

THE ROTTEN APPLES
IN EDUCATION
AWARDS
FOR 2006

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INTRODUCTION

The Rotten Apple awards are somewhat abbreviated this year, not that there was a dearth of foolishness and malice abroad in the land. But facing an office that each day resembled more closely the floor-to-wall paper-stuffed house of the Collier brothers (remember when futurists promised us paperless office back in the Seventies?), I engaged in some non-selective paper-tossing and might well have eliminated some Rotten Apple source materials.

Also, a few worthies like Chris Doherty are omitted because they got sufficiently pummeled in the media already. Doherty, you will recall, referring to out-of-favor supplicants for Reading First funds said, “They are trying to crash our party and we need to beat the shit out of them in from of all the other would-be party crashers who are standing on the front lawn waiting to see how we welcome these dirtbags.” If Secretary Spellings ever follows up on the Inspector General’s report from which this quote was taken—and it’s not clear that she will—we might revisit the Reading First debacle.

Finally, I decided not to overlap the Bunkum Awards in this their maiden year. The Bunkums grew out of the Think Tank Review Project co-headquartered at Arizona State University and the University of Colorado at Boulder. The project serves to provide the peer review for some reports from some think tanks such as Manhattan, Heritage, Fordham, Heartland, etc. These institutions skip that part of the research-to-report cycle in favor of the immediacy of getting unchecked facts before the public and policy makers. Not terribly ethical, but sometimes politically effective.

Not many of the reports fare well when looked at objectively, although some do. Some of the reports, though, were so flawed that it appeared to co-directors Kevin Welner and Alex Molnar that they deserved recognition beyond the publication of the reviews themselves. Hence, the Bunkums.

The Bunkums will be at www.bunkumawards.com (also .org and .net). They should be available some time in February. After the awards are described, brief summaries of all thirteen reviews follow reporting what the studies attempted to show and how and why they failed.

Enjoy.

Jerry Bracey
January 2007

THE 99 AND 44/100ths PURE CRAP AWARD: SECRETARY OF EDUCATION MARGARET SPELLINGS

In “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell wrote, “When one watches some tired hack on the platform repeating the familiar phrases...one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy....” George Orwell was lucky. He never had to listen to Margaret Spellings. Our Lady of the Busted Metaphor can bring you down in a hurry with the inanities of what she says but even more in the realization that those inanities, emitted in mangled English, reflect how her brain works (“speaker sometimes deviates from text” it says at the beginning of some speeches). Herewith an annotated sampling.

“I talk about No Child Left Behind like Ivory Soap: It’s 99.9 percent pure. There’s not much needed in the way of change.” Teacher/author Debra Craig decided that Spellings was “99.9% delusional” while *Education Week* founder, Ron Wolk called the statement “99.9% bunk.” They’re both right.

If Spellings had said nothing else during the entire year, this comment and her trouncing on Celebrity Jeopardy would have secured her place in infamy (“I was shocked to discover that US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings is a moron,” wrote DC gossip blogger, Wonkette. What took you so long? Wonkette’s post elicited many very funny comments. My favorite: “She attempted to defend herself by explaining that she simply doesn’t test well. The value of providing ‘exact answers’ rather than ‘approximate possibilities in a conceptually acceptable range’ is highly overrated. She had still hoped to be socially promoted to co-champion”).

Alas, there is more, much more. Speaking at the NCLB “Summit” in Philadelphia, Spellings declared, “This law is helping us learn about what works in our schools. And clearly high standards and accountability are working. Over the last 5 years, our 9-year-olds have made more progress in reading than in the previous 28 combined.”

Except that those “last 5 years” are from NAEP trend data collected in 1999 and 2004, not in the Bush years of 2001 and 2006. So for three of those five years NCLB didn’t even exist. Maybe Bill Clinton deserves all the credit. Many state plans had not been approved by fall of the 2002-2003 so NCLB would have had only a few months in the 2003-2004 school year to work its wonders. I don’t think so.

“With this law,” Spellings said in the same speech, “we set a historic goal for our country: every child learning on grade level by 2014.” Nope. No matter how many times Spellings mutters “grade level” the law says “proficient.” The only meaningful, existing

definition of “grade level” is the score of the average child at a given grade. If the scores are distributed normally, and the tests from which the concept of grade was developed insured that they would be, then, by definition, at any given time, nationally, 50% of all students are below grade level. Some small, affluent districts might attain Lake Wobegon status, but nationally, half of all students are always below grade level. By definition.

There are other conceivable ways of defining grade level, but none of them would claim that all students could be there or better (unless grade level were defined by a number three standard deviations below the average (median)).

At the end of this speech—it was a doozy—Spellings described a visit she made with Bush to a middle school and reported that in science “The class was full of students asking “what if” questions. They had high expectations” (manifested by what?) and a lot of confidence and they knew they could make a difference” (as sixth graders???)

She wound up with this: “There are certain things you can’t teach in a classroom that our students already have—qualities like creativity, diversity, and entrepreneurship. Our job is to give them the knowledge and skills to compete.” This might likely be the first and only time that “diversity” has been described as a personal quality.

