

## Reshaping national assessment policy

The proposals of:

*The Forum on Educational Accountability,*

*Broader Bolder Approach to Education*

*Forum for Education and Democracy*

*Harold Berlak*

Dozens of professional educational associations corporate lobbies think tanks have offered proposals for reshaping national assessment policy. I summarize and offer commentary on key proposals of three prominent organizations named in the title and briefly described below. All were written with an eye to how Congress should go about reauthorizing *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), and repairing or undoing the educational disaster it inflicted. The three sets of proposals I draw upon were released prior to Obama's election and Duncan's elevation as Secretary of Education. Though the political and economic situation has changed dramatically the issues raised by these remain central to any effort to reshape national assessment policy.

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***The Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA)*** convened in 2001 was organized and is chaired by Monty Neill, an executive director of the *National Center for Fair & Open Testing* (FairTest), the nation's independent watchdog for misuse and abuse of standardized testing. In 2004 *FEA* issued the *Joint Organizational Statement* on the *No Child Left Behind Act* that was endorsed by fifty of the nation's leading civil rights, religious, children's advocates, disability, civic, and labor organizations. The *Joint Statement* was updated April 2008, in the midst of the 2008 presidential campaign. It is now endorsed by 151 organizations.<sup>1</sup> Neill estimated that collectively these groups have over fifty million members.

***Broader Bolder Approach to Education (BBA)*** is an offspring of *EPI*, the *Economic Policy Institute*, the widely known and highly regarded non-partisan policy center that specializes in producing policy papers and economic analyses of the impact of public policy on lower-and middle-income families. Over fifty eminent researchers, politicians and practitioners including several former Democratic and Republican officeholders, and experts in the fields of child development, social welfare, health, housing, and public health endorsed *BBA* proposals. Among the more notable signatories are Julian Bond, James Comer, Linda

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<sup>1</sup> A partial listing of endorsing organizations: National PTA, NAACP, ACLU, People for the American Way, The Urban League, Children's Defense Fund, American Friends Service Committee, Service Employees International, the National Education Association, numerous associations of teachers, nurses, librarians, principals, school board officials, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees national church organizations, the Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church.

Darling-Hammond, Jocelyn Elders, Julianne Malveaux, Deborah Meier, Diane Ravitch, Janet Reno, Richard Rothstein, William Julius Wilson, and the late Theodore Sizer. Note also that Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan is a signatory of both *BBA*'s general policy statement and educational assessment proposals. He endorsed *BBA* recommendations while CEO of the Chicago Public Schools and actively pursuing policies that are directly contrary to the *BBA*'s proposals he endorsed.<sup>2</sup>

*Forum for Education and Democracy (FED)* was convened by fifteen esteemed education professionals, each with a history of working with teachers and in schools. The Conveners include former and/or current school principals, classroom teachers, and teacher educators who are committed to the democratic mission of public schools, and equality of educational opportunity. Of the three organizations *Forum for Democracy and Education* alone is overtly left leaning or 'progressive.' Conveners include Judith Browne-Dianis, James Comer, Linda Darling-Hammond, Carl Glickman, John Goodlad, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Deborah Meier, Larry Myatt, Pedro Noguera, Wendy Puriefoy, Sharon Robinson, Nancy Sizer Angela Valenzuela, and George Wood. Five of the Conveners also are signatories to *BBA*'s proposals.<sup>3</sup> *FED* maintains a website, blog and Facebook page, produces occasional policy papers and reports, and provides expert assistance to schools and districts. In the midst of the 2008 presidential campaign *FED* released a fifty-page report. *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education* that included a critique of NCLB, and set of assessment proposals.

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## The Proposals

### The *Forum on Educational Accountability Assessment (FEA)*

*FEA*'s 'Joint Statement' accepts NCLB's goals of high standards and "closing the achievement gap" but argues there is a need to correct NCLB's serious flaws including:

The over-emphasis on standardized testing, and focus on test preparation rather than enriching academic learning; the 'over-identification' of schools as in need of improvement, and imposition of sanctions that do not improve schools or raise academic standards.

