

The 'New Paradigm' for wrecking what's left of U.S. education

by Joyce Fredman and Sue Atkinson

On Oct. 27 and 28 at the Des Moines, Iowa convention center, the "Bushmen" got together at a high-priced forum (\$75 a pop for everyone, including press), sponsored by the National Educational Goals Panel, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Business Roundtable. Along with Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, governors from more than 12 states, education delegates from all 50 states, plus corporate representatives, got together to exhort Americans about the importance of our national education, or lack thereof—one of the President's favorite topics.

The National Education Forum, also sponsored by the Iowa Department of Education, Iowa Department of Economic Development, and the Governor's Office, certainly had the right topic to catch headlines, since there is no subject more worthy of attention right now. As H.G. Wells said, "The future is a race between education and catastrophe." However, if the forum is any indication, the United States is headed straight for catastrophe.

Survival of the 'fittest'

The forum addressed neither the reality of the crisis nor its underlying causes. Rather, Alexander and his fellow free enterprise ideologues took the opportunity to reiterate Bush's agenda of "free choice" for parents—a euphemism for survival of the fittest. No one discussed curriculum, or the quality of teachers. The ugly truth of many students' poverty-stricken home lives was never mentioned. Instead, it was a "we can do it" rally of delusion-filled Horatio Algiers.

Noble aims and high-minded phrases were everywhere. The press release by Iowa Gov. Terry Branstead set the tone. "We know what we need to do to improve America's classrooms. Now it's time to begin implementing that knowledge. Time is of the essence as the global race to turn out the best-educated, highly trained work force intensifies. America's future is at stake." *America 2000: An Education Strategy*, a report commissioned by President Bush and compiled by the New American Schools Project, was the main theme, especially the six goals which this white paper lays out:

"All children will start school ready to learn, an increase in high school graduation to 90%, U.S. students becoming first in mathematics and science, a demonstration of compe-

tency in a broad range of subjects, as well as preparation for responsible citizenry, literacy for all adult Americans, and every school in the country free of drugs and violence."

Were they sincere, such aims would be indisputable. But the program presented by the administration provides no basis whatsoever for such goals to be attained.

The guts of the President's plan is that America's main problem is "attitude," not curriculum or budget. Alexander told the forum, "We have great big attitudinal changes after we chew over an issue." Earlier, Alexander had told reporters that having a national system for assessing progress toward the goals was essential to making the goals meaningful. But deciding exactly what students should know, and finding the right way to test that knowledge, is a tough trick, he confessed.

In Iowa and elsewhere, Alexander said, goals will be realized only if communities insist on it. He called on schools to resist turning teachers into social workers; he said it was more efficient to bring professionals into the schools. He pointed out that students' needs have changed as society has changed.

According to *America 2000: An Education Strategy*, major change is anticipated in our 110,000 public and private schools: change in every American community; change in every American home, change in our attitude about learning.

"The strategy will spur far-reaching changes in weary practices, outmoded assumptions, and long-assumed constraints on education. It will require us to make some lifestyle changes, too. It honors local control, relies on local initiative, affirms states and localities as the senior partners in paying for education, and recognizes the private sector as a vital partner, too.

"It recognizes that real education reform happens community by community, school by school, and only when people come to understand what they must do for themselves and their children and set about to do it. Our vision is of four big trains, moving simultaneously down four parallel tracks: better and more accountable schools; a new generation of American schools; a nation of students continuing to learn throughout our lives; and communities where learning can happen."

The watchword is decentralization

The Deputy Assistant to the President for Policy Planning, James P. Pinkerton, has been one of Bush's most popular proponents of "The New Paradigm." In a 1990 speech in Los Angeles, he told businessmen, "The New Paradigm is characterized by increasing individual choice. The President's education program offers a concrete example. During the 1980s, real spending per student shot up nearly 30%. Spending in this country is now about \$5,200 for each public school student. . . . Meanwhile, SAT scores sink and we typically rank in the second decile internationally. In big cities, where students routinely graduate from high school without being able to read their diplomas, spending is often much greater. Instead of pouring money into this existing leaky structure, the President seeks to change that structure by letting parents choose the public school their children will attend. . . . The New Paradigm is characterized by decentralization."