But if Spellings asserts that you can’t teach creativity or entrepreneurship, what does that say about how Spellings defines teaching? And how on earth did the kids “already have” these qualities? Is it something in the water?

In a June speech, Spellings said “I had a meeting with Thomas Friedman from the New York Times last week. And he told me the number one skill our children will need to survive in the flat world is learning to learn.” So the question is, Does she disregard what Friedman told her or does she actually think that NCLB will contribute to kids’ learning to learn? How dumb can you get?

She certainly knows how to motivate kids, though. At a speech to the PTA, she reported that once “my youngest daughter—typically an A or B student—brought home a D in science. I was mortified!” Why?

“What did I do? I went to her school and met with her teachers (??? The D was only in science. Apparently the daughter was not consulted about why it happened). I wanted to tackle the problem head-on. Afterwards, my daughter said to me, ‘I hated that you were in my school.’ I told her, ‘You get your grades, up and I’ll get out of your school.’”

“That’s the deal we made, and guess what? I haven’t had to visit her school for that reason since.” Maggie, you ever hear of intrinsic motivation?

Under Spellings, the U. S. Department of Education announced a proposed program to send students to private schools with publicly funded vouchers four days after her department released a study showing that private schools have an advantage on public

schools only because of how they select students—more rich kids, fewer poor kids, fewer minorities, fewer special education kids, and fewer English Language Learners. Similarly attempts to shore up charters were undercut by another department study indicating that public schools outperform them. New regulations favoring single-sex schools appeared not long after her department issued a huge report saying there was no evidence that single sex schools improve *anything*.

It is depressing to think that the stewardship of the federal department of education is in the hands of an idiot.

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THE HOLY COW AWARD:

BARBARA BUSH AND NEIL BUSH

People who do something extraordinary early in life often find it hard to deliver an appropriate encore. So it is with Neil Bush, the middle of the five Bush boys. Since he stuck American taxpayers with \$1 billion as his Silverado Savings & Loan collapsed, Neil has been looking for a good way of saying “I’m baaaaack.”

Not that life hasn’t been at least interesting for him. A semiconductor company managed by then-Chinese president Jiang Zemin paid him \$2 million as a consultant even though Bush admitted in court that he had no knowledge of semiconductors. Kopin Corporation, which makes LCD and other high-tech visual displays hired him as a consultant and gave him some stock options which he later used to make \$798,000, \$171,370 of it in a single day. No insider information involved, he said.

In “The Relatively Charmed Life of Neil Bush,” *Washington Post* reporter, Peter Carlson documented the unusual events of Neil’s life: “When you’re Neil Bush, you’ll be sitting in a hotel room in Thailand or Hong Kong, minding your own business, when suddenly there’s a knock at the door. You answer and a comely woman strolls in and has sex with you.” Bush admitted this to his wife’s attorney during their rather nasty divorce battle. Were they prostitutes, the attorney asked? Bush said he didn’t know—they never asked for money and he never paid them. Maybe he thinks all Asian hotels provide this service to all visitors.

As a child, Bush suffered from dyslexia and his son has learning difficulties, so in 1999 Bush decided to develop an educational software company, Ignite!Learning. His contacts in Japan, Taiwan, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, plus a relationship with Putin arch-enemy, billionaire Boris Berezovsky, allowed him to raise \$23 million. (One wonders if Dubya and Vlad the radioactive ever talk about the Neil-Boris connection).

Now he has hitched his wagon to a cow. More precisely, *the* COW, which stands for Curriculum on Wheels. It is purple.

Neil doesn’t think much of No Child Left Behind, saying its “reliance [on standardized tests] threatens to institutionalize bad teacher practices.” (Attention, Margaret Spellings). However, all of the materials I have seen at www.ignitelearning.com are fact-driven and tested with multiple choice questions. One wonders to what extent the tests have been examined for properties like reliability and validity.

COW also delivers whole-class instruction although it was designed to permit each child an individual path through the material. Ignite purchased its software from Adaptive Learning. “It breaks my heart what they have done. The concept [of adaptive programming] was totally perverted,” said Mary Schenk-Ross of Adaptive Learning.

“The original concept was to avoid ‘one size fits all.’ That was the point,” lamented Catherine Malloy, a programmer for the material.

As of October 2006, 13 U. S. school districts, mostly in Texas, had used NCLB funds to buy the COW at \$3880 a pop (Ignite claims 81 districts in all). The company estimates income for 2006 at \$5 million. Some of that money will come to him courtesy of his mother, Barbara, or “Bar” as Poppy calls her. Bar made a contribution to the Clinton Bush Katrina Fund—how much was never revealed—but specified that it had to be used to buy COWs. So she was really doling out money to her son and to herself—she and Poppy are investors in Ignite!

Shortly thereafter, Bar went to a Houston middle school and spent two hours championing the software. Some claimed the district violated its own policy by allowing a company to host a promotional event on campus.

That NCLB money would be used to buy COWs is curious. NCLB emphasizes only reading and mathematics. The COW’s udders contain instructional materials on neither, only social studies and science.

