research & Occasional Paper Series, Center for Studies in Higher Education, June 2007, available from http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/docs/ROPS.GEISER_SAT_6.12.07.pdf.

9. To learn more about this movement, see www.eliminateenclb.org.

10. For more on this point, see Barry Glassner, *The Gospel of Food: Everything You Think You Know About Food Is Wrong* (New York: Ecco/Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 1-2.

11. For more on this point, see Judy Willis, “The Neuroscience of Joyful Education,” *Educational Leadership*, Summer 2007, online edition, available at www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menuitem.a4dbd0f2c4f9b94cdeb3ffdb62108a0c/.

12. For more on emotions, learning, and human development, see Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2006).

13. Lawrence Harvey, “Overburdened, Overwhelmed,” *American School Board Journal*, April 2003, available at www.asbj.com/2003/04/0403coverstory.html.



File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0712oha.pdf

Susan Ohanian and Philip Kovacs, Make Room at the Table for Teachers, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 89, No. 04, December 2007, pp. 270-272.

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