The *Joint Statement* suggests fourteen "significant, constructive corrections" to NCLB, and in a subsequent document five principles to guide federal state and local assessment policy.<sup>4</sup> I've chosen to focus not on guidelines or principles but on the specific legislative proposals *FEA* sent to Congress. It consists of thirty-nine pages of line-by-line deletions and additions to the

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2 Other *BBA* signatories include Peter Edelman, Pedro Noguera, Edward Fiske, John Goodlad, Marshall Smith, Christopher Jencks, Kenneth Bernstein, former Assistant Education Secretary Susan B. Neuman; Director of faith-based programs John DiIulio, former Surgeon General Richard Carmona.

3 The original five are: Linda Darling-Hammond; John Goodlad; Deborah Meier; Pedro Noguera; the late Ted Sizer. <http://www.forumforeducation.org/>

4 *Assessment and Accountability for Improving Schools and Learning*, Forum on Educational Accountability August 2007

language of the existing ESEA/NCLB legislation.<sup>5</sup>

One set of *FEA*'s legislative proposals would provide exemptions and /or 'accommodations' for particular groups of students for whom the usual tests and testing protocols may be inappropriate or misleading. This includes immigrants whose home language is not English, or who are otherwise atypical, disabled or developmentally exceptional. In addition, *FEA* would do away with the current dysfunctional NCLB regulation that designates an entire school as a total failure (hence eligible for closure and replacement) if any one of the categories of disadvantaged subgroup of students named in the Act fails to achieve the prescribed number of test points.

The second set of *FEA*'s proposed changes provides more flexibility in assessment practices, for example, the use of "alternative assessments such as learning records, writing samples, portfolios or collections of students' work, and exhibitions; and use of other indicators of school quality such as grades, graduation, promotion, and attendance rates." States would also be eligible for federal funds to support "locally developed and managed assessments."

*FEA*'s third set of changes aim to lessen the 'overemphasis on standardized tests by (1) reducing annual student testing from annually (beginning in third grade) to three times during a student's school career -- once in elementary, middle, and high school; (2) abandoning the unattainable goal that all students be 100% proficient (average and above) in language and math (as measured by standardized tests) by the year 2014 with "attainable goals", one based on average gains for all Title 1 students in the state reaching proficiency over a three year period, with scores at the 65th percentile set as the minimum . No reason is given for this number; (3) ameliorating the progressively punitive *Adequate Yearly Progress* (AYP) requirements and funding school-based 'capacity-building' programs that promote student learning. *FEA* organizer Monty Neil calls 'capacity building' *FEA*'s key proposal. It would direct about twenty percent of a school's Title I funds to 'capacity building' in two broadly defined areas, 'professional development' and 'parent involvement.'<sup>6</sup>

Finally, *FEA* proposes *opportunity standards*. Should the required resources, human and material, be insufficient, schools, individual teachers and students could not be held accountable and subject to punitive consequences. There is no requirement that the *opportunity standards* be met, only that lack of resources be identified and made public; nor is there a provision that would suspend testing until needed resources were provided.

***The Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA)*** *BBA* cites a large body of evidence that the gap in student achievement and school success are mostly rooted in factors outside of schools and classrooms --in economic inequalities, unemployment other life circumstances, access to affordable health care, social conditions of the families and communities the schools serve. What's needed *BBA* asserts is a *Bolder, Broader Approach* to addressing the nation's inequalities, one that includes public investment in quality early childhood, pre-

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<sup>5</sup> *FEA* makes no claim that the 151 organizations that endorsed the Joint Statement of general principles support these specific legislative proposals.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of programs cited in the proposed legislation include teacher mentoring and collaboration, leadership training for school administrators, parent education and mentoring, and adult literacy programs. State and local authorities would be held accountable for instituting and sustaining these *capacity building* programs.

school, and kindergarten education, the availability of adequate health and prenatal care, preventive and routine pediatric, dental, and optometric services as well as access to libraries, academic arts and after school and summer programs for children and youth. *BBA* unequivocally rejects “narrowly defined academic remediation aimed at boosting standardized test scores.”