The money went to Houston area schools. Bar and Neil live in Houston. Neil had extracted money from HISD earlier. He had agreed to raise \$115,000 with a group of private businessmen for purple COWs. HISD would then match the money. Shortly after Mrs. Bush paid that visit to a middle school in Houston and promoted the software, HISD managed to find another \$200,000 for the machines. *Houston Chronicle* reporter, Jennifer Radcliffe, whose earlier articles had raised questions about the propriety of the donations, cast a definitely jaundiced eye at the transaction: “It seems it took only a few months for Barbara Bush’s visit to a Houston middle school, where she promoted her donation of her son’s software to a Hurricane Katrina relief fund, to pay off.”

Radcliffe’s report riled *Chronicle* editors. In the editorial, “Neil’s Deal,” they wrote “The Houston Independent School District board has authorized spending up to \$200,000 for educational software and projectors sold by a company founded by Neil Bush, the son of former President George and Barbara Bush. It’s a waste of tax dollars that doesn’t pass the smell test.”

“Critics complain that the Ignite computers and software are of questionable value, the contract was not competitively bid and the program was not adequately evaluated. Visitors to Ignite Learning’s Web site will tend to agree. The sample on display barely scrape the surface of the subject. Tariffs, for instance, are represented as a monster created by a mad scientist.”

“An eighth-grade student is quoted as saying how much he prefers looking at cartoons and singing songs to being taught by a teacher. *Quelle surprise*. The company claims its product makes connections between program content and students’ lives. Isn’t that the job of the teacher, who actually is acquainted with the students’ lives?”

Ooh, ooh, ooh, bad *Chronicle*.

The editorial not only elicited a defense of his company from Bush himself, but a spirited defense of Bar by the Big Boys of Houston, saying “There are few people whom most Houstonians and Americans admire more than Barbara Bush. She is a national treasure, and we believe with all our heart that our city and our nation have been fortunate indeed to have her walk among us.” The letter was signed by

James A. Baker III, (Secretary of the Treasury for Reagan, Secretary of State for Bush Senior and, some think, giver of the presidency to Shrub, deliverer of bad news about Iraq).

Robert Mosbacher, Sr. (Mosbacher Energy Company, Bush Sr.’s head fund raiser and Secretary of Commerce).

Willie Alexander (consulting and insurance and close friend to Ken Lay).

Jack S. Blanton, Sr., (President of Eddy Refining Company).

Jim McIngvale (furniture; known in Houston as “Mattress Mac”).

Drayton McLane, Jr. (CEO of the Houston Astros, formerly partly owned by Shrub).

Bob McNair (football: founder, president and CEO of Houston Texans, 6 & 10 for 2006).

David Underwood (oil).

(Thanks to Susan Ohanian for annotations on the signers)

N.B. NONE OF THE THREE AUGUST, 2006 ARTICLES CITED FROM THE *HOUSTON CHRONICLE* ARE AVAILABLE AT THAT PAPER’S WEBSITE. LINKS AT OTHER SITES PRODUCE “ARTICLE NOT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE.”

Some questions were raised about this national treasure in connection with Katrina, though. On NPR’s “Marketplace” while touring a Houston relocation site, Bar said, “What I’m hearing which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in *Texas*. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.”

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THE 100% SMOKESCREEN AWARD:

TIM MOONEY, PATRICK BYRNE AND GEORGE F. WILL

Arizona Republican political operative Tim Mooney thought it. Overstock.com CEO Patrick Byrne funded it. *Washington Post* pundit George Will named it: “The 65 percent solution.” We could improve education vastly “if schools were required to spend 65% of their operating budget ‘in the classroom.’” Mooney estimated that on average only 61% of budgets stayed in the classroom and that only four states met the 65% criterion.

Of course, “in the classroom” is not the most specific, easy to pin down term. Mooney claimed he used categories from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). But a look at the NCES categories would show quickly that they provide administrative convenience more than anything else. In Mooney’s scheme, money spent for band uniforms counts as in the classroom. Money spent for librarians does not. Money spent for coaches’ salaries counts as in the classroom. Money spent for counselors does not. Money spent for “instruction supplies” counts as in the classroom. Money spent on teacher professional development does not.

The proposal cleverly disguises a major erroneous assumption: that schools are adequately funded. All we need to do is shuffle the money around a bit and never mind all those adequacy suits that districts have been bringing against states (and winning).

Not a bad gambit, but there was no research evidence that the scheme would work. Indeed, a study of nine states by Standard & Poor’s found no relationship between the percent of money spent “in classroom instruction” and achievement. In Minnesota, which already had about an equal number of districts above and below the 65% level, S&P found no percentage to be a threshold—some low spending districts scored high, some high spending districts scored low.

The real purpose of the 65% solution, though, never was to improve education but to elect Republicans. The 65% solution is 100% politics.

As Mooney explained in the “Political Benefits” section of a memo, “Republicans will have a viable answer to ‘in the classroom improvement of education’ without the need to call for a tax increase, offsetting budget cuts in other popular programs, or gimmick accounting and deficit spending.”

Mooney found other benefits flowing from his scheme:

1. Splitting of the Education Union.” The proposal “naturally pits administrators and teachers at odds with one another with monies flowing from the former to the latter...” Mooney’s intimate knowledge of education apparently includes information that only one union exists for both teachers and administrators.

