

APPRAISING THE CLINTON EDUCATION PLAN

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It's a pleasure to be back with you. I appreciate the invitation to review President Clinton's recent education "reform" package, with particular emphasis on his standards-and-testing proposal, the one part of that package that I believe has considerable merit. Let me note that I appear as an individual analyst, not as a representative of the Hudson Institute or the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, neither of which has any institutional views on or interests in the matters before us today.

The Federal Role

The President and Secretary Riley deserve credit for placing education high on their priorities and calling considerable renewed national attention to this issue. The Congressional leadership also deserves credit for signaling that this is an area where they intend to reach agreement with the administration this year. Every survey we see indicates that the American people are worried about their schools and their children's education--and almost every new study confirms that they have ample grounds for such concern.

The question, of course, is what to do, especially what to do at the federal level.

I urge you to be humble here--as the President has, for the most part, not been. In truth there is not a great deal that the federal government can do to improve U.S. education, and much that it can do to make matters worse. Indeed, it's my strong impression that many existing federal programs are accomplishing little good and doing no inconsiderable harm to promising reform strategies now struggling to arise around the country. Moreover, while I do not doubt the sincerity of his concern for education, the President routinely employs language in this field that suggests that solving the nation's education problems is Uncle Sam's responsibility--and within Washington's grasp. (He's not the first, of course. Such hubris has marked federal education policy debates since the 1960's, perhaps even since Sputnik and the National Defense Education Act of the late 1950's.) Whether the White House intends to or not, this can only raise false hopes and encourage community leaders, school boards and state legislators to breathe a sigh of relief: "Whew, we're off the hook. This problem has now been federalized. We can relax. The nanny state will take care of it. And if the problem doesn't get satisfactorily solved, it's Washington's fault, not ours." Such a mindset would be fatal for any serious education reform in the United States.

It's also important to note that, while the administration has proposed a number of new education programs and projects--and a hefty budget increase to pay for them--they haven't proposed stopping those that have outlived their usefulness, that waste money or that are doing harm. (True, they've zeroed out some little ones in the Fiscal '98 budget, but nothing of consequence.) Their concept of the federal role in education seems to be one of endless expansionism. Any seemingly-good idea gets its own program, any plausible fad gets its own appropriation, and any issue that rings the chimes of focus groups gets its own paragraph in the State-of-the-Union.

That is not how it should be. There are only a few things that the federal government does well in the field of education, and only a handful of responsibilities that it properly shoulders.

Statistics and Assessment

One of those few-but-legitimate and genuinely important education responsibilities of the federal government is gathering and reporting reliable data on how the country is doing. This has been a function of the national government since

1867 when the first tiny federal education agency came into being primarily to gather and disseminate statistics on the extent and progress of American education.

There are some things we need to know about the whole country, as well as about its states and communities, and making such information available is a distinctive and valuable activity of the national government. It is also one that it has shown itself capable of handling well, not just in education but in many other fields (e.g. the economy, the demographics of our population, various matters having to do with health).

For the past thirty years, along with myriad measures of inputs and services, federal education data-gathering and reporting have included information on student achievement. That is almost entirely the work of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). For twenty of those years, however, such information was provided only for the country as a whole. Then, following the recommendation of President Reagan and Secretary William J. Bennett (who in turn were following the advice of a blue ribbon panel chaired by Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander), Congress authorized NAEP to report state-specific results for those states that wanted to participate. Most (but not all) states have opted to do so, and the yield from this modest undertaking has been immensely valuable. Literally for the first time, state officials, business leaders, taxpayers, parents and educators have been able to see how their state is doing in terms of educational achievement compared to other states and the nation as a whole. There is *no* other reliable source of such information. And it has had a considerable impact on policies and practices. It was primarily NAEP data on fourth-grade reading achievement, for example, that recently led California to revamp its entire approach to reading instruction in the primary grades.

For many years, NAEP results were reported (like many "standardized" commercial tests) only as statistical averages. They contained no real standards or judgments. They indicated how youngsters were doing in comparison to how they had done in the past but were silent on how well American students and schools *ought* to be doing in key subjects. It was as if your doctor reported to you that your cholesterol level is 230 now, compared with 240 a year ago, but said nothing about what level is desirable for good health (below 200, I am told.)

As the nation grew more concerned about its lackluster educational performance, however, and more aware that simply pumping additional resources into schools (or requiring students to spend more time there, or take more courses there) did not necessarily translate into improved achievement, there arose a hunger

for specific standards against which academic performance--actual results--could be monitored and appraised. President Bush and the fifty governors (including the then-governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton) met in Charlottesville in 1989 to set ambitious educational goals for the country. These included the bold statement that "By the year 2000, American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography".

Well and good. But what exactly is "challenging subject matter" and what does it mean to "demonstrate competency"? Who is to say? How will we know when we've gotten there? How is a superintendent to know when his schools have reached this goal? How is a parent to know about her children? A teacher about her pupils? A governor about his state?

Three cautious developments followed.

First, a number of professional education groups, some with modest federal subsidies, set out to establish "national standards" for their particular subjects. Several of these turned out reasonably well (math and geography, for example). Some (e.g. English) were debacles. Others (such as history) became the objects of intense controversy.

Second, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), a bi-partisan, broadly-representative and largely-independent body which, since 1988, has been charged by Congress with setting policy for NAEP, set about to develop standards--"achievement levels" they were called--by which NAEP results could henceforth be reported. There was much controversy over this undertaking, but NAGB persevered, establishing three standards (called "basic", "proficient" and "advanced") by which national and state achievement could be--and now is--reported. These have been fairly well accepted as benchmarks by which the country can track its educational progress and these, as I understand it, are the *only* standards that President Clinton is referring to nowadays when he speaks of "national standards".

Third, on April 18, 1991, as part of his "America 2000" strategy for moving the country toward better education, President Bush proposed new national tests of student achievement. Here are his words:

We will develop voluntary--let me repeat it--we will develop voluntary national tests for 4th, 8th and 12th graders in the five core subjects. These American Achievement Tests will tell parents and educators, politicians and employers, just how well our schools are doing. I am determined to have the first of these tests for 4th graders in place by the time that school starts in September of 1993.

But, of course, nothing of the sort happened. Indeed, so fierce was the resistance of educators and members of this Committee to the "American Achievement Tests" idea that it never even made it into the "America 2000" bill introduced six years ago.

The Clinton standards-and-testing proposal

Now President Clinton has proposed something may look radical but is actually more modest than what President Bush recommended. (In this portion of its program, and perhaps only in this portion, the administration displays welcome humility about the federal education role.) The Clinton plan is limited to fourth grading reading and eighth grade math (a total of two tests, compared to fifteen implied by the Bush plan). And the Clinton plan does not envision brand-new tests or standards. It starts with the NAEP tests that we already have and the NAGB standards already built into them. At its core is the simple proposition that states wishing to do so should be able to use those tests and standards for individual school districts, schools and children as, under today's NAEP, they cannot.

I have a number of concerns about the particulars of the Clinton testing plan, and will get to some of those in a moment. It's important that they be addressed by the Congress and I would not advise proceeding with this plan unless they are set right. But before getting into the trees, let's step back for one more glimpse of the forest. All that the President is basically proposing is to take two well-regarded existing tests of core skills, tests that already contain generally-accepted national standards, and allow these to be used more widely by those who wish to do so.

