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The Failure of Goals 2000

Back in February 1990 we wrote an open letter to President Bush expressing great reservations about his Goals 2000 proposal made in his State of the Union address. To those of us who knew the reality of public education, we knew that if the educators and government continued doing what they had been doing for the last few decades, the goals would never be achieved. And, of course, we were right.

This writer is not a prophet. I am simply an observer of what is real. I knew that the education establishment was incapable of making the kinds of reforms that were absolutely essential if the stated goals were to be attained. I wrote: "The present education establishment is simply too big, too self-serving, too financially secure, too corrupt, too monopolistic, too utopian to do the simple, efficient job that needs to be done. . . . What is needed, Mr. President, is realism and good faith. Realism requires that we see our education system as it is and not continue this endless charade of reforms that waste billions and do not produce the desired results. Good faith requires that we acknowledge the right of a free people to seek alternatives to failed government institutions and programs."

The goals themselves were little more than a laundry list of educational

shortcomings that were supposedly susceptible to remediation once the intention was stated. Why these shortcomings existed in the first place was never gone into. Obviously, there were causes, but this would have opened several cans of worms which President Bush and the Congress were in no position to address. And so, the goals were set as if setting goals was enough to energize the educators into trying to reach them. Its true purpose, however, was simply to provide greater Congressional justification for spending more federal billions on education.

Ready to Learn

The first goal was that all children would be ready to learn by the time they were ready to attend school. I wrote: "The problem is not that the children aren't ready to learn, it's that the teachers aren't ready to teach! Children are ready to learn the moment they are born. In fact, by the time they are of school age they have learned to speak their own language quite intelligently and fluently. Every child, unless born with a serious defect, is a very efficient self-teacher and self-learner – a veritable dynamo of language learning. Yet, after one year in a public school, many of these same intelligent children become 'learning disabled.' How come?"

The next goal was that by the year 2000, the high school graduation rate would be 90 percent. I asked: "But how is it to be achieved if so many children are academically crippled by what is done to them in the first three grades? *U.S. News* magazine reported in 1987 (May 18) that: 'Nationwide, nearly a million students graduate each year unable to read and write.' So graduation is not a guarantee of competence. But the educators may very well increase the graduation rate by simply giving out more meaningless diplomas."

The third goal was supposed to prevent such frauds. President Bush stated: "And we're going to make sure our schools' diplomas mean something. In critical subjects – at fourth, eighth and 12th grades – we must assess our student's performance." That spurred the development of national assessments, such as the NAEP, which continue to report student deficiencies, which then call for more federal funding for education. That goal, incidentally, was expanded by the Clinton administration to include "preparation for citizenship."

First in Math and Science

The next goal proposed by President Bush was that by the year 2000, American students would be first in the world in math and science. As of 1998, we were nowhere near that goal. According to a U.S. Dept. of Education news release of 2/24/98:

According to the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), released today by the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. 12th graders outperformed only two (Cyprus and South Africa) of the 21 participating countries in math and science. . . . On the advanced math

assessment, U.S. students were outperformed by those in 11 countries. On the physics assessment, U.S. were outperformed by those in 14 countries, were the same as those in one country, and outperformed those in no participating countries.

In other words, except for one country, U.S. students came in last in physics.

Another goal was that every American adult would be a skilled and literate worker by the year 2000. In September 1993, the U.S. Department of Education released the results of its 14-million-dollar survey of adult literacy in America. It reported that 40 million American adults were functionally illiterate and that another 50 million fared only a little better. Only about 34 to 40 million Americans could be considered literate. I wrote in my education letter of October 1993:

"At no time in American history have so many people earned high school and college degrees—leading many to describe the country as better educated than ever. However, according to this study, a diploma does not mean a person is functionally literate. More than half of high-school graduates were found to have restricted abilities in math and reading. . . . American business has been paying dearly for the nation's literacy problems, said Keith Poston, spokesman for the National Alliance of Business, a group dedicated to public-education reform. It is not unusual for employers to 'reject three out of four applications because they cannot read or write well enough to hold entry-level jobs. Half the applications are thrown in the trash.' . . . 'We have estimated that only about 25 percent of the adult population is highly literate,' said Brenda Bell, vice president

of marketing for the National Alliance of Business.”

As of December 1998, the literacy situation in America is about as bad as it was in 1993. In California, for example, educators are just beginning to reform the teaching of reading in its primary schools. We’ll have to wait twelve years to see the results. And so the notion that in the year 2000 we will be able to attain the literacy goals called for in Goals 2000 is just another government flight from reality. We have written extensively since the 1970s on what must be done in the primary classrooms of America to improve the literacy of the nation. But our words have fallen on the deaf ears of the education establishment.

Education Week of December 16, 1998, reported on the “slow progress” in America’s efforts to “reach national education goals.” The article states:

“The nation still has a long way to go to meet the national education goals,” Gov. Cecil H. Underwood of West Virginia, the chairman of the federally funded panel [charged with monitoring the process], said at a news conference last week. “In short, America has made progress on some of the goals but still has room for improvement.”

