Has NCTE been led down the standards yellow brick road? Pat Shannon thinks so

In the movie Network (Gottfried & Lumet, 1988), Howard Beale asks viewers to stick their heads out the window and yell, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it any longer." His anger comes from watching the network's leadership drag his beloved institution, TV news, toward irrationality in the pursuit of maximizing profits. I share some of this frustration because the Goals 2000 juggernaut seems to be swelling its opposition whole. As a literacy teacher, I'm mad as hell at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) for taking wrong step after wrong step in the pursuit of someone else's agenda and, along the way, diminishing its potential impact on schools and society. Where once NCTE showed courage and leadership on textbooks, grammar teaching, and class size, it now shows timidity and opportunism as it perpetuates the myth of public school inadequacy in the corporate political project to maximize profits and protect privilege in America.

NCTE, a professional education association with approximately 90,000 members (mostly secondary English teachers, with many elementary school teachers and some university faculty), is now putting the finishing touches on a "going-it-alone" project to write standards of various types for English language arts (a part of the National Education Goal #3). The project is funded by $500,000 from NCTE and the same amount from the International Reading Association ("NCTE/IRA Say Standards Effort Will Continue," 1994). This funding raises many questions for me, a member of both organizations for 12 years and who has served on several committees as a volunteer. For starters—where did these member-supported groups find such large sums of money on such short notice? How did we spend this $1.000,000? How much more money does NCTE have available for other large projects? Why doesn't the membership know that its organization is so flush that the leadership can simply write a check for half a million dollars? I never realized that our non-profit organization was so... well, so profitable.

NCTE is going it alone because the federal government wouldn't continue to fund the original IRA, NCTE, and Center for the Study of Reading Joint English Language Arts Standards Project. The government withheld almost half of the initial allotment and canceled their second installment of over a million dollars. A government official reported the reason for the cancellation of funding was the lack of "expected progress" toward promised goals (Diegmueller, 1994). At the time of the announcement, David Pearson from the Center for the Study of Reading and a director of the project was quoted as responding, "I thought we were developing these standards for kids, their parents, and their teachers" (Diegmueller, 1994, p. 9). Firing the standards developers is unprecedented among the federally funded standards projects in other disciplines. For example, although the history standards have been labeled a national disgrace by the popular media (e.g., Elson, 1994) and denounced in the Congressional Record (1995), the National Center for History in Schools at UCLA received their full million-and-a-half from the government.

To my knowledge, and I was Director of the NCTE Commission on Reading at the time, NCTE had not considered the possibility of developing standards of any variety before the federal request for proposals to do so. After the government brought the subject up, however, the NCTE leadership "discovered" a consensus among its membership that favored standards. The membership was told in open forums at both its Louisville and Pittsburgh annual conferences that having the federal funding as well as the membership's mandate gave the standards project both political and professional legitimacy. The NCTE leadership told us it was imperative that we participate in developing national standards because the government and the public wanted them, someone else would do it anyway, there was money in it now and later and these standards could be used by society's have-nots to protect themselves against schools that won't teach (Myers, 1993). Furthermore, the leadership said that the Department of
Education put no contingencies on the funding. In Louisville, Miles Myers (1993), Executive Director of NCTE, reported, "We are free to write the standards as we see fit, and if the membership doesn't like the standards, we can reject them." (p 24) Chair of the English Standards Board, Janet Emig (1993), stated, "No federal body can legislate our success or failure." (p 40) However, we are now expected to forget those initial remarks as NCTE strives only for professional legitimacy because the withdrawal of funding has thoroughly discredited this organization in the political arena.

The issue of the national standards originated in the Bush administration’s "America 2000," a document negotiated at the National Center of Education and the

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Economy by Hillary Rodham Clinton; Ray Marshall, former Secretary of Labor; then-governors James Hunt and Thomas Kean; then CEOs Kay Whitmore, David Kearn, and John Sculley of Kodak, Xerox, and Apple, respectively; and David Rockefeller, Jr (Noble, 1994). The original work was sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, which funded previous controversial projects resulting in Carnegie units, the Educational Testing Service, and the A Nation Prepared report (Carnegie Foundation on Education and the Economy, 1986). The National Center group began their deliberations with a questionable assumption about schooling, and they used a curious logic to arrive at the conclusion that a lack of educational standards is what is ailing our nation's economy (Weisman, 1991).