2. “Direct Fix for Public Education.” “While voucher and charter proposals have great merit, large segments of the voting public—especially suburban, affluent women voters—view these ideas as an abandonment of public education.” Because the 65% solution helps fix public education—by definition—it would work better than chardonnay and brie to soften up these well-off women for charter and voucher schemes later on. It would also give Republicans greater credibility when addressing education issues (not that that would have helped much in the 2006 elections).
3. “Establishes the Debate on Taxes and Government Spending.” Once voters see how much waste there is in education spending, they’ll want to analyze waste in other government agencies.
4. “Allows the Use of Unlimited Non-Personal Money for Political Positioning Advantages.” This presumes that the proposal would be enacted by a public referendum such as Mooney had proposed for Arizona. A public initiative could by-pass spending limits imposed on candidates, parties and PACs.
5. “It Wins!” Mooney foresaw the 65% percent solution becoming a litmus test for candidates similar to those for tax limits, term limits, and the definition of marriage. Back it or die.

A number of states debated the proposal but only two enacted it. Texas Governor Rick Perry put the 65% solution into effect through an executive order. So far, only one state legislature, Georgia’s, has been dumb enough to pass it into law—signed by Governor Sonny Perdue. Georgia’s recent record on education is not exactly exemplary, providing the nation with the only state superintendent, Linda Schrenko, who spent \$9000.00 of taxpayer money for a face lift and who currently is serving an 8-year prison term for fraud and money laundering involving \$600,000 in federal election funds.

THE WHO NEEDS FACT CHECKERS ANWAY AWARD, I: TOM FRIEDMAN

On page 270 of *The World Is Flat* (and apparently on page 336 of the revised version), Friedman observes that a remarkable number of top math and science students are the children of immigrants. “Top” here is defined by two specific events, the 2004 Intel Science Talent Institute and the 2004 International Math Olympiad. Sixty percent of the Americans in the Intel Institute and 65% of those in the Olympiad had immigrant parents.

Friedman doesn’t mention that these percentages obscure very small numbers, 40 at Intel, 20 at the Olympiad. Still the odds of 24 of 40 and 13 of 20 being immigrants in any kind of representative sample are tiny. But, then, these are not the offspring of parents who arrived at Ellis Island in steerage. As they debarked they tendered H1-B visas to the immigration officers. H1-B’s are reserved for professionals.

Friedman then moves from a sample size of 60 to an N of 1, one Andrei Munteanu. Munteanu got to the Intel affair by inventing an algorithm to predict collisions between Earth and asteroids (who says popular culture is intellectually deadening—Munteanu was inspired by the movie *Armageddon*). Munteanu, now 18, started school here in the seventh grade which, Friedman asserts, “he found a breeze compared to his Romanian school.” “Breeze” is Friedman’s descriptor. An *Education Week* article about the Talent Institute said he found “his lessons in Romanian schools noticeably more demanding than those he encountered when he began seventh grade in the United States.”

Friedman then quotes Munteanu from the *Education Week* article: “The math and science classes [cover the same subject matter] I was taking in Romania when I was in the fourth grade.”

One can only gasp that a *journalist* for the *New York Times* would rush a conclusion into print based only on the 10-year-old memory of a single 18-year-old person. That Friedman failed to check the facts is even more surprising because the next paragraphs discuss the results from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). So Friedman knew about TIMSS. Why didn’t he look at those results? Had he, he would have found these data from the 8th grade assessment (Romania did not take part in the fourth grade testing):

		Math	Science
TIMSS 1995	Romania	482	486
	United States	500	534
TIMSS 1999	Romania	472	472
	United States	502	515
TIMSS 2003	Romania	475	470
	United States	504	527

My, my. The U. S. consistently scored substantially higher than Romania in mathematics (always our worst subject) and much higher in science. Where are all those Munteanu-like kids. I don't know but here's a guess: Someone realized that little Andrei was a really bright kid, at least in science, and whisked him off to an elite school.

When Friedman does get around to discussing TIMSS, he exhibits a far too common trait among those who comment on education: the need to put the schools in the worst possible light. He also says a few things that don't make any sense at all. For example, he claims that TIMSS shows "the American labor force to be weaker in science than those of its peer countries." The ability of 9- and 13-year-olds to bubble in answer sheets in response to multiple-choice questions says something about the strength of our labor force?

Friedman does admit that US 8th-graders got higher ranks in 2003 than they did in 1995, but then comes the negative spin: "The worrying news, though, was that the scores of American fourth-graders were stagnant, neither improving nor declining in science or math since 1995. As a result, they slipped in the international rankings as other countries made gains."

A more neutral commentator might have said "stable" rather than "stagnant." And the use of the phrase "other countries" implies that a group of them surpassed the US. In fact, only one country in each field made large gains between 1995 and 2003 to overtake the US. England gained 47 points in math, Hong Kong 34 points in science. The other countries were close enough in 1995 that they did not differ significantly from the US in either 1995 or 2003, but in 2003 they scored a little higher. Even so, the US ranking "fell" all the way from 6th to 8th (of 15) in math and from 2nd to 5th in science. How could such rankings in both topics be "worrying news?"