That is all. And that, in my view, is worth doing, provided that key details are repaired. (I'm attaching to this statement a recent commentary that Diane Ravitch and I co-authored.)

Why is it worth doing? Because today there is a crucial missing link in the information about educational achievement that can leverage real reform at the state and local level, within individual schools and around millions of kitchen tables. Today's parents cannot find out with any clarity or reliability how their children are doing in core academic subjects in relation to how well they ought to be doing--and in relation to the educational standards and achievement of the nation and the world. Today's teachers cannot find that out about their pupils. Today's school boards cannot find that out about their schools. And today's governors and legislators cannot find that out about any units smaller than their entire state. Michigan's John Engler, for example, can learn a fair amount about how Michigan-as-a-whole is doing in relation to the nation, but he can learn next-to-nothing about the performance of Grand Rapids or Detroit, much less about the Jefferson School vis-à-vis the Franklin School.

Governors who don't feel they need to know such things won't have their states join in the "national test". Those who think it's important to know such things in order to leverage real reform will want to participate (as Governor Engler indicated to President Clinton last week).

In my view, no meaningful education reform will occur without such information. Parents cannot make informed choices among schools. Charter schools will lack benchmarks by which to track their progress. Statewide reform plans will have no decent "audits" of their success. Districts will not be able to say whether their students are doing better.

Sure, there are lots of tests today. But none of them yields satisfactory information on educational achievement in comparison with other jurisdictions around the nation and the world and in relation to high standards that signal what level of achievement should be expected.

Could this be done without federal backing? Conceivably. I can imagine a carefully-organized private-sector venture to develop academic standards and market high-quality tests geared to them. I can also imagine a consortium of states doing something of the sort. (Possibly the new entity called "Achieve" could take the lead.) But such approaches would forfeit the track record, experience and credibility of NAEP and its standards, and would lack the legitimacy of an initiative blessed by both President and Congress.

The Clinton national testing plan presents a rare opportunity for bipartisan cooperation in the public interest. Indeed, without such cooperation it won't go far, because it can count on (indeed has already drawn) criticism from both ends of the political spectrum. There are those on the right who blanch at the adjective "national", no matter what it's attached to, and those on the left who dislike every form of "testing" regardless of who does it or why. If their combined forces are not met this year by strong bipartisan support for standards-based national testing, we can probably bid farewell to this idea for a generation. (The politics of this issue are fascinating, since many on the right demand the accountability that comes only with standards and testing while many on the left embrace the extension of national responsibility in education.) The President has invited bipartisan support. I believe this part of his program deserves it.

Concerns about the Clinton plan

The concept underlying the testing plan is valid. But the details are crucial, and some of them need attention. In my view, Congressional approval of (and state participation in) any national testing program should hinge on its meeting five essential criteria:

1. Above all, there must be adequate insulation from politics, from the federal bureaucracy and from the depredations of special interests and ideologues.

2. It should be truly voluntary. No federal coercion, no sanctions, no linkage to federal aid programs, no rewards or inducements save for (limited) federal subsidy of the creation and deployment of the tests themselves. (Let me be clear. Along with the late Albert Shanker, I believe in "tests with consequences" as a vital tool of education reform. But Washington has no proper business imposing those consequences. Making the test available is incentive enough for states and localities--and principals, teachers and parents--to develop consequences of their own.)

3. Its standards should be high ("world class") and its tests should be of good quality (free from bias, challenging, worth taking, worth "teaching to").

4. Those tests and standards should be open to public scrutiny. No secrets. Test results should be public, too, so long as the tests' integrity --and the security of information about individuals--are assured.

5. Their use should be flexible. For example, a state should be able to embed a version of the "national test" in its state tests. Test publishers should be able to incorporate versions in the products that they develop and distribute. Communities, even individual schools, should be able to obtain versions if they want to. Perhaps parents should be able to obtain "samples" from the Internet for their children to try at home.

That's a tall order, of course, maybe more than any one test can be expected to accomplish. But that's what we should set out to do, and those are the criteria by which the Clinton plan should be judged.

Unfortunately, the administration has not yet supplied enough detail to judge all of its particulars--while evidently rushing toward its rapid implementation. From what I have been able to learn, however, as some details seep out, I am not satisfied that these five criteria will be met. I would encourage the Congress to probe these matters carefully.

Governance

Let me now turn to the first of those criteria, the protection of any national tests from politicians, bureaucrats, special interests and zealots. This is central to the legitimacy, integrity and acceptability of the entire enterprise. Without such protection, few will want to use the tests and they'll achieve nothing. Regrettably, the administration presently intends to keep this sensitive, vulnerable undertaking within the bosom of the Education Department rather than entrusting it to the National Assessment Governing Board or other independent entity.

That is a serious blunder. There is already too much tampering with NAEP, too many instances of NAGB's decisions being overridden or ignored by political appointees and entrenched bureaucrats, and of NAGB itself being weakened. (Not just by the executive branch. Congress's 1994 reauthorization of NAEP compromised NAGB's independence and diminished its authority.) Indeed, I believe this problem should be solved for the good of National Assessment whether or not President Clinton's new plan also goes forward.

In my view (and Diane Ravitch's), any national testing program should be spun entirely out of the Education Department and entrusted to an independent agency or quasi-governmental corporation, answerable to the White House and Congress only for funding, general oversight and periodic reauthorization, not for daily policy direction, staffing or administration. Such an entity needs a truly-independent and bi- (or non-) partisan governing board consisting of laymen, parents, business leaders, educators, and state and local officials. Such a board must be truly "in charge" of all aspects of these tests and the standards incorporated into them. It should not be able to be second-guessed by a doubting assistant secretary, an over-eager White House aide, a random sub-committee staffer, or special interest groups and "experts".

How might that be accomplished in today's Washington? A strengthened and reconstituted NAGB would be one way to go. A new board or entity could be another. Without attempting to suggest all the details today, my sense is that the members of any such board should be presidential appointees, confirmed by the Senate, and that the board should serve as its own "nominating committee", i.e. that the White House can only select from among individuals recommended by the board itself. (The first such "slate" might be suggested by an informal panel consisting of Secretaries Riley, Alexander, Cavazos, Bennett and Hufstedler.)

It oughtn't be too large--about the size of a school board or state board of education. It ought not be a Noah's ark of special interests and constituencies. And all its prospective members should be asked whether they believe in the value of the standards-and-testing enterprise they are being invited to help govern. (So long as the tests themselves are voluntary, there's no need to place opponents within their governance.)

That is only the faintest sketch of the kind of mechanism that might meet the first criterion suggested above. Similar outlines could readily be developed for the other criteria.

In concluding this portion of my testimony, let me repeat that, so long as such crucial details are satisfactorily worked out, the voluntary national tests envisioned by President Clinton--and before him by President Bush--deserve support across the political spectrum. Those who don't like them will remain free not to use them. Those who believe, as I do, that they would be a major contribution to the renewal of American education, indeed are necessary for any true accountability, should have the opportunity to test that belief.