*BBA* makes the argument that national assessment is essential in order to provide the public, parents, and elected officials with the information needed to correct problems and address concerns. Schools they say should be held accountable for providing “a broad range of knowledge and skills individuals need to be successful. *BBA* soundly rejects sole reliance on standardized test scores to assess a school’s contribution “to the full range of student outcomes.”

*While FEA* is highly critical of NCLB testing provisions it accepts as a given the need for federally controlled national testing. *FEA* asserts that NCLB can be fixed while *BBA* rejects the current system in no uncertain terms. “The federal government should cease attempting to micromanage accountability for the performance of all 100,000 schools nationwide and, *the federal government is incapable of developing assessment policies that serve the multiplicity of situations across this Nation and the wide diversity of students.*’ [Italics added]

There are two parts to *BBA*’s assessment proposal. The first is aimed at greatly improving the quality of information about children and youth currently collected by the federal government by consolidating information (public health and crime statistics, for example) now gathered by a bevy of federal agencies and departments, updating and expanding *NAEP*, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal program of educational assessment established in 1965 best known for its use by the U.S. Department of Education for its biennial National Report Card. *NAEP* has in recent years also been used (inappropriately) as the standard to ‘calibrate,’ adjust, and compare state, national, and international test results. *NAEP* assessments are structured not to assess individual students, teachers or schools, but scientifically drawn samples of student populations within states. *NAEP* as currently constructed is unusable for imposing punitive sanctions on specific individuals or institutions. *BBA* would preserve *NAEP* “low stakes status” and make several changes that include administering and reporting test results yearly (rather than biennially), increasing sample sizes, broadening student samples with respect to race, ethnicity and mental and physical disabilities. *BBA* proposes also to expand the areas assessed by *NAEP*, to include not only the standard school subjects but “student work habits, physical health and fitness, mental health, citizenship habits [and] other appropriate behaviors that will enable students to achieve success in a pluralistic society and complex global economy.”

*BBA*’s second major proposal is far more ambitious. It would replace the current NCLB national testing regulations with an entirely new nationwide system of ‘inspectorates’ modeled after those in England, the Netherlands and numerous other nations. The proposed ‘inspectorates’ would be subsidized in part by federal dollars but created and operated by the states subject to federal oversight. Inspectorates would conduct periodic school visitations and issue evaluation reports that “identify the merits of districts and schools, and trigger intervention by state education departments and school districts to guide reform in areas needing remediation.” Information would be gathered using “qualitative and quantitative methods” and

employ “human judgment.” Inspectorates would be expected to use “trained inspectors”, and to assess not only basic academic skills, [but also] aspects of the development of the whole person that are within the scope of a school’s responsibilities, including physical health, character, social development, and citizenship skills . . .” Federal incentives would also be used to underwrite development of “higher quality” assessments.

*BBA* is mute on how this new system of State Inspectorates would come into being, except to note it must be gradual and require planning and significant resources. *BBA* concludes its assessment proposals with an urgent appeal that “continuing our present accountability policy . . . cannot be justified and the time to begin is now.”

The chances are slim that *BBA*’s or any major structural change of this magnitude will be undertaken by the Obama Administration or any administration Republican or Democratic. Arne Duncan, a signatory of the *BBA* assessment proposals, has had ample opportunity to use his position to undo or diminish the damage of the ‘overemphasis on standardized testing’ and to advance the *BBA* assessment agenda he once endorsed and now forswears. Duncan and Obama not only embrace NCLB’s federalized system of testing and sanctions; they press for policies that consolidate and extend centralized government control over curriculum and teachers, and hasten the pace of privatizing public education.

