

## NOTES FOR MARY'S CLASS IN ALEXANDRIA

August 10, 2001

1. Dr. Futrell has asked me to talk about the Bush Administration's education plan. To set the context for that discussion, I would like to begin by describing the federal role in education, then discuss some of President Bush's key proposals and the study we conducted. We will focus later in the class on one of these proposals—test-based accountability—to consider first, whether school and state rankings by test scores reflect the quality of education and second, whether the accountability plan is likely to improve education for low-income students. As part of that discussion, I will ask you to comment on the link between Bush's plan and the experience with Virginia's SOLs. [How many of you are teachers, or principals, or work for a school system in another capacity? How many of you work in Virginia?]
2. Distribute questions on federal funding. Ask about 10 students to give budget estimates. Distribute table on expenditures. My main reason for posing the budget question is to help put the federal role in perspective.
  - The United States spends about \$648 billion each year on public and private education: \$387 billion on elementary and secondary education and \$261 billion on higher education.
  - The federal government spends \$55 billion (8.5% of total expenditures) on education: \$23.5 billion (6.1% of the total) on elementary and secondary education and \$31.6 billion (12.1% of the total) on higher education. (Despite these numbers, President Reagan took credit for higher SATs a few months after he took office!)
  - The largest programs are Title I (at the elementary and secondary level) and Pell grants at the higher education level.
  - As you listen to the comments of our political leaders, keep in mind that the programs we hear the most about are not necessarily the ones that are most important. Each president wants to focus on "his own" program, even if that program is insignificant compared to major programs like Title I and IDEA. And many of the programs that have high visibility on TV or in the press are too small to have a significant impact nationwide. For example, if a program is funded at \$1 billion per year—assuming equal distribution across school districts—each district receives \$66,666 for the entire district. That amount is barely enough to cover the costs of one experienced teacher, with benefits. Many federal programs are funded at this amount—or less.
  - Finally, it is important to remember why the federal government originally became involved in education. Title I started in the mid-1960's as part of President Johnson's "War on Poverty." Its purpose was to increase equality of educational opportunity. While there now are many priorities in federal

education programs (some think too many), equity remains central, as demonstrated by the two largest programs—Title I and student financial aid.

3. As you can tell from the budget numbers, the federal contribution to education is a very small proportion of overall education expenditures. However, the rhetoric from the last three presidents (at least) has given the impression that each of them personally can make a major difference in the quality of education nationwide. (Consider, for example, Bush's reading initiative.) I should add that in addition to the budget numbers we discussed, there are other reasons why the federal government can have a smaller impact on education than the rhetoric would lead us to believe. There are several reasons:

- First, the federal funds do little to compensate for a highly unequal system of school finance at the state and district level, a system which allocates the fewest resources to the lowest-income school districts. This is ironic because the general public believes that high-poverty communities receive extra resources when in fact they receive a lot less than affluent communities. Second, the federal funds are not sufficiently concentrated on the low-income schools to compensate in any significant way for the school finance inequalities. (The politics of Title I is the best example.) Third, the federal contribution sometimes replaces what states and school districts would otherwise have spent—that is, the funds are not additional. (An example is the 33%-66% reduction.) Yet, with all of these problems, and even with the very limited federal role, Title I especially has provided much needed additional resources to low-income schools.
- Most important, all of the rhetoric will not overcome the fact that poverty is the major factor contributing to low educational achievement—in the United States and throughout the world. In most studies, it accounts for 75% of the variance between schools (not between students) in achievement scores. That does not mean children from low-income families cannot achieve in school. Many overcome the odds and excel. Nor does it mean educators should be relieved of the responsibility to provide these children with a quality educational experience. But it does mean that if a problem is that big you need a major investment to begin to address it in any serious way. Our system of school finance does just the opposite: It compounds the educational problems associated with poverty by creating major school finance inequities, which affect everything from teacher quality, to class size, to course offerings, to technology—and even textbooks and basic supplies.

4. With these points as the context, I would like to turn now to our class study of the Bush Administration's education plan, entitled *No Child Left Behind*.

- Current status of the legislation—conference committee; the major differences deal with funding (the Senate bill: \$33 billion; the House bill: \$23 billion) and the strictness of the standards--the Senate is more lenient. A recent Congressional Research Service study, which ran simulations in three states—

Texas, North Carolina, and Maryland—concluded that the vast majority of schools would be found “failing” under the standards being considered by Congress. Bush, apparently, is now urging “realistic education standards.”

- The study focused on three key proposals in Bush’s plan: (1) to increase the flexibility of federal programs; (2) to strengthen accountability for student performance; and (3) to offer school choice options.
- Selection of respondents: wide range of perspectives; highly knowledgeable.
- Selection of issues--topics that are central to Bush’s plan and also to federal aid to education, for example: (1) the tradeoff between flexibility and ensuring that the funds are targeted to low-income districts and schools and result in additional spending (note federal and state political issues); (2) issues related to the educational benefits—or disadvantages (depending on how you view it)—resulting from test-based accountability and whether the test-score rankings reflect the quality of education ; and (3) the implications of vouchers in terms of their potential impact on the quality of education available to low-income students.
- One additional comment on our study: I began the discussion of federal aid to education by placing the federal role in a broader context. Several of our respondents did the same and pointed out that much more massive interventions are needed. Some focused on the need to reduce school finance inequities dramatically (note, for example, the analysis in RAND’s Title I report of the cost—well over \$100 billion--of significantly reducing inter-state school finance inequities). Others proposed comprehensive voucher plans, large-scale economic investments in education (comparable to the Marshall plan), or major interventions to address problems of poverty. I’m reminded of a comment by one of our respondents: “We believe that schools solve the problem of poverty, and now this program assumes that tests solve the problem of schools. By implication, that means tests are supposed to solve the problem of poverty.”