Other elements of the Clinton package

The remaining parts of the President's program are a hodgepodge of projects, activities and ideas, not a coherent "plan" at all. Here's how I size them up:

National teacher certification. The President would have the federal treasury pay for 100,000 teachers to be screened by a private board that's been around for a decade but has managed to certify barely 500 people in that time--while spending millions of federal dollars already. That's because the board's review process is complex and costly and perhaps because the board itself (dominated by teachers' union representatives) is still ambivalent about branding certain teachers as superior to others. Political correctness is also seeping into its standards. Sure, there's a chance that, if it keeps its standards high, the effort may yet boost teacher professionalism and reward classroom excellence. But with states and districts already offering bonuses to board-certified teachers, surely the cost of screening candidates is a reasonable investment by those who stand to benefit.

"America Reads". It's hard to argue against third graders knowing how to read, and there's nothing wrong with college volunteers listening to seven-year-olds sound out new words, but where does the President get the notion that a million amateurs will be able to accomplish something that 2.7 million professionals cannot manage? The landscape is already littered with dozens of federal "literacy" and "compensatory"

programs of various kinds. This one looks more like a salvage operation for "AmeriCorps". The main problem with primary reading in the U.S. isn't too few bodies in our classrooms; it's that too few of our teachers use proven methods to impart this vital skill to their young charges. Mr. Clinton would have made better use of his bully pulpit if, every time he uttered the word "tutors" he had instead said "phonics". Whole-language theories have been dogma in our teacher colleges for a decade. Ten million volunteers won't solve that problem.

Early Learning. Sure, education begins in the cradle and yes, parents need to be more involved. But aside from expanding Head Start (whose cognitive effects pretty much vanish by third grade) there's little more here than a couple of dubious conferences on "the brain" and "the family". In any case, no conference can alter the record of federal "compensatory" education programs, which have spent a hundred billion dollars or so since President Johnson's time with lackluster results. What we know for sure is that children do best when they grow up in strong families that love and nurture and read to them. Regrettably, Uncle Sam can't supply that.

School choice and charter schools. The President has the concepts right: parents should be free to choose their child's school, and independent "charter" schools are a sound way to create more decent choices. Yet his proposals are pale shadows of what's needed. He would confine parental choices to government schools, though many youngsters, especially poor kids trapped in awful urban schools, do better in private and parochial schools. (The research on this is now fairly conclusive.) And as much as charter school founders welcome those modest federal checks to offset their start-up costs, they'd be helped far more if the President and Congress would snip the red tape that snarls their schools in regulations and denies their students a fair share of existing programs.

Character education in the schools. Bravo if the President is serious about uniforms, curfews, zero tolerance for drugs and guns, and removing disruptive students from classrooms. I wish he would demonstrate it by instructing his own Education Department to have zero tolerance for weapons even when carried by "disabled" students--which would appear to be the precise opposite of current administration policy toward the reauthorization of I.D.E.A.

Construction. To my knowledge, the federal government has never been in the business of underwriting school bricks-and-mortar and, if the White House is serious about balancing the budget, it's hard to see this one as more than expensive, politically-appealing (if harmless) tokenism. Besides, there are shrewder, cheaper, non-federal solutions to school crowding, such as year-round use of existing facilities.

Universal college attendance. Another superficially-appealing idea that turns out to be bad policy. The problem with American higher education isn't too few people starting the process: we already have more college than high school students and boast the world's loftiest matriculation rates. Indeed, college enrollment directly after high school is at an all-time high: about 64 percent. The great problem is that far too many of those who enter aren't prepared for college-level work because they learned too little beforehand. Almost a third of today's freshmen require remediation--and many more would if college academic standards hadn't also slipped. That leads to

costly compensatory classes and a soaring college drop-out rate. Assuring everyone a free ride through grades 13 and 14 is like paying for high school twice. It signals the futility of reforming grades 1 through 12. And it will tempt every college in the land to jack up its prices to harvest the new federal windfall.

Job training vouchers. Turning what Mr. Clinton rightly terms "the confusing tangle of federal training programs" into vouchers for adult education is a very powerful idea, if vouchers is indeed what he intends. Why won't he do the same for schoolkids?

Technology. Sure, every school in America should be connected to the Internet. But, as with bricks and mortar, where does Uncle Sam's responsibility (and budget) stop? And once the wiring is installed, what's been achieved? Linking a twelve-year old to the "web" solves nothing. Fine, he'll learn how to use the technology, but the Internet is just a vast collection of stuff, much of it trivial, trashy or eccentric. American kids need to learn how to concentrate and analyze and discern, not to web-surf all day before channel-surfing all night.

If I were grading the White House education policy package, the average mark would be somewhere between "C" and "D"--with that important "incomplete" for the standards-and-testing piece.

What to Do?

As this Committee and the Congress look ahead, I encourage you to keep in clear view the great education problems that need solving:

- * A nation that's still at risk because few youngsters learn enough as they pass through school and college. The just-released 1996 NAEP math results, though slightly up from 1992, show that only 24 percent of U.S. eighth graders, and a wretched 16 percent of high school seniors, are "proficient" in this vital skill. International comparisons place us closer to Kuwait and South Africa in math and science achievement than to Singapore and Japan.

- * A stolid, retrograde public school monopoly in which the interests of producers outweigh those of consumers, where truly bad ideas are conventional wisdom and ineffectual practices are the classroom norm. (Should that allegation seem overwrought, please read E.D. Hirsch's splendid new book, *The Schools We Need & Why We Don't Have Them*.)

- * A ton of money being spent--more each year--without decent returns because the system has no real standards, no true accountability, few decent measures of performance and an unwarranted faith that "more of the same" will produce different results.

- * Heavy-handed government rules and procedures, both federal and state, that buttress the monopoly, discourage innovation, waste money, and help shield everyone from responsibility for their own actions

As I said at the outset, Washington alone cannot solve those problems and it's a sin to suggest otherwise. But surely anyone who agrees that they need solving will want Uncle Sam to do his part--and to stop making things worse.

What might a decent package look like? Here's my modest proposal:

First, testing. Get the details straightened out, then do it.

Second, establish the principle--across the spectrum of federal programs--that aid dollars follow eligible youngsters into whatever schools they attend. That doesn't happen today because funding formulas are built on district demographics. Fixing this would do wonders for charter schools, would give consumers real leverage, and would keep federal policy from undermining state-and-local school choice plans.

Third, let the money stop following--indeed, *make it stop flowing* to--those who are violent in school. Stipulate, too, that no federal law shall require any school to retain any student (disabled or not) who disrupts the education of other children.

Fourth, let the states opt to receive any or all of their federal aid in a no-strings block grant--so long as they, too, empower parents by letting this money follow children who are eligible (for whatever services the state elects to spend it on) into the schools they select.

Finally, agree on several dozen ineffectual or obsolete programs to scrap--and use the money saved thereby to aid charter schools and experiment with a "G.I. Bill for Kids", as Lamar Alexander calls it. President Clinton has begun this process by submitting a fiscal 1998 budget that (swollen though it is elsewhere) zeroes out some 41 currently-authorized federal programs. Surely Congress should accept his list and add a few more specimens to it.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

A Yardstick for American Students

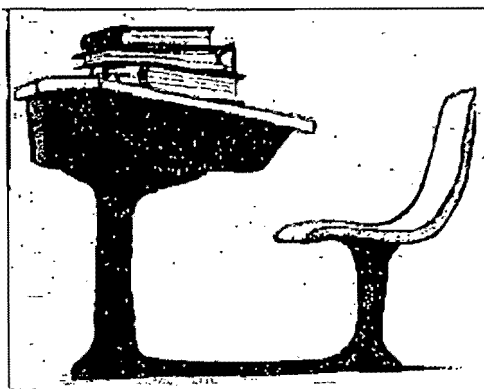
President Clinton's proposal for national testing makes sense. As former assistant secretaries of the Department of Education in the Reagan and Bush administrations, we urge Congress to support it.