THE WHO NEEDS FACT CHECKERS ANYWAY AWARD, II: *FORTUNE* MAGAZINE AND THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES¹

The cover of the July 25, 2005 issue of *Fortune* featured a takeoff on the old Charles Atlas body-building ads from the comic books of my youth. On the beach, a brawny China (in a bathing suit made from the Chinese flag) bullies a scrawny Uncle Sam. The text on the cover asks “America: the 97-pound weakling?”

In The Fifteenth Bracey report, I made note of the cover and one of the statements from reporter Geoffrey Colvin: “Our primary and secondary schools are falling behind the rest of the world’s.” About this statistic I commented, “No evidence was offered, no doubt because none exists.” Well, that’s true, but it turned out that I had overlooked the statement and the statistics that would cause so much mischief.

Those came in a section where Colvin wrote about the increasingly well-educated globe saying, “In engineering, China’s graduates will number over 600,000, India’s 350,000 and America’s only about 70,000.” Colvin’s timing was impeccable—his article arrived just as a group of fear mongers at the National Academies were putting the final touches on *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, pretty much an echo of the Colvin article that included his figures for engineers. “The Gathering Storm” carried a particularly ominous tone--Winston Churchill had used that phrase as the title of his book on the coming of World War II.

Colvin’s numbers had already caused Carl Bialik’s broad eyebrows to arch. Bialik’s *Wall Street Journal* column, “The Numbers Guy” tracks down various statistics, repudiating some, elevating others. Unlike most things at the uber-capitalist WSJ, Bialik’s worthwhile column is free, www.wsj.com/NumbersGuy.

Bialik could not locate the original source, but he did find a number of skeptics and wrote about their doubts in an August column. Ron Hira of the Rochester Institute of Technology pointed out that CEO’s have nothing to lose by crying wolf: “There’s only an upside for them. It deflects attention from the fact that they’re offshoring more work. And there’s no cost to them—the government is going to foot the bill [by subsidizing engineering schools]. The increase in supply of engineers is going to keep wages down.”

When *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* appeared in early October, Bialik returned to the stats. “Now that the National Academies has lent its imprimatur to the numbers, they’re likely to be circulated more widely in an industry effort to boost government investment in engineering education that might not be in the best interest of American technical workers.” Good guess.

¹ The National Academies are formed by the National Academy of Science, the National Academy of Engineering, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council.

Richard Freeman at Harvard told Bialik that his studies showed that many of the Chinese “engineers” would come out of two- and three-year programs and that the number of real engineers graduating from Chinese universities would be more like 350,000.

When Bialik approached Deborah Stine, who had led the National Academies team, she told him “we assumed Fortune did fact-checking on their numbers” (!!). She also said, “We appreciate your bringing it up.” She pointed Bialik towards a study from the McKinsey Global Institute which had used a figure of 550,000. As Bialik noted, though, the McKinsey study focused on how nine out of ten Chinese “engineers” would lack the skills to qualify for employment at a multinational corporation.

The matter appeared to have been put to rest with the publication of an in-depth study by Gary Gereffi, Vivek Wadhwa and a team of researchers at Duke University. They confirmed Freeman’s numbers coming up with 351,537 for China, 112,000 for India and 137,437 for the U. S. A lot of what China and India called engineers, America would call technicians.

The matter was not put to rest. The Duke report appeared in December. Calling the original numbers “mangoes to litchis” comparisons, Wadhwa gave his figures some visibility in a December column in *Business Week Online*. In April, 2006, I dedicated part of a *Kappan* Research column to debunking the original numbers and in May I published “Heard the One About the 600,000 Chinese Engineers?” in the Sunday Outlook section of the *Washington Post*.

The *Washington Post* piece popped up on hundreds of Web sites in North America, Asia and Europe. Not that that did much good. The National Academies imprimatur stuck. Not only did it stick outside of the National Academies, it stuck inside as well. Asked by *Christian Science Monitor* reporter, Mark Clayton, what the new figures meant, Stine replied “I don’t think we believe that all these new numbers change the ultimate recommendations we have. The U. S. is well behind other countries.” Jeez, why bother with numbers at all?

In the meantime the larger figures prevailed in speeches by Secretary of Education Spellings, Secretary of Commerce, Carlos Gutierrez, Senator John Warner, Rochester Institute of Technology President, Alan Simone, and, in a variation on the theme, Bill Gates. They turned up in columns by journalists Hedrick Smith and Fareed Zakariya.

Some few people did speak of the “engineering gap” in the same skeptical voice we now use to refer to the earlier “missile gap,” but I imagine the vision of hordes of Chinese engineers will live on statistically for many years. Indeed, the experience allowed me to formulate Bracey’s Law of Statistical Longevity: Any statistic, no matter how bogus, that appears to reflect badly on the education system and raises fears about the future is guaranteed a long life.

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**THE HAVEN'T TALKED TO ANY CHILDREN,
VISITED ANY SCHOOLS LATELY AWARD:
MARC TUCKER
AND THE NEW COMMISSION ON THE SKILLS OF
THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE.**

Commenting on this commission's recommendations, *Washington Post* reporter and columnist, Jay Mathews observed that the commission included "some of the giants of American education," but "like hundreds of powerful and brilliant people who have participated in well-intentioned commissions before them, they let themselves be talked into wandering through dreamland, rather than the real world."