5. With that quote, let’s turn to issues of testing:

- *The Trouble with Ranking.* (Distribute tables.)

6. Three questions to guide the group discussions:

- In your view, what is needed to make a significant difference in the quality of education in low-income schools? (There clearly are many possible approaches—and some will work—but we tend to look for “quick fixes.” As you consider this issue, try to be realistic about what you believe would be needed to make a real improvement in student achievement.)
- Using your experience with (or knowledge of) the SOLs, do you think high-stakes testing will increase, or decrease, the quality of education? What are your reasons? What are the tradeoffs?

- Do you think the test-score rankings provide a valid measure of the quality of education? Why? Why not? If you believe the tests are not appropriate, what measures would you use?

7. Wrap-up on test-based accountability:

There appears to be widespread agreement on both sides of the political aisle that student scores on standardized tests are valid measures of the quality of education in a state, a school district, or a school. Indeed, test-based accountability plans—with their associated rewards and sanctions—were the centerpiece of both presidential candidates' education proposals during the campaign—and there also is wide agreement about their merits on the Hill (with the exception of a small number of liberals and conservatives who are against testing, although for different reasons). However, the plans remain controversial among researchers, educators, and parents—for good reason.

8. While the test-based accountability plans are intended to improve education, I believe there is evidence that they have, instead, been counterproductive.

First, test-score rankings do not tell us which states, school districts, or schools are doing a good job. Therefore, rewards and sanctions administered on the basis of these rankings are based on flawed measures of performance. There are several reasons why standardized test-scores tell us little about the strengths and weaknesses of schools.

- There are large differences in student selectivity. We do not know which students took, or did not take, the test. In addition, we do not know the policies in different states and districts with respect to the inclusion of students in special education and the inclusion of language minority students in the testing. These policies vary widely across jurisdictions.
- There also are differences in grade retention policies and drop-out rates. Examples from Ireland (in the 1940's), China, Kenya, Kentucky and Texas. Note the conflicting reports on drop-out rates in Texas. (Also, note the conflicting RAND reports on Texas achievement scores.)
- There are differences in district and school practices with respect to cramming for the test; test familiarity (example: new superintendents); the difficulty of the test and whether it becomes easier or harder over the years; and cheating in some cases—and, of course, large differences between schools in poverty and resources. Moreover, fluctuations in test scores from year to year tell us little about the quality of education. (An example is the Title I experience in implementing school improvement requirements.)
- And, even if none of these problems in interpreting test scores existed, we might question whether the federal government can—or should be—in the business of monitoring test scores in each of the 85,000 schools in the United States. It is interesting that an administration advocating local control has proposed federal requirements perhaps more prescriptive than any previous requirements. These

are some comments by our respondents: The testing would include “all kids, not just Title I kids. Title I is the tail to wag the entire dog of federal funding. It’s really breathtaking.” Further, testing might “trump the effect of anything else” and “function rigidly as a practical counterpoint to the flexibility that was otherwise intended.” Therefore, “the net result is an increase in federal direction. That is why these proposals are really interesting—because of Republican support.”

In addition to considering whether standardized tests are valid measures of the performance of principals and teachers, we can ask whether the process itself might improve the education program—that is, will it raise academic standards?

- On the positive side, I hear reports of more emphasis on writing, if writing is part of the test; more structure for inexperienced teachers and low-achieving students; and more focus on educational problems, therefore potentially attracting additional resources.
- On the negative side, weeks, even months, might be spent cramming for the test, a practice which replaces the school’s ongoing academic program, narrows the curriculum, and increases the emphasis on rote learning. When we read that states have raised academic standards, all we know is that they have initiated a high stakes testing program. We know nothing about whether the quality of the education program has improved. For example, if 25% of students drop out of school because they failed the test, we have not improved our schools—they simply are not serving lower-performing students.
- A preoccupation with high stakes testing may have a negative impact on the teaching environment, which will discourage some of the more qualified teachers and principals from entering and remaining in the profession. There are reports of teachers leaving the field, or requesting transfers to a grade that is not tested, because they feel that the tests have adverse effects on instructional methods and working conditions (see, for example, the article on the SOLs). It also is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain principals. If policies intended to strengthen academic standards exacerbate current shortages, they will have precisely the opposite effect from that intended.
- High stakes testing also weakens the quality of education if it encourages policies that may not be in the best interest of the child—for example, policies, described earlier, that increase drop-out rates, or decrease graduation rates.
- Finally—and most troublesome—is the fact that the focus on test-based accountability has diverted attention from underlying causes of low academic achievement. We cannot improve education for “all” children without addressing problems of poverty and the serious inequalities in resources available to schools serving affluent and low-income populations. Nor can a test substitute for a comprehensive and sustained academic program or a working environment that encourages the most qualified teachers and principals to remain in the profession.