There are ironies, of course. When George Bush and Lamar Alexander suggested something similar—which they called American Achievement Tests—congressional Democrats scoffed, and no such bill was ever introduced. And in 1992, when a bipartisan panel called the National Council on Education Standards and Testing recommended a form of national testing, a convoluted scheme that involved different tests based on common standards, the idea was ignored by congressional leaders and attacked by prominent educators.

Still, it was a good idea then, and it's a good one now. In fact, Clinton's version of national testing is better than Bush's in these important respects: It doesn't require any new standards or tests to be devised, and it does not hinge on dubious efforts to attach multiple tests to uniform (nonexistent) standards.

The administration has figured out that the nation already has two excellent tests that measure student achievement in reading and math, the most basic of basic skills. Accordingly, the president has proposed that states and school districts be permitted to use a respected national test for fourth-grade reading and an equally admirable international test for eighth-grade mathematics.

Nobody is obliged to use these tests, nor will anyone be punished for failing to do so. The federal government will pay for the first round of testing, and after that it's up to states and districts to cover their own costs. They can, however, embed the national tests into their own testing programs—which virtually every jurisdiction has—and commercial publishers would be licensed to offer them, a welcome form of "outsourcing" that would hold down costs, bureaucra-



cy and allegations of unfair government competition.

Most important, they're good tests, incorporating standards far more rigorous than most states are now using. The reading test is based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which has been around for almost three decades but has never been used by districts or schools to report the progress of individual students. The NAEP reading test is solid, multi-faceted (not just multiple choice) and has rigorous standards built into it.

For eighth-graders, the White House proposes to make available the math part of the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), which was given to a half-million youngsters in 41 countries. The standards of TIMSS are built into the international comparisons. It's TIMSS results that enabled us to see that our eighth-graders perform poorly in mathematics compared with their peers in many other industrial countries.

Consider how powerful it will be for parents and teachers to compare the math prowess of their eighth-graders in, say, Phoenix or Minneapolis, to the performance of their peers in Korea and the

Czech Republic. Consider the impact of parents in Denver or Boston actually seeing how well their fourth-graders read in relation to a national standard of proficiency.

According to every major public opinion poll, an overwhelming majority of the American people want national standards and tests. Until now, there has been no way for parents or public officials to get good information about how students are doing. Instead, they've been stuck with college entrance tests that are not representative of the full population and that, in any case, aren't even administered until the end of high school. Or they have had to settle for "standardized" tests that yield spurious results about youngsters being "at or above grade level," even though "grade level" is simply a statistical average, not a true standard.

Only with such information in hand can parents make wise choices among schools. Only with such information in hand can parents and legislators appraise how well their school systems are doing. Only with such information in hand can teachers and principals determine how effective their efforts are—and take corrective action where needed.

To those worried about "local control," we say that these tests are a yardstick, not a harness. They give the federal government no new powers. The test results, in fact, will actually enhance local control by empowering consumers, policy makers and professionals to know what actions need to be taken locally to improve education. As the CEO of a major corporation pleaded at the governors' education "summit" last March, "Why shouldn't the reading standards for 9-year-olds in Pittsburgh be the same as in Seattle? Math is math, whether it's taught in Oregon or South Carolina, and the global economy in which today's youngsters will live and work expects them to meet world standards, not just those of Portland or Charleston."

Information is power. And gathering and dispensing good information is one of the things that the federal government does very well.

So important is national testing that it must be safeguarded from politicization, a temptation that is sure to arise if the student results are as bleak as everyone expects. To prevent this possibility responsibility for national testing should be removed from the federal Education Department (and congressional committees) and placed under the control of an independent, nonpartisan body. Fortunately, such an entity, called the National Assessment Governing Board, already exists. It is supposed to set policy for NAEP. That board, however, has been weakened by recent legislation and turned into something more like an advisory committee to consider decisions that are actually made by political appointees. The White House' current plan to give control of national testing to the Department of Education would, we think, be a big mistake.

If Clinton will agree to turn the program for national testing into an autonomous agency, akin to the National Science Foundation (where the National Science Board sets policy) or the National Transportation Safety Board, then Congress should endorse this part of his education package. This proposal deserves their support. Once upon a time it was even a Republican idea. Now it is a good American idea.

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If there are to be national tests, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) is the right body to be in charge of them. I served on NAGB from 1988 until 1996 and had the honor of chairing it for the first two of those years. I know it well. It's a hard-working, conscientious and sturdy bunch that isn't easily cowed. But it has some shortcomings that are a problem even without adding responsibility for something as sensitive as national testing. And the Administration's proposal to assign NAGB the task of "formulat[ing] policy guidelines" for national testing has inadequacies as well.

I will supply a little background, then itemize those two sets of shortcomings (all of which Congress could easily rectify).

Background

- Before 1988, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) had no independent policy-making body. The Education Department's NAEP contractor (ETS then as now) appointed its own "assessment policy committee", which meant the contractor controlled the "policy" group and was in turn controlled by the Department.
- A blue-ribbon panel chaired by then-Governor Lamar Alexander (and including Hillary Rodham Clinton) recommended in 1987 that this arrangement be changed and an independent governing board be created to make policy for NAEP. The Reagan administration drafted a bill and the Democratic Congress enacted it in 1988. The Secretary of Education made the initial appointments but thereafter the Board was "semi-self-perpetuating", i.e. it served as its own nominating committee, giving the Secretary a slate of (at least 3) candidates for each opening; he could reject that slate and ask for another but he could not appoint anyone unless they were nominated by the Board itself. Terms were four years and could be renewed.
- Though ultimate control was divided between NAGB and the Department's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), NAGB had considerable authority and did not hesitate to assert it. By far the most controversial thing the Board did in its early years was develop "achievement levels" (AKA standards) by which to report NAEP results: the 3 now-well-known markers called "basic", "proficient" and "advanced". (It's those standards that President Clinton proposes to use for the national tests.

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But the administration plans to use "basic" as a satisfactory standard, whereas NAGB said "proficient" is what all kids should attain.)

NAGB Weaknesses

To punish NAGB for asserting itself as it had done, curb its independence, and give the Department more control of NAEP in the future, the House of Representatives moved in 1994 to turn NAGB into a powerless advisory committee. The Senate resisted and a compromise was reached. But NAGB was still weakened in that year's I.A.S.A. legislation:

- additional "testing experts" were added to its membership, thus reducing the influence of members of the public and adding to the board the very people who are normally hired as staff and consultants;
- nominating authority was taken away, meaning that the Secretary could now appoint anyone. (Secretary Riley, himself a onetime NAGB member, has continued to invite the Board to suggest names as vacancies arose, and has taken many--though not all--of them, but there is no reason to assume that a future Secretary would do this.)
- board terms were shortened to 3 years (a problem considering that it typically takes at least a year for new members to "get up to speed" on complex NAEP issues); and
- important NAGB powers (involving the assessment design and reporting of results) were taken away and given to the Department.