Dreamland, indeed. Perhaps the goofiest, most Orwellian double-speak statement in the report occurs in the description of Step 1 of a 10-Step program. It describes a set of "Board Exams" that most students would encounter at age 16. Performance on these exams would determine what kind of educational experiences were open to them later. "Students could challenge these Board Exams as soon as they were ready, and they could keep challenging them all their lives, if necessary. No one would fail. If they did not succeed, they would just try again." Yeah, right. Try substituting "High School Exit Exam" for Board Exams. Doesn't change the meaning, does it?

We are asked to believe that a 30-year-old attempting them for the umpteenth time would have no sense of failure, having had the old "try, try again" ethic instilled in him. We are not told what this person would have been doing all these years other than getting ready for the exams again. There's enough class segregation in this nation already. These Board Exams would take us further towards Huxley's *Brave New World* (although maybe, as in the novel the kids who failed could be induced by *soma* and propaganda to be happy in their role as Deltas).

Dreamland, indeed. Maybe I was wrong above. Maybe the goofiest statement in the report is this: "This is a world (the world of the future), in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for *most members of the workforce*" (emphasis added). Meanwhile, over in Wal-Mart nation, the number of retail sales clerks totals more than the number of slots available in the ten fastest growing jobs combined. We have 9 cashiers, 6 waiters and 5+ janitors for every computer programmer. The report glibly projects that routine work will be handled mostly by machines.

What were these guys smoking? I imagine a scene where they're pleasantly buzzed while Kurt Vonnegut reads to them from *Player Piano* or *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. And they think they are happy books.

Dreamland, indeed. Wait, no, maybe I was wrong above. Maybe the goofiest statements in the report come from the commissioners themselves describing the report. They read like the commissioners had nothing to do with the preparation of the report, which might well be true: “I commend the Commission for a report that presents bold and promising proposals to deal with the issues that our nation and its workforce will face in the 21st century.” Thus spake commissioner Joel Klein, Chancellor of NYC public schools. Why didn’t Klein say “I commend me and the rest of us...” “This report offers a radical new blueprint for making America’s K-12 educational experience more meaningful and effective. It’s a fascinating and thought-provoking read that is sure to get the American educational establishment talking.” This from commissioner Charles Reed, Chancellor of the California State University System (who was once rebuked for insulting his faculties on the various campuses). What? Didn’t Reed take part in writing the document? Why didn’t he say “We wrote a fascinating and thought-provoking...?”

And, of course, the comments have to include the doom-and-gloom common to all such reports “I become more concerned each day that our students are falling further behind and the people of this nation do not seem to be alarmed.” David Driscoll, Commissioner of Education, Massachusetts. But Dave, for years now you’ve been touting how the MCAS does wonders for the students in your state. More than a few eyebrows in MA went up at your willingness to abandon in a trice what you’d championed so much and so often and so long. Wha’ happened?

Mathews also challenged the woe-is-us scenario: “Even if both India and China do attain that potent blend of liberty and creativity, how exactly is that going to hurt Americans? Their economies are thriving because world commerce is losing its dependence on borders and tariffs, and the old way of thinking (accepted without question in this report) that if some poor countries get rich, then some rich countries, like us, are going to become poor....The more middle-class people overseas, the more customers there will be for the newest gizmos that our large and innovative middle-class country keeps coming up with.” (Another echo of Churchill who once declared, “ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put).”

Jay Mathews is not as old as I am, but he’s been around this block often enough to get tired of this crap. Can’t do better than to close with Jay’s opening paragraphs:

The two words mostly likely to make education reporters sigh wearily are “national” and “commission.” Those of us who have been doing this for a while know that many government, business and non-profit groups cannot resist the urge to gather great men and women together frequently to plan our schools’ future. This result is almost always a great waste of time and paper.

So when “Tough Choices...” arrived in the mail, I was pretty sure I was not going to like it. These reports come in two varieties: those that belabor the obvious and those that ignore reality. “Tough Choices” falls into the second category, which means it has no more staying power than the chocolate pie I whipped up for yesterday’s family Christmas dinner.

No doubt the pie was easier to digest.

Mathews, Jay. (2006, 26 December). “Bad guess on U. S. future.”
www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/26/AR2006122600451.html.

**THE REVENGE OF THE TEXAS MIRACLE OR, TAKE A
CHILL PILL AND CALL ME IN A YEAR AWARD:
TEXAS EDUCATION COMMISSIONER, SHIRLEY
NEELEY
AND THE TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY**

After the *Dallas Morning News* uncovered evidence of widespread cheating on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skill (TAKS), Neeley and the TEA decided they had to do *something*. In the summer of 2005, they hired Caveon, a data analysis company that specializes in the detection of cheating, to analyze the 2005 TAKS data. Caveon completed the work in about six weeks. Then the TEA did...nothing. It sat on the report for almost a year planning to let the identified schools, which it said numbered 442, and districts investigate themselves if they so chose. The schools, though, couldn't do much on their own because the TEA did not tell them which of several types of cheating they stood accused of.