Here is the crux of what the administration is pushing. All of the chaos and incompetence that the United States saw with the decentralization of the airlines, savings and loans, trucking, and phone system are now being visited upon our classrooms. With a crumbling economy as the backdrop, the demise of our schools is unfolding like a horror show.

A national disgrace

Close to 100,000 students in Pennsylvania have already been affected by strikes this year. A district in the northeast Bronx lost 14 of its 31 principals this year. In Holyoke, Massachusetts, the school budget was cut 25%, laying off one-third of its teaching staff.

Iowa is entertaining a proposal to eliminate 6,000 of its 33,000 public school teaching positions. This would nearly double the size of the classroom, across the state, to 30 students.

In the Homewood section of Pittsburgh, 13% of the children were born underweight—a surefire obstacle to proper school performance, and indication of the conditions of poverty that Bush wants to ignore. Homewood helped the United States get its ranking of 26th in the world, behind countries as poor as Bulgaria, for percentage of low birth weight babies.

Twelve percent of this country's children are already suffering from some *preventable* ailment that hinders learning, by the time they start school. These include malnutrition, lead poisoning, prenatal exposure to drugs, and low birth weight, according to Brown University professor of public health Lucile Newman. She co-authored a study of links between preventable health conditions and learning problems, an overwhelming problem in inner cities.

Jonathan Kozol, in his book *Savage Inequalities*, has dramatically described the nightmare in American city schools. In East St. Louis High School, there are recurring sewage overflows in its kitchen, and, according to Kozol, close to 20,000 students in the Chicago public school system

are in classes with no teacher two days a week in the springtime.

Music, arts, and physical education are being eliminated in schools around the country, and, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, some students end up sweeping classrooms because there are not enough janitors. All after-school activities here have been closed down because of the lack of custodial staff. Buildings must shut down at 3 pm.

Violence in the schools is another well-publicized problem. The number of Washington, D.C. students suspended for carrying guns, knives, or other weapons at school increased from 142 in 1989 to 245 in 1990. This year already, at least four city schools have reported incidents where gunshots have been fired. Three-fourths of New York City's wolf pack or "wilding" episodes are committed by kids between the ages of 11 and 18. Drug and alcohol use among teenagers continues to rise, and surveys put the numbers at 15 to 30% nationally, of teenagers using illicit substances.

The best teachers are leaving

In this environment, even the best of teachers leave in disgust. New York State school officials named John Taylor Gatto, a teacher of public schools (for 26 years), as teacher of the year. Gatto has since left the public school system, because he no longer wanted to "hurt" the kids. He listed seven "harmful" lessons taught in America's schools, including confusion, indifference, emotional dependency, and intellectual dependency. Gatto says, "Government schooling . . . kills the family by monopolizing the best times of childhood and by teaching disrespect for home and parents. . . . The major form of local political patronage in the United States is the schools. My own district spends \$46 million a year and competitive bidding doesn't exist. Contracts go to politically correct people."

Bush and Alexander tell us the problem is not enough local control, that federal interference is responsible for this mayhem. But 93% of funds for public education comes from state and local sources, whereas only 7% comes from the federal government. As state budgets unravel further, what else can be expected but worse situations in the classroom, regardless of the speechmakers in Washington.

Corporate America says "bad attitude" is preventing us from being number one in math and science internationally. Yet, according to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), in a publication called *Science for All Americans*, 30% of high schools offer no courses in physics, 17% none in chemistry, 70% none in earth or space science; 38% of elementary school teachers have no science materials or facilities available in their schools; and 50% of secondary science teachers have no access to a general purpose science laboratory. As to the future? Currently, 13 math and science teachers leave for each one entering the profession. Even a junior high school student can figure out those odds.