Aside from its 1994 weakening, NAGB has inherent problems that are magnified when it's asked to take on something as volatile as national testing:

- under its current composition, as few as 2 of its 25 members (one governor, one legislator) could be from the party that doesn't occupy the White House. Thus it cannot truly be called a bipartisan board in any meaningful sense;
- its current composition assigns 16 slots to professional educators and other members of what some call the "education establishment" and just 9 to representatives of the "general public" such as elected officials and parents;
- in key areas, authority is blurred between NAGB and the Education Department, such that NAGB decisions may be ignored or reversed by Department officials. It's also important to note that the Department, not NAGB, writes the contracts with ETS and other organizations that actually conduct the assessment, which means those contractors view the Department, not NAGB, as their boss. With its authority so diluted and compromised, NAGB is not really an independent agency;

- the Department has other advisory committees (such as the Advisory Committee on Education Statistics) that it periodically invites to second-guess NAGB; ETS appoints still more advisory committees and expert panels that do much the same thing; and the Congress has had a propensity to assign "evaluations" of NAEP to the National Academy of Education and/or National Academy of Sciences that also have the effect of second-guessing and undermining while diverting resources and energy.

Problems in the Administration's Proposal

Even if NAGB had all the authority it needed with respect to NAEP, the Administration's proposal to assign the board partial responsibility for the new national tests is flawed in important particulars:

- The amendment drafted by the Administration invites NAGB to "formulate policy guidelines" for the tests, but does not give the board clear policy control. Given current language the Education Department would remain in charge of the tests themselves.
- The amendment does not empower NAGB to review and, as needed, rewrite the "test specifications" already drafted for the national tests, or to review and alter the large test development contract already awarded by the Education Department. (Many who have reviewed those specifications have serious reservations about them and they differ in important particulars from the NAEP assessments.)
- The amendment does not state that NAGB is expected to ensure that the standards used for the national tests will be the same as those used for reporting NAEP results. (The draft specifications indicate that the "basic" standard will be deemed "passing" rather than the "proficient" standard.)
- The amendment does not empower NAGB to decide whether the national tests will be given in languages other than English. (The draft specifications assume that the 8th grade math test will also be given in Spanish.)

Throw These Tests Out of School

By CHESTER E. FINN JR.

This week Congress weighs President Clinton's plan for national standards and tests, beginning with fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math. But although national testing is in principle a good idea, the president's proposal will do more harm than good. If Congress is going to enact such a measure, it should do it right.

The House is likely to vote to block future funding for the program. A multimillion-dollar contract, however, has already been signed by the Education Department and work is now under way. Timid GOP Senate leaders, lacking the nerve to kill the program, will decide whether to accept the Clinton version or make last-minute repairs. House and Senate negotiators from the appropriations committees, who have scant expertise in education policy, will then work out the final version of the bill.

All the Stops

The administration has pulled out all the stops to keep its plan alive, including threats to veto the huge Health and Human Services appropriation in which it is embedded. Only in the past few weeks has its fate been in doubt. For six months, a passive GOP Congress simply allowed the executive branch to proceed unilaterally with the first-ever nationwide standards and tests in a country that heretofore left such things to states and local communities. The White House brashly asserted that it didn't even need authorization from Congress. The president has already signed up six states and 15 cities to participate. Congress merely yawned. My fellow alumni of the Reagan and Bush administrations agree that if a Republican White House had attempted a maneuver like this, it would have taken the Democratic Congress about 30 seconds to cut us off at the knees.

The reason the testing plan is now one of the hotter issues in Washington is not, alas, because Republicans in Congress took the lead but because outside opposition finally surfaced. On the left, groups such as FairTest (which has never seen a test it deems fair) and the Congressional

Black Caucus are opposed on grounds that test scores may harm minorities and more dollars should instead be pumped into school programs. Conservative groups, such as the Christian Coalition and Concerned Women for America, protest this new federal intrusion into education. One influential congressman, Rep. Bill Goodling (R., Pa.), himself a former school superintendent, opposes national testing in principle. In his view, more tests wouldn't tell us anything we don't already know about what's wrong with U.S. schools, and comparisons among schools are invidious.

Many fellow Republicans think Mr.

The Clinton administration has mangled a promising idea to the point that the GOP Congress should either make major repairs or scrap it altogether.

Goodling is wrong. Properly done, standards-based national tests would provide useful information to students and their parents and put pressure on schools to improve. The public-school establishment is opposed because it wants to continue obfuscating the truth about its dismal performance.

But the Clinton administration has mangled this promising idea to the point that the GOP Congress should either make major repairs or scrap it altogether. The past few weeks have brought bountiful evidence that the tests now in the works are sorely flawed, just the sort of exams teachers' unions would love. They won't tell us whether children can actually read or compute. Major problems include dumbed-down standards, "fuzzy" math (as Lynne Cheney calls it), universal use of electronic calculators, and assumptions about reading that partake of "whole language" and "deconstructionist" notions rather than systematic phonics, grammar and basic understanding. The Clinton tests will examine the things trendy experts wish the schools were teaching, rather than the skills and knowledge that parents, employers and state officials prize.

This subversion of national testing re-

sults from letting the Education Department run the project on behalf of its school-establishment and ivory-tower pals. No issue is more fundamental than who is in charge of the tests; Mr. Clinton opted to vest that control in his own appointees and contractors and experts of their choosing. That arrangement invites future manipulation of sensitive matters such as test content, standards and "accommodations" for influential groups. A dozen assistant secretaries can fiddle and meddle, and their machinations will shift with passing political winds and changing administrations.

Once the plan encountered opposition,

the White House made a sop to its critics. It hastily cobbled together a proposal to transfer jurisdiction partly from the Education Department to a body called the National Assessment Governing Board. That's the "deal" currently before Congress.

I served on the NAGB for eight years, and chaired it for two. It's a good group. If it were made truly independent and bipartisan, given unambiguous control over the tests and invited to fix the mistakes of the Clinton plan, it might be able to do this delicate job.

But that isn't what the administration proposed. Rather, the White House would hand very limited authority to the NAGB, a board that also remains vulnerable to second-guessing and foot-dragging by the Education Department. Its membership is anybody the secretary of Education wants to appoint. It could have as few as two Republicans out of 25 members. It includes plenty of educators and "testing experts" but just a few governors, parents and employers. As currently constituted, and with the meager authority proffered by the White House, the NAGB cannot be counted on to fix the errors in the Clinton scheme, much less safeguard the future integrity of national testing.

Congress, which created the NAGB in 1988 and weakened it in 1994, could easily set this right. It would take minutes to write good legislation to reconstitute the board and give it full control, and the Clinton White House is so hot for national testing that it would likely go along. But today it appears Congress is not up to that assignment. These are complex, technical issues that the president cares mightily about but few on Capitol Hill even understand. Indeed, the GOP leadership seems to have virtually abandoned education, apparently concluding that it cannot outgun or outmaneuver the White House and its powerful allies in the school establishment. On issues far larger than testing, the GOP has already yielded to the administration. The pending appropriations bill, for example, would more than double funding for the genuinely destructive bilingual education program.