#### The *Forum for Education and Democracy* (*FED*)

The *FED* calls NCLB, a failure with these words:

The path we have taken in educational reform has led us astray. Inequities in educational opportunity have increased, public commitment to democracy has waned, and the scope of education has narrowed . . . The federal strategy of attempting to improve schools through mandates and sanctions cannot get us where we need to go. (p. iv)

The *Forum for Education and Democracy* calls for a fundamental change in direction for the federal education policy, one that abandons the effort to reform school by federal fiat tied to punitive sanctions.

[T]here is no one-size-fits-all plan for improving and supporting public schools; it is the conversations in our neighborhoods and communities that are most important. You, your neighbors, the teachers in your town or city – you are the people who can best design school reform strategies that work for your children, and create, nurture, and support high quality schools across the country.

The Conveners of The *Forum* believe that every community is entitled to receive from our federal government the supports that make an equitable, high quality education possible for all children. While it is fundamentally the role of states and locales to support schools, the role the federal government can play is crucial. *It should not, however, be the role that has been played over the past decade—that of dictating classroom practices, micromanaging curricular and teaching decisions, and dictating assessment practices.* [Italics added] . . . The legitimate federal role in public education is to insure that all of our children have equal access to public schooling.

The *Democracy and Education Forum* sets four priorities for this new federal education policy. The first echoes *BBA*'s proposals urging the federal government to address the growing need for basic social and healthcare services and to ensure that all schools 'have the human and physical capital they require to serve all children including those with disabilities or a history of discrimination.' Like *FEA* and *BBA*, the *Forum for Education and Democracy* calls for creating an *opportunity index* (or *opportunity standards*) that would indicate the availability of fully qualified school staff, adequate curriculum resources and physical facilities. The *Forum for Democracy* would link federal support to a state's progress toward meeting *opportunity standards*.

The second *FED* priority is to greatly improve the recruitment, education, and retention of teachers and school administrators through a variety of incentives including scholarships, intensive programs for 'high need' communities, providing teachers and other school professionals with sustained, practice-based professional development, mentoring and coaching programs for novice teachers, enhancing the opportunities for accomplished teachers to share their knowledge with colleagues.

*FED*'s third priority is for government to make significant investment in educational research, and development and innovation. The *FED* Report notes that federal expenditures on research by the Department of Education amounts to 0.2% of the federal research budget and recommends a minimum of 1% of the national education budget (approximately 4 billion dollars) be allocated to "build knowledge and practice." Two thirds of the total would be directed at increasing the capacities of state education agencies, regional educational laboratories and local districts to conduct applied research, disseminate best practices, and build strong data systems and assessments that are directly related to improving learning. Among the major areas that need to be addressed are recent advances in cognitive sciences, children's and adolescents social and emotional learning and development; the application of the new digital information technologies to all aspects of schooling. A substantial portion of R&D expenditures would be directed to the improvement of educational assessments and testing, to replacing conventional standardized tests with assessments that "motivate student involvement, improve teaching and foster higher order learning and student civic engagement." *FED* also proposes changes in National Assessment of Educational Progress (*NAEP*) so that "it more closely resembles the original *NAEP* which did not rely as so heavily on standardized test technology [as is now the case] but on qualitative 'performance assessments.'"

The *Forum for Education and Democracy*'s fourth federal policy priority is to foster the engagement of communities in their public schools. "Democracy has a stake in bringing people together around their public schools to allow sharing of experiences, and the building of a larger common ground." The *Forum* proposes a series of measures that if integrated into ESEA would facilitate and subsidize "authentic" family and community engagement in public schools and ..."place schools at the center of community education." One proposal would require employers to provide a paid half day each year to parents in order to meet and consult with their children's teachers. Others include subsidizing collaborative programs with libraries, and school-based wellness centers, providing resources for translators for non-English speaking students and parents, extending opportunities for community education and integrated job training, and "stimulating inquiry at each level of the system."

