Reading Around Reading Education:
Trying to Understand Federal Policy Change

Patrick Shannon
PENN STATE UNIVERSITY

Kenneth Goodman
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Introduction
We think that the reading fold is at a critical juncture. President Obama has made some moves that imply that mistakes were made through NCLB, while being explicit that he doesn't understand reading, learning, and teaching very well. The spaces created by his mixed messages afford reading educators opportunities to insert themselves into this unfolding of reading education policy in order to discuss and build a better foundation for reading education in public schools. In order to inform those opportunities, we take the practice of reading around a subject from Kate Atkinson's 2008 novel, *When Will There Be Good News*. At the IRA convention in Chicago 2010, we spoke from research reports and other sources that do not often appear in mainstream conversations about reading education, which seem to us to be too focused on technical matters without enough regard for rationales, evidence, and consequences. We believe that these reports can help teacher educators and other teachers in our efforts to be heard.

The Baggage of NCLB

In "The Wizard of Oz," Dorothy is told, "It ain't enough to know where you want to go. You gotta know where you're coming from." Who better to explain where we come from with No Child Left Behind than two former Assistant Secretaries of Education? In the June 8, 2008 issue of *Time Magazine*, Claudia Wells interviews Susan Neuman, who worked briefly in the Bush II Administration.

...many early critics insisted that No Child Left Behind was nothing more than a cynical plan to destroy American faith in public education and open the way to vouchers and school choice. Now a former official in Bush's Education Department is giving at least some support to that notion. Susan Neuman, a professor of Education at the University of Michigan, was and still is a fervent believer in the goals of NCLB. And she says the President and then Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, were too. But there were others in the Department, according to Neuman, who saw NCLB as a Trojan Horse for the choice agenda - a way to expose the failure of public education and "blow it up a bit," she says. "There were a number of people pushing hard for market forces and privatization."

Neuman warns that we should be wary of forces of privatization within Obama's Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of ESEA.

Diane Ravitch worked for the first Bush Administration. In 2005, she wrote in favor of NCLB. "We should thank President George W. Bush and Congress for passing the No Child Left Behind Act... All this attention and the focus is paying off for younger students, who are reading and solving mathematics problems better than their parents' generation." In her recent best selling *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch (2010) takes an almost opposite view of NCLB.

I went to a conference at the American Enterprise Institute,...[that] examined whether the major remedies prescribed by NCLB -- especially choice and after-school tutoring, were effective... It became clear that NCLB remedies were not working. Students were offered the choice to go to another school, and they weren't accepting the offer. They were offered free tutoring, and 80 percent or more turned it down... Under NCLB, the federal government was dictating inefficient remedies, which had no track record of success. Neither Congress nor the U.S. Department of Education knows how to fix low-performing schools. What I learned that day fundamentally changed my view of No Child Left Behind. I started to doubt the entire approach to school reform that NCLB represented. I realized that that incentives and sanctions were not the right levers to improve education; incentives and sanctions may be right for business organizations, where the bottom line -- profit -- is the highest priority, but they are not right for schools. I started to see the danger of the culture of testing that was spreading through every school, community, town, city, and state... As time went by, I came to realize that the sanctions embedded in NCLB were, in fact, not only ineffective but certain to contribute to the privatization of large chunks of public education.

Ravitch suggests that neither government nor business knows how to help low performing schools because they seek simple solutions to complex problems, and they use the wrong metaphors when thinking about schooling.
There should not be an education marketplace; there should be no competition... Schools should operate fundamentally—a school should operate like a family. The fundamental principle by which education proceeds is collaboration.... Teachers are supposed to share what works; schools are supposed to get together and talk about what's been successful for them. They're not supposed to compete with their trade secrets and have a survival of the fittest competition with the school down the block.

Race to the Top

Yet despite Ravitch's concern, President Obama from the moment he took office asked a metaphor—Race to the Top. This competition pits states against one another to develop new plans to raise underachieving schools through innovation, collective standards, and a common assessment. This framework is unfortunate for at least three reasons. First, the assumption that market competition and injurious change has proved questionable even in the world economy. According to the Federal Fiscal Crisis Inquiry Commission (2010), the collapse of Wall Street Banks and financial institutions demonstrates that individuals' choices were not always rational or for the common good as promised in the market solution metaphor. In fact, many innovative investments were designed for some to get rich quick at the expense of common welfare (Think mortgages, which proved the financial ruin of many banks).

