

PRESIDENT BUSH: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND, SPREZZATURA, JUMP THE SHARK

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ABSTRACT

President George W. Bush is undoubtedly the chief architect of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. Anyone's careful analysis of the law, especially if the person doing the analyzing has even limited classroom teaching experience, will indicate that most aspects of NCLB are ridiculous. Why, then, does NCLB enjoy its popularity with many groups? Who can argue with the name of the law: no child left behind. Boy, doesn't that sound great?

With a great name like "No Child Left Behind", someone has to start to think, when can this *good* thing go bad? Thinking back to the 1970s and 80s hit Happy Days a phrase evolved out of an episode where Fonzie, looking *cool* in his leather jacket, jumps over a shark on his water skis. At that moment the show lost credibility. That episode has since coined the phrase "Jump the Shark" and it has become known as the "moment you know your favorite show has lost its magic, beginning the long, painful slide to the TV graveyard" (Hein, 2002). What has NCLB done and where is it taking public schools?

The clear implication is that our schools, prior to NCLB, were doing a terrible job of educating our kids. This simply is not the case. The landmark "study" that concluded that our public schools are bad was the 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk. This "study" has since been proven to be pure propaganda (Bracey, 2001). There is solid research from the 90's that indicates that our public schools are good, but the school bashers prefer to ignore this study. The study is the Sandia Report, which has a very interesting history. In February 1990, Admiral James Watkins, the Secretary of Education under President G.W. Bush, announced that he had designated the Sandia National Laboratories as the agency to conduct a study of the effectiveness of public schools. The three senior researchers assigned to the project were Charles Carson, Robert Huelskamp, and Thomas Woodall. The researchers looked at popular measures to assess public school's effectiveness. When possible, they reviewed data obtained over time. The researchers concluded: "To our surprise, on nearly every measure, we found steady or slightly improving trends". The Sandia researchers were independent, with no prior premises to prove. But, since the report did not say what the administration wanted, it was suppressed. One of the Sandia researchers began sending portions of the report to Gerald Bracey, and it was eventually published in its entirety in the Journal of Educational Research. What is extremely befuddling is why, except for a few people, there was no one complaining about the suppression of a report paid for with public (tax payer) funds (Bracey, 2004).

We have probably all read about the most recent scandal connected with the G.W. Bush Department of Education. It involves Rod Paige, until recently the Secretary of Education, hiring a PR firm to handle “publicity” for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Not only was the PR dude handling “publicity,” but he was also paying bribes to insure that only good news about NCLB was reported. When questioned about the matter, Mr. Williams, the PR dude at first denied the allegations, but when confronted with the evidence, he admitted that perhaps mistakes were made. President G.W. Bush, showing his outrage, commended Williams for having the courage to fess up, while totally ignoring the fact that Williams only owned up when he was caught with his hand in the cookie jar (Fuller, 2005).

Let’s now do some critical analysis. When President G.W. Bush wanted to prove once and for all that public schools were bad, he sent the data to Sandia. He did not get back the report he wanted, so he had to suppress the report. President G.W. Bush may have learned from that mistake and did not ask for an independent report, but, controlling the media so that only good news is reported, that’s a different story.

The “Houston Miracle” was not so much a miracle as a “rigged” situation. For example, at Sharpstown High School, Robert Kimball, who was an assistant principal, noticed that in one year 463 students left the school. And the school reported zero dropouts. Mr. Kimball went to KHOU-TV and told the story, which eventually appeared on “60 Minutes II”. The then Secretary of education and former Houston superintendent Rod Paige would not appear on the show. Neither did other Houston school officials.

Kimball was demoted. Independent investigators checked the figures for about one-half of Houston’s public high schools and found that more than 3,500 of the 5,000 “school leavers” should have been classified as “dropouts”. Mr. Kimball sued the district and settled for \$90,000. According to Gerald Bracey, the real Houston miracle was that Houston officials were able to suppress the facts and “keep the scam going for so long.” It might still be going on if it were not for Mr. Kimball.

The New York Times and CBS News have reported that the 463 kids who left school were assigned numerical codes indicating that they had changed schools, applied for the G.E.D., or returned to their native country. Actually, many of the “school leavers” never gave officials any such reasons. The estimated dropout rate for Houston high schools is estimated at 33% to 50%. Houston officials, it seems, learned accounting from Enron officials. With Enron, adults were hurt. In Houston, kids are hurt. Who is outraged?

In the above case, AYP (adequate yearly progress) drove officials to “underreport” dropouts. The result was that the law performing students were gone when the tests were given. And, the AYP nut was met. And, everything was rosy; except for the forced out kids. But, who cares? Paige still smiles and nods about the “Houston Miracle.” A compelling question, which Congress should ask Paige is: Why didn’t you appear on TV at the same time as Mr. Kimball, to support or refute his allegations? We can only wonder why Paige dodged the cameras. And, since the Secretary of Education reports to the

President, why didn't President G.W. Bush insist that Paige appear on TV? Does this start to look like a conspiracy? (Wood & Maier, 2004).

Probably the most controversial feature of NCLB is the disaggregation of data by ethnic background. We should remember that more and more students are the products of more than one ethnic group and are often unsure of what to check. Young children simply do not know, and older children often choose not to respond (Goldberg, 2005).

The authors are suggesting that since NCLB is an accountability model for education, that its uses as an accountability model should be expanded to other government agencies and offices. Perhaps the president should have to keep his popularity at 50% or above. And, if it falls below 50%, he has one year to demonstrate AYP or he is terminated, and the vice president becomes president. And, the president must maintain AYP with all ethnic groups. We will flush out this proposal for another conference here in April.

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