

**Aristotle was asked how much educated men were superior to the uneducated: “As much,” said he, “as the living are to the dead.” —Diogenes Laertius**

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## **TTL: Teaching, Testing and Learning: How Public Education Policy Doesn't Lead America Toward A Republic Of Learning**

*by John Boleyn*

President Bush's No Child Left Behind education plan presents the country with the biggest change in how the federal government handles education since the Johnson Administration. Its significance lies in a new approach to education policy, particularly the federal government in how it develops and enforces a general set of achievement standards for children in public school systems across the country. H.R.1, the House version includes many of the Presidents proposals, and is geared toward much more of Bush's federal education plan than the Senate version.

For the first time in federal education policy, recipients of taxpayer dollars must show that students are maintaining a general academic standard and are benefiting from the programs which were created to help them learn. The 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed an across the board failure in American education in most of our students to demonstrate the capacity to function in the learning skills that every child must obtain by adulthood in order

to build a good life. These skills are punctuated as reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as calculating and information processing skills. These are only developed by habits and are the real substance of the liberal arts.

The President's, as well as the H.R. 1 plan seeks to implement a mechanism for accountability for student performance, streamlining and ending repetition of bureaucratic procedures, and give flexibility to local education officials in policy implementation of federal programs.

No question, "the nation's report card," clearly shows the \$80 billion dollars in federal money spent over the last decade has failed to enhance not only the environment of learning for children, but the reading and math skills demonstrated by 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students did not maintain progress, if not actually digress in comparison to the rate of per-pupil expenditures. A 1993 survey released by the Department of Education tells us that 90 million Americans over the age of 16 lack the reading and writing skills required for employment. Seven hundred thousand students, the Department of Education states, graduate "without the ability to read their diplomas." In 2001, the best which can be said about this shameful state of education in America is that it might not be worse than 1993.

Krista Kafer, an education policy analyst for the Heritage Foundation has proposed 4 policies which would greatly enhance the learning environment for developing solid learning skills in our nation's children. Building on current school choice provisions around the country, developing a precisely measured testing policy which accurately demonstrates habits of learning, continued consolidation of federal education programs, and enhancement of the nation's Straight A's provisions can build a environment which helps education reform prosper.

What is necessary to really improving academic performance?

In an era of ever declining academic performance, there is the need to see their performance levels increased. And our legislative and policy experts have the responsibility to ensure that this problem is addressed. But what if the problem is much larger than the solution of nationwide or state implementation the SOLs? Does our education establishment understand how the skills of learning are developed in the first place?

Just how would methods of instruction and preparation and the Standards of Learning tests empower our kids to learn? The way in which we test or examine students and the way in which we grade them determines what teachers teach and how they teach and what students learn and how they learn. Unfortunately, most teachers and administrators do is complain about the SOL process and create clever catch phrases such “All the SOLs do is cause us to teach to the test.” Yes, there is some truth to this and as it could apply to the concept of teaching and testing in both public and private schools in general. But teachers and educators are going to have to do a lot better than this.

### **Three Vital Questions**

Three questions must be positively answered by our education establishment before our system of education has the chance to take root in our country.

Are the teachers the sole cause of learning?

Are all children educable?

Are students only learning because teachers are ‘teaching’?

Most people view our public and private schools as

student-centered, but they are actually teacher-centered (and have been for most of America's educational history). They will become more so as this process swallows the time of teachers, parents and kids to serve a so called standard which measures little, if any learning at all.

It is the classroom which is the most important aspect of schooling—what is being taught and what is being learned. This is the battleground. So, should not the classroom revolve around the teacher as the center point of learning? To suppose that the teacher is the exclusive cause of learning is to believe that the activity of a teacher can by itself suffice to cause learning to occur in another person even though that person remains entirely inactive.

Mere teaching or lecturing by teachers is not necessarily learning on the part of students. Teaching is a cooperative art meaning the teacher cooperates or assists the student in the process of discovery. The teacher doesn't produce knowledge in the same way a painter creates an object of beauty or a machinist produces a product of utility.

The only real learning is learning which is the product of discovery. If genuine learning cannot occur without activity on the part of the learner (passive absorption or memorization do not deserve to be called learning), then we must also recognize that all learning is process of discovery on the part of the learner. The teacher and the student must be active in learning together.

Teachers are tools which aid their students in the activity of learning; while many times they are instrumental, they are not the sole cause learning.[1]

### **Real Liberal Education: A Republic of Learning**

Schooling should be general with very little special-

ization; liberal in developing free minds, and not vocational. It must be dedicated to the total human being, not just to training in specialized techniques. General learning should be the possession of every person. Right now our approach in both public and private schools is pretty much to indoctrinate students with information and have them memorize it. Then they pass it back to their teachers as learning rather than a process of genuine learning by acts of thinking and understanding that involve discovery by the minds of students.

If the information students get is not understood, it's only opinion, not knowledge. Opinions adopted on the naked authority of teachers have no durability, and with memories temporarily reinforced for tests, these opinions are for the most part forgotten. Much more durable are the habits of skill, which are formed by the kind of teaching which is coaching, which is more cooperative than lecturing. Habits are not memories.