According to the Obama Administration, charter schools are the competitive mechanism for innovation in public education. Yet, the State Department (2007) on charter schools suggests that this faith in charter schools is contrary to evidence. In the eight states that Rand studied, there was no evidence that charter schools were achieving increases in student achievement in five states and negative effects in two. Moreover, charter schools did not compete with innovation leading to change in local schools. While there certainly are some effective charter schools, there are many questions about the effectiveness of all of them. They are not the evidence-based solution sought with fervor by many philanthropic organizations.

Second, common standards do not guarantee common results. Leading the way toward innovation in Race to the Top is the new common core standards that will provide a national measure of quality control. Common standards and assessment are deemed necessary because of the folly in many states that claim student reading proficiency rates to be in 20th and 30th percentiles for those states who do not have standards. The National Assessment of Educational Progress indicates proficiency rates to be in 20th and 30th percentiles for those states who do not have standards. The National Assessment of Educational Progress indicates proficiency rates to be in 20th and 30th percentiles for those states who do not have standards. The Nation's report card, Students Sounds Good, But Doesn't Work—And Why We Keep On Doing It Anyway, the Civil Rights Project at UCLA found little evidence that standards would lead to improvements in student achievement. Standards, standards aligned instruction, and testing raise student test scores consistently. In fact, even the targeted interventions in reading achievement are questioned. The Reading First Initiative: Final Report (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009) found no significant difference on comprehension between third grade students enrolled in Reading First Programs featuring the theory that automatic decoding necessarily improves comprehension. Despite some protests over the Re- plication methods, the previous head of the Institute for Edu- cation Sciences (Whiteshurstry, 2009) seemed to think it prudent to be proud of spending six billion dollars on a program with no significant results. Whiteshurstry concluded that the Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) argued that the Race to the Top provisions for high stakes testing are more stringent than those in NCLB. NCLB increased emphasis on alternative assessments. Because the states had yet to develop a comprehensive testing system, the notion was that the states could drop nearly 20 percent nationally and much higher in most urban and rural areas (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). In fact, raising the bar seems the opposite of equity and opportunity for all. Isn’t the bar raised to eliminate competitors? There is an inherent contradiction between market competition and innovation on the one hand and excellence and narrowing objectives on the other.

The common core curriculum of standards is that there is a segment of knowledge in any subject area that must be learned in a specific sequence at each successive grade—not before and not after. Yet, there is little evidence to support this simplistic view. Rather the common core conception is that a network of information is taught at each grade level to build proficiency to the next. This in no way “evidence regarding what students must know and be able to do at each grade level to be on track to grade form high school, college and career readiness. Such standards are to be based upon the assertion that NCLB, which is intended to provide the information they need to determine whether their students are on track to college-and-career readiness and to evaluate their schools’ effectiveness. State will continue to implement state standards and aligned assessments in specific grade spans, and may include such assessments—as well as statewide assessments in other subjects, such as history—in their accountability systems. Finally, states will develop state standards and aligned assessments for English learners, aligned so that they reflect the academic language necessary to master the content standards. Perhaps you can see that this paragraph serves many agen- das. Despite the lofty goals of equity implied in this statement, the Race to the Top provisions for high stakes testing typically means more income for individuals, the remark neglects history, and the diversity of communities they serve. Some students might not wish to be scientists or historians. Narrowing the objectives to a much smaller group than they are set to turn around the critical failures in NCLB. The road is to the nextAuthorized by an act of Congress. The Racial and/or Tribal designation typically means more income for individuals, the remark neglects history, and the diversity of communities they serve. Some students might not wish to be scientists or historians. Narrowing the objectives to a much smaller group than they are set to turn around the critical failures in NCLB. The road is to the next.
Legitimate ranks American schooling 37th in the world. The 2007 Report in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) reported that the American fourth grade students tied for 37th in its examination. However, these rankings are deceiving — not because they are inaccurate — but because they hide the fact that we have two school systems in the U.S. — one for the white and middle class and another for people of color. The whole, middle class school system scored above all countries on the PIRLS test and the other fell somewhere near the bottom. The 2009 Poverty and Potential Report from the Education and Pub- lic Interest Center argues that the Little Engine that Could metaphor cannot unite the two systems because federal and state laws tend to deal effectively with poverty outside of school, and the effects of poverty are consider- able. "Children being poverty induced physical, sociologi- cal, and psychological problems in school which suppress their educational performance." Poverty means low birth weight, inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, food insecurity, and potential pollution, inadequate be- havior, and employment and income related stress within the family and community.