## Commentary

*FEA*'s legislative proposals are consistent with its announced goal to mend NCLB. *FEA* accepts NCLB's goals of educational excellence and equality but aims to fix or ameliorate its worst mistakes, by making assessment rules more reasonable – allowing more flexibility and exemptions for particular categories of students; requiring less frequent testing; encouraging use of qualitative assessments; and replacing the arbitrary and unattainable 2014 deadline for 100% proficiency with attainable goals and NCLB's punitive sanctions with positive 'capacity building' programs.

Several *FEA*'s proposals if adopted would mitigate some of the more blatant injustices inflicted by NCLB's national testing regulations. But the heart of NCLB, a federal system of national testing is left unchallenged. Rendering ESEA's current testing provisions less toxic would be an advance in that it would improve the school lives and prospects of many deserving children and families. But *FEA* appears to accept as a given the shift in power to the center brought on by a federalized system of *national testing* that diminishes democracy by diminishing or ignoring the voices and concerns of teachers, principals, parents, and their children.

While *FEA* proposes use of 'qualitative' alternatives to standardized testing it unfortunately adds two conditions that greatly diminish or negate their usefulness: (1) Alternative assessments may account for no more than twenty-five percent of the total assessment of school quality. [Why 25%?] (2) Alternative assessments must be capable of reporting results or "outcomes" in terms that can be converted to numerical scales. *FEA* also attaches strings to federal funding for local *capacity building* programs. For example, should a federally funded local *capacity building* 'parent involvement' group fail to meet its goals (which are locally set but must have federal approval) it can be disbanded and/or its management subcontracted to an entity approved by federal officials?

*FEA*'s proposal to install *opportunity standards* and sanctions for states that fail to meet them is its most radical proposal. Some form of this proposal is included in the three proposals. It is also the proposal that will almost certainly be ignored. The politics of austerity prevails in Washington with no sign that Obama, or the Congressional Democratic Party leadership will address the Nation's outrageous inequalities, the fact that according to recent US Census data one in five American children lives in poverty and with few exceptions attend deteriorated, resource-starved, and understaffed schools.

As I write it appears unlikely that a fully reauthorized ESEA will soon emerge from a dysfunctional Congress. We do know with some certainty that both President Obama and Secretary Duncan embrace the corporate agenda, support curriculum standardization and increased centralized control. The '*No Child Left Behind*' slogan has been forsaken but its chief legacy -- national testing coupled to federal sanctions and incentives--lives on stronger than ever. Duncan remains a champion of increased federal incentives for creating "charter schools" which are *de facto* selective private schools supported with public funds, and fostering corporate for-profit management of schools and delivery of educational goods and services. It is also possible that to mollify its liberal base --teachers unions, children's, and disability advocates, civil rights groups-- the Democratic leadership will extract some modest concessions and adopt several changes to assessment policies advocated by *FEA* and others. But it is also clear that the structural changes proposed by the *Bigger Bolder Approach* and the *Forum for Education and Democracy*, and significant public investment in community health and other social services for children and

families; for installing *opportunity standards* with teeth are dead in the water. At least for now.

The *Occupy* movement has radically shifted the dialogue over public policy. The movement aims at nothing less than a democratic transformation of American political, economic, and cultural life. This is not merely a change in consciousness or attitude. It is certainly that, but required also is a material *shift of power* from government and the corporate elite to the ‘grassroots’. *Occupy* has energized vast numbers of people who share the view that people’s needs and concerns are routinely ignored by our politicians who are beholden to the 1%. They demand redress and a positive voice in shaping their and their children’s lives and futures, including how our children are educated and who has access to vocational education, community colleges, and universities without accumulating years of indebtedness. The 1% is not likely to yield control without a long and arduous struggle. How the *occupy* movement will evolve and effect public education and federal state and local education policies in the short or longer run is of course unknown. What we do know for certain is that there can be no transformation of public education, no power shift to students, teachers, parents and local community members without basic changes in the system of educational accountability and assessment.

Harold Berlak is an independent researcher residing in Oakland CA. [hberlak@yahoo.com](mailto:hberlak@yahoo.com) 1-12