But, using an FOIA request, the *Dallas Morning News* obtained the report nearly a year after it had been received by the TEA. The *News* determined that in addition to the 442 schools the TEA had listed, the Caveon report had identified another 167 that the state had simply ignored. Then it discovered another clump of 90 schools. Six hundred and ninety-nine schools total, about 10% of all Texas schools.

The *News* wrote "An alarming number of students who graduated from Texas high schools last month probably cheated to get there—and state education officials are in no hurry to catch them." The TEA didn't move. The plan, according to state officials was to have Caveon gather data for several years in the hope of improving test security "down the road." "But I look at that list [of schools with suspicious scores] and I think these are anomalies," said Neeley.

Anomalies? *News* reporters Joshua Benton and Holly Hacker examined the information from one school given in the Caveon appendix. Several groups of students had identical answer sheets. Even their wrong answers were identically wrong. Other groups showed suspiciously large numbers of erasures. Of 1,431 students who took the TAKS math test at this school, 185 had answer sheets that were suspiciously similar. Wrote Benton and Hacker, "Caveon said the chance of that happening at random was less than 1 in 4 million million billion billion billion. That's a 1 with 40 zeroes after it." That's fairly anomalous, yes.

The state's reactions? "The Texas Education Agency is leaning toward severing ties with the company it hired to look for cheating on the TAKS test, in part because the results have generated negative publicity for the state." Officials also insinuated that Caveon's

methods were unsound: “I don’t have a lot of confidence in them anymore,” Neeley said, “Right now, I’m sure not inclined to ask Caveon for anything more.” Some cynics thought that Caveon had created a problem for itself with the high schools that it had identified: “Caveon flagged a large percentage of the schools in well-off suburbs....” Accepting that Caveon’s analysis was accurate would cost too much face.

What to do next? “Everybody should just take a chill pill,” said Neeley.

The TEA ultimately decided it needed to investigate. But how do you run checks on 699 schools? The group appointed had only 5 members with 15 people on board as staff. So you go mostly with an 8-page survey. Sixty-five schools received site visits, but seventeen months after the event, the TEA sent out a survey to all of the rest. The questions are open-ended (e.g. Did the district have a policy on cell phones?). It is not clear how this survey could be used to determine a school’s guilt or innocence, but on December 15, 2006 the TEA announced that it had cleared 592 of the schools on the list. Some of those remaining hadn’t filled in the questionnaire properly or at all—in some instances the person in charge at the time of the alleged cheating no longer worked at that particular school.

The TEA’s approach generated more than a little skepticism. Jason Stephens of the University of Connecticut expressed doubts about using a questionnaire to obtain accurate results “That might be expedient, but if there is something going on, nobody’s going to go out and admit that.” I noticed that none of the articles about the investigation actually said who was going to investigate. According to the *Austin American Statesman*, that’s likely because the head of the investigation, one Bill Hammond, has a colossal ego and in announcing the committee, neglected to mention the names of the other four people. “If anyone else on this committee gets a word in edgewise, but on the Rangers to be in the World Series this year.” More to the point, Hammond’s organization, the Texas Association of Business, “suffered a criminal investigation and was sued in civil court.” Maybe that’s an advantage, mused the editors, “Who better to investigate people bending the rules than someone who has been investigated for bending the rules? Who better than a fox to report on the security deficiencies of a hen house?”

Other “anomalous” results appeared. The *News* reported that at one high school, more than 10% of TAKS answer sheets were unusually similar, while at another the figure was 6%. The first school was cleared, the second remains under investigation. (Readers who want to inspect the questionnaire can put “cheating inquiry clears schools” into Google. This brings up the December 15 story and contains a link to the questionnaire).

As 2007 dawned, the TEA made some contradictory statements but will likely take the recommendation of its task force on cheating: Fire Caveon and do it yourselves. Department officials complained that Caveon, citing proprietary concerns, would not share its exact methodology. They also complained that the company flagged too many schools. But, without intimate knowledge of the methods, how could they know? TEA officials declined to even look at more detailed information that Caveon did offer to show them.

The sense is that the TEA didn't do a genuine investigation and will let the matter slide for a while—the 2006 data won't be analyzed for cheating and it will take a year or more for the TEA to acquire the expertise itself, if it even can. Instead of actually looking at the data they interviewed janitors about what they saw two years ago.

Can you say, “charade?”

Austin American Statesman (editorial). (2006, 6 August). “Of all the people to investigate cheating...Bill Hammond?”

Benton, Joshua. (2007, 4 January). “TEA may create system to hunt TAKS cheaters.” *Dallas Morning News*, p. A1.

Benton, Joshua. (2006, 15 December). “Cheating inquiry clears schools.” *Dallas Morning News*, p. A1.

Benton, Joshua. (2006, 1 September). “TEA may ax test analyzer.” *Dallas Morning News*, p. A1.

Benton, Joshua. (2006, 29 July). “TAKS inquiry gets a boost; TEA adds investigators and task force for cheating probe.” *Dallas Morning News*, p. A1.