Tests should signal what students should be learning; identify gaps in children's knowledge and skills; highlight the unequal achievement among kids,[2] and provide schools with data to modify instruction. Most students who pass at the end of one academic year the standardized tests of final exams or the current SOLs (which are largely tests based on memorization) would be hard-pressed to pass the very same tests given without warning at beginning of next school year. But if the habitually possessed skills of students in reading and writing were measured by the level of their performance at the end of one year and measured in the same way at a later time little would be lost.

The understanding of ideas and knowledge once acquired has maximum durability in our lives because it is habit of the intellect, not something solely remembered.

This is a conception of education which must be

understood and implemented starting at the local level first, for it to have any chance of surviving the our constituency-based political process. Our current policy on education is deficient in these concepts and the republic of learning our nation should progress toward will be inevitably delayed.

1 *Reforming Education*, Mortimer Adler, Pg 168. Macmillan Publishing, New York, 1988.

2 *Overboard On Testing*, Education Week, January 11, 2001

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max:

Thanks for the information you sent. It is very helpful.

Just a brief note to let you know that Colloquium is going well. We now have twenty-four members.

Colloquium is: “Men and women who meet once per month to share and discuss intellectual topics from history, philosophy, literature, science and the arts.” We have lunch, present a topic and then discuss the topic. Our format calls for participants to voluntarily step forward and present topical programs through lectures, demonstrations, readings, recordings or any other method of delivery. Being a presenter is not a requirement for Colloquium membership. Participants may invite guests to present programs or just have lunch, listen and discuss.

Colloquium is an experiment. I suspect we will be able to make a more valid assessment of its success after a year’s worth of presentations. Hopefully, the enthusiasm will hold up as it is now.

Nacogdoches is a college town of 32,000 people, and it has a wealth of knowledge living in the heads of its aging professors and retired persons. It is our hope to tap

into that wonderful database of knowledge. The average age of our members is about 58.

Our lineup for 2001-2002:

April (First meeting) – “Only Adults Can Be Educated, Max Weismann Interviews Mortimer Adler,” Presenters, Dr. Max Morley & Dr. Archie McDonald

May – “Cycles in American Political History,” Presenter, Dr. Archie McDonald

June – “Adam Smith and Karl Marx,” Presenter, Mr. Al Cage

July – “Contemporary Capital Punishment in America,” Presenter, Mr. Dan Norton

August – “Beware of False Prophets: Modern Science vs Public Policy, Presenter, Dr. Jack McCullough

September - “Wild Bird Populations in East Texas,” Presenter, Dr. Dean Fisher

October – “Johannes Brahms and Symphony No. 1,” Presenter, Dr. Max Morley

November – “Evidence Based Medicine,” Presenter, Dr. Rick Hurst

January –

February -

March -

April – “The Role of the Arts in Culture,” Presenter, Dr. Max Morley

Thanks Max.

Max Morley, Music Professor  
Stephen F. Austin State University  
Nacogdoches, Texas

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Dear Max,

Thanks for the Questioning the Answers piece. It's a great article. I plan to reproduce it for my staff and expound on it more during the next school year.

I have to tell you, that's the type of teacher I was in the classroom. I questioned kids all the time. I do that now as an administrator, esp. when disciplining the kids. I have them reflect and tell me why. That's why I'm known as a fair disciplinarian.

It's the only the method that works, but adults lose sight of it because they feel they have to talk all the time and that kids are suppose to listen.

Thanks for sharing.

Lucy Boyadjian, Principal Glen Oaks School  
Hickory Hills, IL

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To the Public Good list: Former U.S. Senator and Presidential candidate Bill Bradley has sent out a recent email listing his recent activities, including a plan to help families save for education:

“And, I recently helped kick off an exciting new venture called “Upromise”, a way for parents and relatives to increase savings for the college education of their children. Upromise’s strategy is simple: 1) make it easy for parents and families to open tax-deferred college saving accounts; 2) convince America’s best-known companies to contribute a percentage of their customer’s spending to those accounts; and 3) create a way for extended families to pool their purchases and savings for a child’s benefit. To date, AOL, AT&T, Borders, Citibank, Century 21, Coca-Cola, CVS, ExxonMobil, Fidelity Investments, General Motors, McDonald’s, Salomon Smith Barney and Toys“R”Us have announced their participation.

“At the family level, Upromise’s impact could be staggering. A family with children and family income of \$58,000 can save more than \$20,000 over 15 years. That same family now owns only \$12,900 in financial assets. In other words, a family can exceed—through Upromise



contributions alone—the financial assets it would currently own through savings. For more information about Upromise, you can visit their website at <http://www.upromise.com>.”

Alan Zundel  
For the Public Good  
<http://www.publicgood.org>

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## **WELCOME NEW MEMBER**

**Grace Harrison, Ontario**

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**We welcome your comments and questions.**

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**THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE** is published  
by the Center for the Study of The Great Ideas  
Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann  
E-mail: [TGIdeas@speedsite.com](mailto:TGIdeas@speedsite.com)  
Homepage: [TheGreatIdeas.org](http://TheGreatIdeas.org)  
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