In its eighth annual update, the National Education Goals Panel says the country’s young children are better prepared to start school, and that there have been slight increases in math achievement.

But the panel’s report cites data showing the country is far from outpacing the world in math and science—the most ambitious of the eight goals. Indeed, U.S. students have in some cases fallen farther behind in those subjects, the report says. . . .

Of the eight goals, the report says the most progress has been made in reaching the first one, which says children should be ready to learn when they begin school.

Citing research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Center for Health Statistics, the goals panel says the proportion of the children born with health risks such as low birthweight declined from 37 percent to 34 percent between 1990 and 1996. In 1997, 78 percent of 2-year-olds had been fully immunized, compared with 75 percent three years earlier, the report says. . . .

But at the heart of the goals—substantially higher student achievement—the panel was unable to report significant progress. . . .

Under the third goal, which calls for 4th, 8th, and 12th graders to raise their achievement in core subjects, the panel points to success only in math, citing the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In reading, NAEP scores of 12th graders fell but have remained the same in the other grades.

The panel reports little or no progress on: goal four: an improved teaching force; goal six: every adult will be literate; goal seven: schools will be safe and drug free; goal eight: more parent involvement.

And so, what does the nation have to show for all of the money spent on Goals 2000? Not much, if anything. But the education establishment is richer, the assessment bureaucracy bigger, and the American people are as bamboozled as ever. Meanwhile, one may ask what have immunizations got to do with academic improvement? When this writer was a child, the only immunization anyone got was a smallpox vaccination, and academic achievement was much higher then. Nowadays, infants are assaulted by a battery of immunizations shortly after birth and more of them are now on Ritalin and other drugs so that they can sit still in the classroom. How come these kids aren’t “ready to learn”? Are any of these immunizations causing the behavioral and learning problems that

these children experience by the time they are ready to attend school?

A Perpetual Fraud

More and more parents have come to realize that our government education system is simply one fraud piled on another, and that the purpose of the education establishment is to perpetuate this fraud for as long as they can get away with it. Public education is the largest system of tax-financed cash flow in the nation. It is in the interest of several million recipients of that cash flow to increase its volume and make sure that it is never shut down. Failure justifies more federal spending, more testing, more "reform," more teachers, smaller classes, newer buildings, more experts, more certification, more goals.

Meanwhile, the homeschool movement, the fastest growing educational phenomenon in the United States, proves that good education is attainable without government funding or goals. But the vast majority of American parents prefer to send their children to the public schools despite their much publicized shortcomings. But as Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said: "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and you can fool all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

Parents Win Suit on Student Privacy

The San Antonio school district has agreed to destroy surveys completed by high school students this fall in order

to settle a lawsuit brought by a group of parents. The parents complained that the surveys filled out by more than 600 students at Jefferson High School in September, asked personal questions about the teenagers and their families. They were represented in a federal lawsuit by the Texas Justice Foundation, a nonprofit public-interest litigation foundation that advocates parental rights.

The agreement calls for parents to be given copies of their children's questionnaires to review before the surveys are destroyed. In addition, the district will establish a parents' committee to review future surveys that might be considered "personally intrusive," and will obtain parental consent for surveys that include sensitive topics such as political affiliations, sexual behavior and attitudes, and mental and psychological problems.

The questionnaires were drafted by the district's counseling department and given to students at the high school by their homeroom teachers as part of an effort to foster better rapport with the teenagers, said David Splitek, the associate superintendent. Questions on the two-page "Getting to Know You" form include: "What do you consider to be the best thing about your home and the worst?" "Do you have a hard time controlling your temper?" and "If you could change one thing about your family, what would it be and why?"

Jefferson High, with some 1,800 students, has been organized into four academies. As part of the restructuring, which was designed to create a smaller and more personal atmosphere, students take part in "academic coaching"

classes. Under the agreement, those classes must address only academic issues. Parents asserted that the classes were "designed for the teacher to become a surrogate parent."

Mr. Splitek disputed that characterization of the classes, which he said are supposed to ensure that both parents and teachers track students' academic progress. The district also consented to provide in-service training for its employees to emphasize that they can't retaliate against, intimidate, interrogate, or harass students or parents who exercise their rights. Finally, the district agreed to instruct its staff members not to tell minor students that their records are off-limits to their parents, unless such confidentiality is otherwise allowed by law. (*Education Week*, 12/9/98)

Comment: Such invasions of privacy by public educators has been going on for quite some time. It was Anita Hoge, a Pennsylvania parent, who in 1986 complained about a test her son was given in school that turned out to be a sophisticated psychological survey. The test violated the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment enacted by Congress. Her story became the basis for Bev Eakman's *Educating for the New World Order* published in 1991, which exposed how assessment tests are being used to gather psychological data on all students.

The publication in 1994 of the *Student Data Handbook for Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education* (NCES 94-303) by the National Center for Education Statistics proves that the education bureaucracy has been planning at least since 1974 to gather intimate, personal psychological

data on all children in America. All of this sensitive data is to be housed in a central computer in Washington D.C. Thus, what was being done in the San Antonio school district is probably being done all over the United States. It is to be seen if parents can get the courts to shut down the big computer in Washington which will become the greatest invader of privacy the U.S. government has ever attempted.