According to this group at the National Center, schools are tied directly to America's economic competitiveness because the U.S. must create a work force that is highly skilled, flexible, and able to think for a living (Reich, 1991). Business can't accomplish this for itself because of unions, ignorant workers, and the expense. However, reformed schools can prepare new workers who can shift from one productive organization to another in order to overcome the threat of low wages. Unless schools are willing to adopt business principles of standards for students, efficiencies of organization, and accountability for teachers, Americans lifestyles will decline, as the title of the National Center's Commission on Work Force Skill's (1990) report states: America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages. According to this report, schools need high, tightly organized standards and testing in science and mathematics in order to adapt to the "realities" of today's world. Standards in English language arts are also needed to ensure that everyone is able to read and write sufficiently to retrain for different organizational and production requirements when necessary.

With mounting trade imbalances, national debt, and factory closings, as well as decreasing wages, employment, and leisure, it's easy for anyone to recognize that something is wrong with the U.S. economy (Bartlett & Steele, 1992). With a virtual blackout on critical analysis of our economy (Jensen, 1994), it is more difficult for many of us to understand what's causing these problems. Placing the blame on schooling, however, is another matter altogether ("The Battle for Public Schools," 1992). Using any reliable or comprehensive data, it's not at all easy to make the case that schools are failing to deliver on their traditional goals (see Berliner & Biddle, 1995, for the United States, and Barlow & Robertson, 1994, for Canada). In fact, most Americans believe that their local schools are, at least, pretty good (Elaem, Rose, & Gallup, 1993). This finding holds across race and social class stratification, although it does vary in spots. In order to offset blame for the economy and credit it for its possible improvement, the public had to be taught that schools don't work in their current forms. Beginning with A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983) and continuing through to the Educate America Act of the Clinton administration, business leaders, government officials, and news pundits have delivered that message through all available media. Using questionable arguments about both business needs and school performance, they call for increased school efficiency, higher demands in curricula, and improvements in teachers' knowledge and dedication (Noble, 1992). To induce agreement, corporations, philanthropic organizations, and state and federal departments of labor and education offer educators cash incentives through grants to buy this line of goods (McCollum-Clark, 1995).

Along the way, those corporations and organizations even use the language of progressive education to position naysayers as defenders of the status quo in failed schools. For example, Mark Tucker from the National Center for Education and the Economy, and Ray Marshall, Former Secretary of Labor and current Carnegie Foundation Trustee, state, "What employers need now are workers who bring the kinds of skills that
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progressive educators have always said they wanted to develop in their students. The demand for a highly skilled work force is in fact a call for educators to realize what have always been their highest aspirations" (Tucker & Marshall, 1992, p. 82) This has become the official position of the federal government during the Bush and Clinton administrations, and its pro-business, high-tech stance, and skills rhetoric are likely to increase in intensity with the Republican control of the House of Representatives and Senate.

As compelling as this logic may seem and this rhetoric may sound, the facts suggest that the logic, assumptions, and information that underlie the standards movement in English language arts and other subjects are wrong. American competitiveness in international markets does not suffer from an unprepared work force (McKinsey Global Institute, 1992). Rather, it suffers from corporations that put their own immediate profitability over the welfare of the nation and its citizens (Mishel & Teixeira, 1991; Weisman, 1993). That is, 95% of American businesses organize their workplace along the lines of classic Taylorism, with low-skill and low-wage jobs. Even the National Center's Commission on Work Force Skills admitted as much in their America's Choice report (1990). Despite government pronouncements and the subsequent media blitz to the contrary, there are very few high-skill, high-wage jobs available in this economy (Kilborn, 1995; Richman, 1993). Richard Rothstein (1993) estimates that high skills will be required of only 20% of the work force well into the 21st century and that U.S. colleges and universities already graduate 30% of Americans under 25. More than half of all new jobs created during the Reagan-Bush-Clinton years have been part-time, insecure, or low-wage employment (Kilborn, 1993). According to government statistics, for every computer programmer job created, the economy creates nine new cashier jobs (Fiske, 1989). Employers desire punctuality, sobriety, and compliance most in their employees and value knowledge of mathematics, natural science, and foreign languages least (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1991). In fact, companies are not clamoring for high academic standards, nor are they eager to pay high wages to anyone but executives (Bok, 1993).

As David Berliner and Bruce Biddle (1995) detail, schools are not the failures that business, government, and the media have painted them to be. Student scores have not fallen through the floor (in fact, they are making steady gains); funding for schooling has not kept pace with other institutions and money does make a difference in what happens in schools (in real dollars teachers’ salaries are close to what they were in the 1970s); and students do seem to be prepared, even over-prepared, for the jobs that are available to them (unemployment for workers 18 to 25 years old is approaching 25%). If truth be told, the connection between schooling and the economy is at an all-time low. Additional schooling can’t promise a student a better job, steady employment, or even higher wages (Bernstein & Mishel, 1992) because the economy is not able to keep these promises, regardless of school standards or student achievement (Aronowitz, 1994).