Bad Advice

Pundits and business spokesmen, meanwhile, are giving bad advice, urging Congress simply to get on with the president's well-intended initiative. They evidently haven't read the test "specs" and they dismiss the governance issues as "details." Yet if we are to have national testing, it's precisely these details that matter most. The crucial questions about any test are who decides what's on it, and who sets the standards by which student performance is judged.

If the House and Senate cannot make sure that sound answers to such questions are enshrined in law, the country would be better off without the tests. But that's not apt to happen either. Keeping this project alive is hugely important to Mr. Clinton, and the GOP leadership would rather create a bad program than risk defeat on a showdown vote. So the president will likely have his way, or close to it. Bad national tests will proceed. A weak NAGB will provide political cover. And true education reform will again be dealt a setback by Uncle Sam.

Mr. Finn is a fellow at the Hudson Institute and a former assistant secretary of education.



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STATEMENT BY DIANE RAVITCH

SENIOR FELLOW, BROOKINGS INSTITUTIONS

September 10, 1997

I support the President's plan to allow schools, districts and states to give a national test of fourth grade reading and eighth grade mathematics. Good information is the beginning of good policy. Parents, educators, and policymakers will benefit by having valid measures of student performance.

Critics say that there are already too many tests, and they are right. Unfortunately, most of the tests now in use establish what are called norms, but they don't reveal whether the norm is good enough or too low. Usually, the "norm" is just an average score. That is not a standard. A standard represents what students should know. The new national tests should incorporate meaningful standards; they should provide real benchmarks based on what students should know and be able to do in 4th and 8th grades.

I applaud the President's decision to turn management of the new tests over to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). Having taken this step, however, it is important to strengthen NAGB and make it far more independent from political control and far more bipartisan than it now is.

NAGB was designed to manage the relatively non-controversial National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). It has served this function exceptionally well. But the advent of national testing for individual students creates a level of responsibility for which the current NAGB was not designed. The current NAGB is not sufficiently bipartisan: Only two of 25 members must be chosen from the party out of power. The current NAGB is not sufficiently independent from political appointees; its independence was substantially curtailed by Congress in 1994.

The President's plan for national testing requires the oversight of a truly bipartisan, authentically independent board that can command the trust and respect of its fellow citizens. It must not be an instrument of the party in power. The board that is responsible for the national tests must represent the public interest, not the interest of any administration or party.

Congress and the President must agree to reconstitute NAGB so that the public can feel confidence in its judgments and can be assured that the content and the standards of the national tests will not be affected by the election returns.

Congress should not wait until 1998 to reauthorize NAGB. If the board's responsibilities are to expand now to include supervision of the national tests, then it should be reconstituted now to secure its independence, its stature, and its bipartisanship.



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BACKGROUND DATA ON DIANE RAVITCH

Diane Ravitch is a Senior Research Scholar at New York University and Nonresident Senior Fellow in the Economic Studies program at Brookings. Ravitch, a distinguished educator and historian, is one of the nation's leading experts on American education.

Prior to joining Brookings, Ravitch was the Assistant Secretary for Educational Research and Improvement and Counselor to the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Education. She has authored numerous books on American education, including *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen's Guide*; *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, written with Chester E. Finn Jr.; *The Schools We Deserve*; *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980*; *The Revisionists Revised*; and *The Great School Wars: New York City, 1805-1973*.

In 1989, she became an advisor to Teachers Solidarity and the Ministry of Education in Poland. She has lectured in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the former Soviet Union, Japan, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Germany, Nicaragua, and throughout the United States. She was chair of the Educational Excellence Network in Washington, chair of the American Federation of Teachers' Education for Democracy Project, and co-chair of the National Academy of Education's Task Force on the Future of Educational Research Priorities.

Ravitch is a member of PEN International, an honorary life trustee of the New York Public Library, and a former Guggenheim Fellow. She was elected to membership in the National Academy of Education (1979), the Society of American Historians (1984), and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1985). She was selected as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar in 1984-85, the first person to be chosen from the field of educational studies. She was awarded the Henry Allen Moe prize in the humanities by the American Philosophical Society in 1986, and a medal of distinction from the Polish government in 1991. For her work on the California K-12 history-science curriculum, she was made an honorary citizen of California by the Rules Committee of the State Senate. She was honored as a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library. She also received an honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, from Williams College, Reed College, Amherst College, the State University of New York, Ramapo College, and St. Joseph's College of New York.

A native of Houston, Ravitch received a B.A. from Wellesley College in 1960 and earned a Ph.D. in history from Columbia University in 1975.

(June 1997)



In Brief...

August 26, 1997

National Tests: A Good Idea Going Wrong

By Diane Ravitch

Six months ago I was an enthusiastic supporter of the president's proposal for national testing. I wrote articles in this paper and elsewhere endorsing the idea of testing fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade mathematics. In March I had the privilege of meeting with the president, the first lady, and the secretary of education to discuss the president's education agenda. At that time, I urged the president to place the national testing program under the supervision of an independent, bipartisan agency, not the federal Department of Education.

Unfortunately, this did not happen, and now the Clinton administration is well on its way to destroying the credibility of its good idea. Instead of turning the testing program over to the National Assessment Governing Board, which is independent and bipartisan, the administration has kept the test development process under its own tight control. It chose a contractor and selected committees to design the tests who may or may not be bipartisan and who may or may not represent the diverse spectrum of views in the fields of reading and mathematics. A few days ago it awarded a \$13 million contract to a consortium of testing companies.

Now the Internet is humming with charges that the national tests will be stacked to favor "whole language" theories of reading and against phonics and to promote "fuzzy math" (where the process of problem-solving, not the right answer, matters most) and against computation. I do not know whether any of these fears are valid, but the administration's partisan control of the test development processing has inflamed such feverish concerns.

The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) should be in charge of the national tests. Appointed by the secretary of education, NAGB is required by statute to be bipartisan and broadly representative; its members include governors, legislators, business leaders, teachers, school board members, public members and testing experts. NAGB was created by Congress 10 years ago to set policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This is the federal program that regularly tests national samples of American students in such subjects as reading, mathematics and science. NAEP has earned great credibility because it is supervised by an independent governing board. However, the Clinton administration plans to use the NAEP tests while bypassing NAEP's governing board.

This opinion piece was published in The Washington Post on August 26, 1997 and written by Diane Ravitch, nonresident senior fellow in the Brookings Economic Studies program.

The views expressed in this piece are those of the author and should not be ascribed to the trustees, officers, or other staff members of the Brookings Institution.

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The issue of who should control the national tests is not just a technical quarrel. The decision to have a national test is of historic proportions; the federal government has never done anything like this before. This is certainly not the kind of initiative that should be undertaken without full public discussion and bipartisan support.

The launch of national testing is precisely the kind of issue that ought to have congressional authorization, yet the administration is pushing ahead without public hearings or explicit authorization by Congress. I believe that a public debate would be healthy and that Congress would ultimately agree to endorse national tests. Every opinion poll shows broad public support for the idea.

To date the administration has refused to seek authorization apparently fearing that Congress would prohibit the tests. It was my experience, when I worked at the Department of Education, that any new program must be authorized by Congress. No matter how terrific an idea the White House might have, the nation's Founders did not believe that the executive branch should be

able to impose new programs unilaterally.