According to psychologist Richard Nisbett (2009) and epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010), poverty suppresses school performance. Nisbett argues that at the top of the economic scale, nearly 75 per- cent of variation in intelligence and achievement is due to genetic influences. At poverty levels, however, less than 20 percent of the variation in intelligence and achievement is cause by genetic endowment. At the top, biological factors cause differences however, at the bottom, environmental factors such as insufficient healthcare, shelter, income and safety—cause most of the differences. Wilkinson and Pickett explain that just the stress of poverty alone floods the body with hormones that hinder memory, problem solving, and judgment. If the revision of ESEA is to be evidence based, then the U.S. system is not working and rising more rapidly within the suburbs than cities or rural. According to 2008 statistics, over 40 million Americans lived below the pov- erty line ($22,000 for a family of four) and as an additional 32 million lived on less that $44,000 (called the working poor by the U.S. Census Bureau). The dramatic recession, which has increased these numbers drastically in many parts of the country. But according to the Race to Be Better, the Blueprint and school teachers are no own in overcoming the challenges of poverty for equi-ntity in education.

Building a New Foundation

The pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides an opportunity for reas- sessment of the recent iteration of that law — No Child Left Behind. The report card is not pretty. Important advocates of No Child Left Behind have recently been quoted as saying that the start was intended to cordon up support for public education, and that it was wrong in its assumptions that the market and business logic would transfer easily to schools and children's learning. Independent reports suggest that privatization, charters, single-minded commitment to a "no excuses" mindset, and disincentives for impoverished schools, and standards, standards, aligned teaching, and high stakes testing were cobbled together to build systems of education in the United States. Moreover, the NCLB is so isolated schools and teachers as responsible for that dual system of schooling has been shown to be a political, and not a research, agenda.

Although the comparisons and direction of Race to the Top and the Blueprint seem much the same as there are so few in which educators and teachers could step in to build a better foundation for reading education than the one that remains from NCLB. Florida teachers recontextualized the positioning of the Little Engine that Could metaphor within their state's legislation to make them solely responsible for the outcomes of the two school systems in the United States. Their efforts to encourage Governor Crist to veto the bill only to see their tenure demonstrate how teachers can organize to defend themselves. Like bunkers, doctors, lawyers and legislators, teachers take the complexity of their work to be un- supported and supported systematically.

Teachers and education professional organizations are already organizing to make changes to the language of the Blueprint, but we hope that the success in Florida will inspire other groups of teachers to organize around the central problems of persistent poverty and other- ties of the dual system of education in the United States. In the poor soil of poverty, minds are not able to grow as they do in richer soil and NCLB, of course, one of antipoverty work is local, and there are agencies and orga- nizations of all types that work to shape the conditions and consequences of poverty. It should be noted however, that the ESEA was originally part of the War on Pov- erty at its inception and that it was supported with nation al programs to directly address poverty in the pol- icy and income of the poor. According to the report from the Education and the Public Interest Center, that coordinated and worked to develop a piece of legislation that closed the gap between the two systems before the Vietnam War, Oil embargo, and Reaganaomics started that agenda. In 2000, the Obama Administration recognized the NCLB mistakes of insisting on a single technological solution based on a single measure. Race to the Top and the Blueprint can address these inaccuracies that affect so many students and help the Blueprint achieve its goals.

Although some of these sentences have passive construc- tions, they convey a confident active voice that bankers, doctors and lawyers housing and education oratory and po- licy debates that surround their work. By reading around the subject of reading education, reading educators can inform them that reading programs should not be determined, but guided by research and the best interests of students who seek to use that authority. As the Communication im- plies, the new foundation of reading education should be the minds of reading educators.