Finally, the liberal belief that standards will somehow arm society’s have-nots so that they can defend themselves against discrimination in schools is na"ive (Shannon, 1995b). On the 40th anniversary of Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 1954, and considering the unsuccessful subsequent challenges to desegregate urban schools (see, for example, Milliken v. Bradley, 1969) and to equalize funding among districts (see San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez, 1968), can we really say that the law has ended or significantly reduced the savage inequalities (Kozol, 1992) of schooling in this country? As Derrick Bell (1992) tells us, the Brown decision has been used creatively to ensure that these inequalities continue. Note the strange logic now being used that Affirmative Action in employment introduced preferential treatment according to race, ethnicity, and gender into a country that only 30 years ago had signs stating, “No Blacks Need Apply,” that today proposes identification cards for Latino workers, and that still won’t acknowledge a glass ceiling for women in business. Self-interest, apparently, can erase the potential benefits of any humanitarian policy. We can’t legislate morality because abstract policies and laws do not overcome deeply held biases based on the lived experience of officials, teachers, or anyone else.

If not intended to create a highly skilled, highly paid work force; to fix failing schools; or to legislate against racism, then what are the standards and Goals 2000 movements all about? I see them as parts of a coordinated effort by corporations in America to discredit public schools in order to reduce the costs of social services in the United States and, thereby, significantly reduce the tax burden on businesses. Standards, vouchers, two-tiered certification, privatization, block grants, reductions in enrollments due to IQ qualifications and citizenship status, and total quality management are all pointed at public schools like loaded guns ready to rob them of the few resources they have. If school curricula are reduced to standards; if per pupil costs can be cut to a national average; if an elite, well-paid cadre of master
teachers can oversee a low-paid teacher core; if parts of or most school functions can be subcontracted to private businesses; if federal funds can be reduced, lumped into discretionary grants, and allocated only to some schools; if students with low IQs, students without citizenship papers, or repeat failures of national exams can be cut from student bodies; or if schools use

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"strategic planning" to direct their resources only to the most "productive units" of schooling, then the costs of schools can be significantly reduced. Coupled with welfare limits, social security benefit taxation, and workman's compensation reform, government can spend much less on social programs; and they can cut corporate and, perhaps, individual property taxes. Of course, the reduced corporate taxes are supposed to increase business investment and jobs, and the benefits will then trickle down to the rest of us—but we've been through that before, eh?

Right from the beginning the NCTE leadership chose the road too often traveled by accepting the corporate money, assumption, and logic in the hopes that they could be influence in school reform. Of course, they had other options. They could have asked the membership to use their considerable talents and resources to inform the public about the economy, schools, and institutional biases. However, once the leadership took the federal money, the membership's options for resistance and action were significantly reduced. The second misstep came when the leadership failed to make a public stink about the political squeeze in which they found themselves when they submitted their preliminary standards to the government. If the government could determine that the joint project was not making "expected progress," then the government had expectations for the standards from the start. That is, the English language arts standards were always politically motivated. Now, through a convoluted process that ended with one man sitting in a hotel room drafting

the final version (McCollum-Clark, 1995), NCTE has written professional, not national, standards that the federal government has already found lacking. In short the government finessed the NCTE leadership. Once the NCTE leadership agreed to produce standards, the government would get what it wanted—either through NCTE's producing acceptable standards or through discrediting the professional organization and standards and finding another, more politicized agency to produce them. No matter how good the NCTE Standards for English Language Arts may seem, they can only serve the corporate unreality rather than the reality of America's children. Why is the NCTE leadership taking us down this path?

If NCTE wants to help teachers of English at all levels, the membership must decide what type of future we want for ourselves and our children. If we seek a future that values people over corporations, then we must become mad as hell about this corporate hoax, and we must expose it by using the literacy and teaching talents at our disposal. A start would be for the leadership to admit that it was wrong about the government's intentions richt from the start and wrong about the likely consequences of writing standards—a reduced emphasis on English language arts, reduced resources for teachers in general, and reduced control over what and how we teach. A second step might be to show that we are not going to take it anymore by redirecting what

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shops to help kindergarten students deal with their feelings about the Persian Gulf War; or Jim Hubbard (1992), who supplied cameras and expertise to homeless children and allowed them to “shoot back” at the world that neglects them. Such efforts attack personally held social biases at the immediate level of lived experiences, and they might just reclaim our teaching lives from corporate America, which now holds NCTE and public schools in the palm of its hand.

Although we may be unsure of ourselves, confused about what to do, and worried that we don’t have every detail worked out ahead of time, NCTE members should follow the thinking of A. J. Muste, an American labor, civil rights, and peace activist, who asked us: Make up your mind and act while your actions might make a difference.

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