Spokesmen for the administration claim that they cannot ask NAGB to oversee the national tests because it is not authorized to oversee individual testing of this kind. This is sophistry, however, because the Department of Education certainly has never been authorized to launch a national testing program for individual students. If NAGB is prohibited from managing the new tests because it lacks specific authorization, then surely the department is also prohibited.

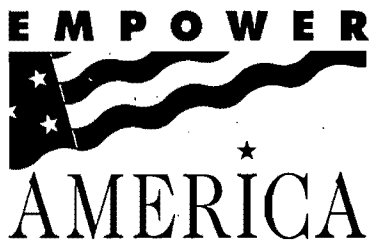
Worse, the administration is establishing a dangerous precedent. If the party in power gets to control the national test, to pick the contractor without an open competition, to select the committees that will write the tests and to control the reporting of the results, imagine what will happen when the other party comes to power. The next Republican secretary of education (Lynne Cheney? Phyllis Schlafly?) will revise the national tests, choose congenial experts to write the reading and math tests, and make the

changes that seem right to the party in power. And all of this can happen without congressional authorization, because the Clinton administration demonstrated that it was not necessary!

It isn't surprising that only six states have signed up to participate in the first national tests in 1999, even though the administration has offered to pay the cost for the first time only. So long as the testing program is directly controlled by political appointees, it will not gain the broad bipartisan support that it needs to be credible.

Yes, national testing is still a good idea, because our current patchwork of tests does not provide a common yardstick by which parents and educators can compare results. Some critics say that testing won't help children learn more, but testing based on high standards will give us valuable information about how we are doing.

If we are to have national tests managed by the federal government, it is important to do it right rather than hurriedly. The administration's insistence on partisan control will destroy the future of national testing. ■



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*Below are excerpts from a September 8, 1997 memorandum sent by
William J. Bennett to select United States Senators.*

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As you know, I have been (in principle) a strong supporter of voluntary national testing. However, I have real concerns about the specifics of the current Clinton proposal -- which, in my opinion, would do more harm than having no test at all. Let me state in the strongest possible terms that the current National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) proposal made by the White House is inadequate to prevent mischief in these tests and the Congress should not delay in fixing it. Waiting until 1998 and the "regular" National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reauthorization cycle will allow seriously flawed national tests to go forward without needed correction from a strengthened NAGB.

It is my strong impression that the Administration is willing to go quite a distance this week to accommodate a Congressional initiative concerning "governance" of the testing program. Indeed, I am told that the White House is awaiting a counter-proposal from Republicans and reform-minded Democrats. *Now is the time to make a solid counter-proposal* (it is also a chance to strengthen NAGB's independence vis-à-vis NAEP itself).

Where does the situation now stand? Apparently the Senate leadership has already agreed to accept an amendment from Senator Harkin which is, from my perspective, quite problematic (the Harkin amendment is simply the Administration's flawed proposal). If this agreement has, in fact, been irrevocably made, it seems to me that the best course of action is that in the forthcoming Senate-House conference committee, Republicans and reform-minded Democrats should insist that these important changes be made:

1. Give NAGB "policy direction" or "policy control" of all aspects of both NAEP and the national tests, not just policy guidance. Otherwise the Department of Education remains in control.
2. Give NAGB explicit authority to review and change the national test specifications, development contract and advisory committees that have already been launched by the Education Department. Otherwise, the bad decisions already made, and the contracts already awarded, will stay in place.

3. Charge NAGB with ensuring that the content and standards of national tests be the same as NAEP's and that the tests be "linked" to NAEP. Otherwise the public will not know whether the test results mean the same thing as NAEP results.

4. Make several key changes in the composition of NAGB itself so that it has greater bipartisanship and independence. (At present, just two of its 25 members need to be from the party out of power. Given the huge responsibility of national testing, and the need for bipartisan consensus, the current imbalance is simply wrong.)

5. Restore NAGB's pre-1994 authority to function as its own nominating committee, i.e. constraining the Secretary's appointees to people vetted by NAGB itself. (And perhaps stipulate that NAGB must consider candidates suggested by chairmen of the pertinent Congressional committees.) Otherwise, the Secretary will have a free hand to select whomever he wants -- as he does now.

6. Restore NAGB terms to 4 years (as was the case until 1994), with re-appointment permitted. (Today they last 3 years, which is a problem because it takes new members 1-2 years to get up to speed.)

Those are the essential statutory provisions.



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RECEIVED JUL 16 1997

July 15, 1997

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

Dear Gordon,

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

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

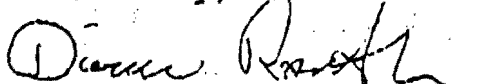
At that time, I was assured that the Administration would consider asking Congress to expand NAGB's authorization to include oversight of this national testing program. However, to my knowledge, nothing has happened to implement this.

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

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

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

Yours truly,


Diane Ravitch

cc: Secretary Richard Riley



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY
FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT

FAX COVER SHEET

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SUBJECT: Diane Ravitch

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RECEIVED JUL 16 1997

July 15, 1997

Dear Gordon,

Diane Ravitch

cc: Secretary Richard Riley

whether the Franklin School had higher achievement than the Jefferson.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Immediately, the scholar Diane Ravitch, the Education Leaders Council (a group of state education officials who don’t toe the establishment party line),

and I urged the administration to reconsider. We said that national testing had merit—but that anything so sensitive as these tests must be run at arm’s length from the government and education-establishment tar babies. It also seemed that Congress should have something to say about the arrangements for so momentous a shift in American educational federalism.

There has been no effort to address our concerns. The Education Department has been rushing

to put the original plan into operation. The independent board has been marginalized. Congress has been stilled. Critics have been ignored. And to the extent that one can forecast real harm from procedural missteps, damage lies ahead. As often in education-reform efforts, the procedure has been hijacked by the tar babies. The hijacking takes the form of contracts that are already being signed with neither congressional approval nor independent oversight.

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

INITIALLY BILL CLINTON'S NATIONAL TESTING PROPOSAL SEEMED MODEST AND WORKABLE. ALAS, IT IS NEITHER.

*Same ones who
developed the
NAEP P specs*

some wrinkles in the Clinton plan.

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

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

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

Consider these clues:

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

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

Third, and most worrisome, the two subject-matter

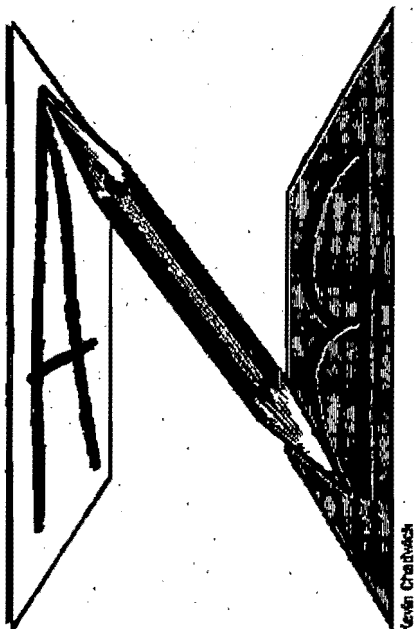
committees, for reading and math, include only educators and experts; there's not a "consumer" or employer in the lot. And while each group contains some well-regarded scholars and teachers, each is also tilted toward today's dominant educationist bias: the theory of teaching and learning known as "constructivism."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

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

that they expect to emerge.

