

Who's Who Behind NCLB

- the players and politricksters of Bush's "education reform" -

More than a sweeping vision for American education, NCLB is the brainchild of a few friends in high places from Texas and another handful of conservative ideologues in DC. On the heels of a Bush presidency, they got together to announce that their same-old tests-for-all education agenda was now the salvation of young children all across the nation. Fresh from the think tanks, frat parties, rodeos, and country clubs of the right wing, here are the chief architects of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Rod Paige – Secretary of Education

A former football coach who is well-known for showing up to press conferences in cowboy boots, Paige first encountered the Bushes when he worked on Bush Sr.'s failed presidential bid against Ronald Reagan in 1980. In 1994, he became the superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, the country's 7th largest district. It is here that he would craft what would be soon known as the "Texas Miracle" in education.



Between 1994 and 1998, the percentage of students passing the three grade 10 TAAS tests (Texas' state exams) had grown from 52% to more than 70%. Not only that, the data appeared to show that as an increase in testing and "real accountability" arrived to the schools, dropout rates went down and scores went up.

The rest of the nation began to watch with astonishment. The Council of Great City Schools gave Paige its award for outstanding urban educators in 1999; in 2000, he won the Harold W. McGraw Jr. prize in education; in 2001, the American Association of School Administrators named him superintendent of the year. Paige was not only becoming a hero of education reform, but an even closer friend to the younger Bush.

Yet the Texas Miracle was fast becoming the Texas Myth. The "Enron of education" was soon unfolding. At Sharpstown High School, there was a freshman class of 1,000 that miraculously turned to less than 300 students by senior year – yet not one dropout was reported. A state audit in Houston soon followed. The audit examined records from 16 middle and high schools, and found that more than half of the 5,500 students from those schools who left in the 2000-1 school year should have been declared dropouts but were not. Other publicly available data showed that the Houston high school dropout rate after Paige's 6 years in office was one of the highest in the nation (92nd out of the 100 largest districts in the US).

On January 21, 2001, Paige was sworn in as the Secretary of Education. The No Child Left Behind Act was passed and signed into act almost a year later on January 8, 2002. This continues to be Paige's big chance to bring a little bit of Texas accounting to the national scene, despite a continuing rise in NCLB criticisms. Paige is well-known for his no-nonsense aphorisms, such as "Teaching and testing are the same thing for us. You cannot teach if you don't test." He is also quick to tell any critic of NCLB that they are succumbing to the "soft bigotry of low expectations". Paige's credibility was legitimately threatened when he deemed the NEA "a terrorist organization" but he was quick to polish his appearance up with more feel-good quotes about student achievement and "doing God's work".

Nina Rees, Deputy Under Secretary for Innovation and Improvement

Rees is a charismatic key player in the new right-wing assault on public education. After graduating from Stanford Business School, she became an analyst at Americans for Tax Reform and then an Education Policy Analyst at the Heritage Foundation. She was one of four advisors to VP Dick Cheney before she joined the Department of Education in 2001.

When asked in a Townhall.com forum whether education will be privatized on a national scale, she responded, "I hope so! But not in my lifetime. Though I think we've made great strides in the 90's. So the end is closer than you think!" She co-authored *School Choice 2000: What's Happening in the States* with Jeb Bush.

In a speech to Stanford students she exhorted them to, "Think, for a moment, about the public school system as a business: there would be 91,000 retail outlets (called schools), almost 3.7 million frontline employees (the instructional staff) serving almost 48 million customers (the students). And more than 15,000 individual firms (or school districts), each with its own governance structure and each operating independently, but also in a heavily regulated environment. I suspect that even Jack Welch--or the consultants at Bain, BCG, and McKinsey--would find this a management headache."

She helped to draft the NCLB blueprint for the Bush administration, and currently heads the Office of Innovation and Improvement. In the Reesian point of view, more test data brings higher performance levels into schools, and more venture capital into the public schools will allow more private companies to try out their even more test-crazed education philosophies and achieve even higher so-called "performance levels".



Sandy Kress, Bush's former senior education adviser



Fresh from Texas, Kress was president of the Board of Trustees of the Dallas Public Schools. He is well-known for his green drugstore notebook that became "A Draft Position for George W. Bush on K-12 Education". A "sweet-talking" bipartisan, Kress played a key "negotiator" role in winning over Democrats such as Ted Kennedy on the No Child Left Behind act. He now is an adviser to Pearson, which will soon reap new profits created by the testing requirements of NCLB.

Margaret Spellings, Currently Domestic Policy Adviser to Bush

Known to Bush as "La Margarita", Spellings perhaps has the most experience working with Bush on education, having served as the political director of his 1994 gubernatorial campaign and on various education initiatives in the early 1990's. She once told Business Week that "We need an accountability lobby, and we hope the business community is that."



Other test-crazed co-conspirers:

Gene Hickok, the Undersecretary of Education - formerly Pennsylvania's secretary of education. When trying to fan rumors that DOE grants go to support privatization of schools, he said, "we support those organizations that support No Child Left Behind."

John Bailey, the Educational Technology Director - believes that school progress should be as easy to track as stocks, and that American education should take a tip from the business model of Wal-Mart.

The Heritage Foundation - an extreme right-wing think tank that has groomed and marketed the conservative rhetoric from many of Bush's education advisers.

Diane Ravitch - the closest thing to an intellectual in Bush's arsenal of education advisers, Ravitch is an education historian, the elder Bush's Assistant Secretary of Education, and an ardent supporter of standards-based education.

The Business Roundtable - a group of CEO's of multinational corporations. They were quick to applaud the "business model" of education, and this political powerhouse has pledged to air ads on TV promoting high-stakes testing.

Achieve - an executive-level organization comprised of politicians and business leaders who are united in the pursuit of increased standardized tests. Their closed-doors 2001 National Education Summit at IBM headquarters was a watershed event in the formation of the NCLB Act. Achieve's Board of Directors include Edward Rust, the CEO of State Farm Insurance, Lou Gerstner, the ex-CEO of IBM, and Phil Condit, the former CEO of Boeing.

McGraw-Hill - one of the test-making companies that will be sure to profit from the No Child Left Behind Act and its new state testing requirements. In addition, the McGraw family has been a close friend to the Bush family since the 1930's when they shared a private island off the coast of Florida. Bush invited Harold McGraw III into his office on the day he assumed the White House, and told Congress that same day that the nation must eliminate its "reading deficit" through the "findings of years of scientific research on reading."

William J. Bennett - currently works as a distinguished fellow at the Heritage Foundation and was previously Reagan's Secretary of Education. He started K-12, Inc. in 1999 and now sits on its board. K12 is a for-profit company that provides "management services" to schools across the country.

Education Leaders Council - a conservative alternative to the Council of Chief State School Officers. Its executive director, Lisa Keegan, believes that ELC's role is to correct a "liberal bias" in American education. Rod Paige told the ELC at its conference that that "the worst thing that can happen to urban and minority kids is that they are not tested." Their for-profit wing includes AccountabilityWorks, Inc.



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