Benton, Joshua and Holly K. Hacker. (2006, 23 July). “Not all suspect schools on TAKS list.” *Dallas Morning News*, p. A1.

Benton, Joshua. (2006, 16 July). “Districts on TAKS cheat list in dark; state didn't seek data on why firm flagged schools, preventing investigation” *Dallas Morning News*, p. A1.

Benton, Joshua. (2006, 11 June). “TAKS analysis suggests many graduates cheated; DISD, other districts unlikely to look into suspicious scores.” *Dallas Morning News*, p. A1.

Benton, Joshua. (2006, 9 June). “Signs of cheating at 114 area schools; state asks campuses to check '05 TAKS scores that raised suspicions.” *Dallas Morning News* p. A1.

THE THEIR (MULTINATIONAL) EYE (AND HAMMER) IS ON THE SPARROW AWARD: SRA/MCGRAW-HILL

The Bush administration is notorious for not tolerating even minor deviations from its policies. Diversity of opinion has no place. The link between the Bush administration and the McGraws, as in McGraw-Hill, is also well documented (see, Stephen Metcalf, "Reading Between the Lines," www.thenation.com/doc/20020128/metcalf). Well documented, too, are the profits to SRA/McGraw-Hill from No Child Left Behind.

Still, it seemed a bit of overkill that SRA/McGraw-Hill canceled speaking appearances at the International Reading Association convention in May by children's book writer, Patricia Polacco, because Polacco refused to promise that the speeches wouldn't contain her objections to NCLB.

Polacco reported that after she signed a contract to make appearances, she was "hounded" by SRA's agent firm, Buchanan and Associates, to furnish a complete manuscript of the talks. When she contacted them by phone, they told her it was "unacceptable" to have any mention of NCLB in the presentation: "Our client [SRA] is very sensitive and does not want you to include this in your remarks." According to Polacco, they put this statement in writing as well.

There is nothing in the contract that says anything about the contents of the speech although it does name two oft-given Polacco titles. Polacco says that she disparages the federal mandates in both speeches anyway so she wasn't prepping anything special. At the time of the blowup, the contract was on the SRA Web site but no longer is.

SRA spokesperson, Joann Craig claimed that "Ms. Polacco chose not to honor her commitment to SRA/McGraw-Hill." McGraw-Hill also said that "Patricia Polacco was to be paid for her appearances, therefore making her an employee of SRA/McGraw-Hill, which means that she is obliged to represent the views of our company."

To call Polacco an employee is absurd. As Polacco pointed out, had the deal been done, SRA would have sent her a form 1099 at the end of the year indicating how much money it was telling the IRS the company paid her. The 1099's I get each year all read "non-employee compensation."

Manzo, Kathleen Kennedy. (2006, 24 May). "Author, publisher at odds over content of talk." *Education Week*, pp. 12-13.

Ohanian, Susan. "SRA/McGraw-Hill Answers."
http://susanohanian.org/outrage_fetch.php?id=404.

Polacco's response to SRA is no longer online and would have to be obtained via USPS with letters sent to Patricia Polacco, 118 Barry Street, Union City, Michigan, 49094.

THE WHO SAYS IRONY IS DEAD AWARD:

JEB BUSH AND LIBERTY PARTNERS

As Secretary of Education, Rod Paige once called the NEA a “terrorist organization.” So it figures that teachers would be thrilled to help the now unemployed Paige make money, right? That's what's happened.

After checking out of the Department, Paige Founded the Chartwell Education Group with some old cronies from Houston. Where does he get start-up money? From retired Florida teachers.

The chain works like this: Florida Governor Jeb Bush heads the three-person State Board of Administration. The State Board of Administration is responsible for the Florida Retirement System. Under Bush, the State Board of Administration gave an investment firm, Liberty Partners, authority to invest the retirement funds. Liberty Partners used the money to become the sole investor in Chartwell Education.

So Florida teachers are paying to help Paige exploit his contacts and become a richer man—if they're lucky.

Some readers might remember Liberty Partners from an earlier edition of these awards: They also used teachers' retirement funds to acquire Edison Schools, Inc.

Connelly, Richard (2007, 4 January). “Rod Paige is still milking the Bush connection. www.houstonpress.com/Issues/2007-01-04/news/hairballs.html.

THE TOO DISGUSTING TO EVEN WRITE ABOUT AWARD: JOHN STOSSEL

As ABC-TV's resident right wing hack, John Stossel has done a lot of stupid, unethical things. Some of them he's had to apologize for on camera. (Go to www.fair.org and put "stossel" into the search engine to see Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting's 41-item dossier on him). But he might have hit a new low January 13, 2006 with Stupid in America.

I consider writing about it such a waste of time, I won't. You can see a good analysis, "Stupid is as John Stossel does" at The Daily Howler, www.dailyhowler.com/dh011706.shtml.

You can get a transcript from www.transcript.net.

But a transcript really doesn't capture the slimy tone of the program. Get it straight from YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfRUMmTs0ZA. Ten minutes, at most, should suffice.

Maybe then you can answer my question: Why do those Belgian kids who do so well on the test (what test in what subject is never revealed) appear to speak English with an American accent?