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



Kevin Chaffin

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Pays
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Screen adds drama to CIA man's testimony

By Mary Ann Akers
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

It might have been a hearing on La Cosa Nostra.

But it wasn't Sammy the Bull or Jimmy the Weasel sitting behind the opaque screen in the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee hearing room yesterday but a CIA official.

He was testifying about intelligence briefings for John Huang, the ever-elusive former fundraiser and Commerce Department official at the heart of congressional and Justice Department investigations of Democratic fundraising practices.

The shield is normally used for the likes of high-ranking mob figures who have decided to cooperate with the government. But it was trotted out yesterday for the unassuming CIA briefer, John Dickerson.

Mr. Dickerson's supervisor at the spy agency, William McNair, explained why:

"Mr. Dickerson has served previously in places under much different identities ... in different capacities," Mr. McNair told the committee.

Behind the shadows on the thick plastic curtain lurked a slight man in his mid-50s who looked more like a librarian than an undercover agent.

Because of his former undercover work for the agency, Mr. Dickerson's request to have his identity protected was fully met by committee Chairman Sen. Fred Thompson, Tennessee Republican.

When Mr. Dickerson had completed his testimony yesterday, Mr. Thompson ordered all television cameramen to point their lenses toward the ceiling. Then the hearing room was cleared before Mr. Dickerson could be escorted out.

Educator resigns from panel creating achievement tests

Says administration politicized process

By Carol Innerst
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

She said she was assured that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Washington Times
THURSDAY, JULY 17, 1997

House panel OKs MFN for Laos

Hmong argue against move, citing human rights abuses

By Toni Marshall
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The House Ways and Means Committee has voted to extend most-favored-nation trading privileges to Laos despite an emotional appeal from 150 Hmong refugees who complained about human rights abuses by the government in Vientiane.

The markup was pushed through easily Tuesday despite a last-minute plea from Reps. Benjamin A. Gilman, New York Republican, and Bruce F. Vento, Minnesota Democrat. Both are members of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, and they urged that it be rejected.

"The United States owes a special commitment to highland Laotians, especially the Hmong, for their role in aiding the U.S. during the Vietnam War," said Mr. Vento, co-chairman of the Human Rights Caucus.

"There would be many more names on the black granite wall had it not been for the Hmong," he said in reference to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall.

Mr. Vento spoke after hearing an

emotional account from Kia Lor, a young woman who was shot and left for dead in Laos in 1987. Miss Lor says she was the only member of her family to survive the massacre, which killed 33 persons.

But Hiem Phommachanh, Laos' ambassador in Washington, said yesterday that only a small part of the Hmong community wanted to delay his country's development.

"Our policy is to forget the past and start a new era with everyone, but if someone is still fighting we cannot consider them a friend," Mr. Phommachanh said in an interview.

The Hmong, who live in the mountainous regions of Laos, helped American troops during the Vietnam War. They also worked with the CIA during the Cold War to resist the spread of communism.

More than 150,000 Hmong fled Laos after the Communist victory in 1975, while thousands were thrown in jail or sent to re-education camps.

About 20,000 Hmong refugees now living in Thailand fear forced repatriation to Laos.

The bill, co-sponsored by Reps.

Philip M. Crane, Illinois Republican, and Robert T. Matsui, California Democrat, comes as the Clinton administration is negotiating a bilateral trade agreement with the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

"Given the progress and effort that the country is making to transition its economy away from state control, I believe that it is appropriate for us to respond by providing the president with the authority to extend MFN status to Laos after a bilateral trade agreement has entered into force," Mr. Crane said.

"Moreover, the extension of MFN to Laos on a reciprocal basis will enhance our bilateral trade relations and will give the U.S. business community greater access to the rapidly growing Southeast Asian region."

Since the mid-1980s, Laos has adopted market-oriented principles to move its economy away from centralized state control.

Mr. Crane said those new policies include privatization, the removal of most price controls, the reduction of government subsidies and the lifting trade barriers.

U.S. denies its training aided in Zaire atrocities

By Nikolai Kralev
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering yesterday insisted that U.S. training of Rwandan military forces did not contribute to the atrocities reportedly committed by the Rwandan army during last winter's rebellion in what was then Zaire.

A human rights organization, meanwhile, accused the Rwandan army of "widespread atrocities against civilian populations in eastern Congo" despite efforts by the Pentagon to raise the army's standards and discipline.

Dr. Jennifer Leaning, consultant for the Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights, said Defense and State department officials have told the group that small groups of U.S. Army Special Forces and other units have been providing several forms of training to the Rwandans.

Both Mr. Pickering and Dr. Leaning spoke at a hearing of the House International Relations Committee about the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly known as Zaire.

"We have over the last three years provided the government of Rwanda and its military forces with very selective training to promote their consciousness of the laws of war, proper behavior with respect for civilian population and humanitarian affairs," said Mr. Pickering. "If we have been successful in that training, it has reduced rather than increased the

possibility that Rwandan forces, which may have been engaged in Congo, had misbehaved," he said.

He offered to ask the Defense Department to provide a full report on the details of the training.

Mr. Pickering said the United States has a clear stake in the success of the new regime in Kinshasa, and emphasized the interest of the Clinton administration "to see a stable, democratic and prosperous Congo emerge during the period ahead."

He pointed out that Congo's citizens aren't the only people who stand to benefit from the country's wealth of mineral and natural resources.

"These same resources make Congo a potential source of growth for the continent and a valued trade and investment partner for the United States," he said.

But he warned that the administration first wanted the 2-month-old government of President Laurent Kabila to cooperate fully with a U.N. mission investigating reports of mass killings of Hutu refugees from Rwanda.

"President Kabila promised this, and we need to hold him to his word," Mr. Pickering said.

Committee members agreed with the need to foster close ties with Mr. Kabila's government, but reiterated calls for an investigation of human rights abuses.

"Those guilty of atrocities must be brought to justice and punished," said the committee chairman, Rep. Benjamin A. Gilman, New York Republican.

The Washington Times

THURSDAY, JULY 17, 1997

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

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

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

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scores may be the most frightening conditions in an urban community, but that in itself doesn't make them the most appropriate targets for benchmark commitments or innovative experiment. The best target may be graffiti, or classroom vaccination, or even computers in the state library system. The best target is something the society knows how to deal with.

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

THIS ISN'T ONLY A TEST

By Chester E. Finn Jr.

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

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

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

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

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

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

whether the Franklin School had higher achievement than the Jefferson.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Immediately, the scholar Diane Ravitch, the Education Leaders Council (a group of state education officials who don’t toe the establishment party line),

and I urged the administration to reconsider. We said that national testing had merit—but that anything so sensitive as these tests must be run at arm’s length from the government and education-establishment tar babies. It also seemed that Congress should have something to say about the arrangements for so momentous a shift in American educational federalism.

There has been no effort to address our concerns. The Education Department has been rushing

to put the original plan into operation. The independent board has been marginalized. Congress has been stiffed. Critics have been ignored. And to the extent that one can forecast real harm from procedural missteps, damage lies ahead. As often in education-reform efforts, the procedure has been hijacked by the tar babies. The hijacking takes the form of contracts that are already being signed with neither congressional approval nor independent oversight.

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

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some wrinkles in the Clinton plan.

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

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

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

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