How Montreal Deals With Teen Loiterers

The city of Montreal in Canada has finally found an effective way to get loutish youthful loiterers from annoying riders in that city's subway system. They play grand opera over a loud-speaker system. Until opera was tried, the police were unable to scare off the juvenile toughs who loitered in stations and bothered riders by demanding spare change, smoking under "No Smoking" signs, using obscene language and in general making life unpleasant for the subway-riding public.

But what the police couldn't do, Maria Callas and Luciano Pavarotti seem to be doing. In fact, Montreal is already claiming success, saying that there are fewer young idlers strutting about the city's busiest subway station. Other Canadian cities have used classical music to repel bad characters from public spots, but Montreal is the first to resort to grand opera.

Montreal has been noted for its safe, clean subway system. But recent years have seen an invasion of some stations by loud gangs dressed in scruffy

denim and leather festooned with chains. They can be aggressive and highly obnoxious, flipping cigarette butts at people who refuse to give them spare change. So the Metro is turning to the big guns: Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," Rossini's "Barber of Seville," and Puccini's "Madama Butterfly." The ringing arias and piercing high notes seem to be driving off the riffraff.

In resorting to opera, Montreal is following other Canadian cities which have discovered that symphonic sound is the most powerful persuaders when it comes to clearing off youthful vagrants. Toronto uses Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms to shoo punkers from crime-plagued stations. In Edmonton, oboe concertos have chased drug dealers from downtown parks. Moncton, in New Brunswick, plays piano sonatas along a stretch of the main street to scare off packs of teenage troublemakers. (*Boston Globe*, 12/31/98)

Comment: It is of course tragic that so many of today's youth not only have no appreciation of classical music, but even can't stand to listen to it. They have become deaf to the world's most beautiful music. When this writer attended elementary school in the 1930s, music appreciation was part of the curriculum. The teacher cranked up a portable Victrola and played short classical pieces. We were required to listen to them and learn about the composers. Those simple lessons awakened in us a love of good music. We wonder how many teachers today would enjoy teaching appreciation of classical music. Is it not possible that developing such love of music might prevent many school children from

becoming the teenage barbarians of tomorrow?

Court Blocks Homeschool Visits

In a major victory for homeschoolers that also serves as a warning to school districts statewide, the Massachusetts Judicial Court, the state's highest court, ruled 12/16/98 that Lynn school officials have no right to visit homes to see how parents teach their children. Ending a seven-year lawsuit over parents' rights to teach children any way they choose, the ruling comes at a critical time for homeschoolers. As their numbers have quadrupled in the past decade to an estimated 4,500 statewide, hundreds of families are struggling to understand their rights in vaguely written laws and court rulings.

Lynn will not appeal the decision and the new school superintendent said that the district had already begun to revamp the policy before the Court ruled. The case stretches back to 1991, when Stephen and Lois Pustell filed a suit against the Lynn School Committee because the board required homeschoolers to be periodically observed by school officials. In 1994, Michael and Virginia Brunelle, who have five children, faced criminal charges in the same city when they objected to home visits and refused to submit their educational plans to Lynn officials.

While the criminal charges were dropped, the Brunelles, Pustells, and their attorneys challenged the validity of Lynn's policy first in the federal courts

and then in the state courts during the past three years. Meanwhile, both couples continued teaching their children at home rather than sending them to school. "We're just thrilled with the decision," said Stephen Pustell, 44, a computer analyst who has four children. The city's job "is to know that children are being educated, not to educate them."

The court did not rule on the constitutionality of visiting homeschoolers and instead relied on a much simpler argument: There is no state law that says school districts can require home visits. The court also re-emphasized parents' long-standing rights to educate their children in the best way they see fit.

Victory for Homeschoolers

"It's a big victory with national significance," said Michael Farris, president of the Home School Legal Defense Association which represented the parents. "Home school laws are in constant flux. If this decision would have gone the other way, we think there would have been copycat school districts all over the country."

While Lynn is considered the only school district in the country to have required home visits, some school districts statewide have had the requirement on their books, but did not enforce it. Some districts that did not have the requirement would ask parents for home visits. Many times parents, unsure of their rights, agreed to allow inspectors into their homes.

"This ruling will help clarify things," said Pat Farenga, president of

Holt Associates which publishes *Growing Without Schooling*, a national magazine for homeschoolers. "There are a lot of people who don't want to report they home school because of the vagueness" of regulations. State law does allow local boards to monitor homeschooling. Most school systems require some type of accountability: portfolios of student work, assurances that students are being taught the full school year, or proof of lesson plans.

While flatly rejecting the inclusion of home visits as a mandatory right of a school board's oversight, the SJC left the door open for home visits in cases where a child may be failing educationally, or if other families send their children to a neighbor for schooling. But the SJC said there is no valid reason to consider home visits essential today to meet the state goal of ensuring all children are being properly educated.

"Teaching methods may be less formalized, but in the home setting may be more effective," Justice John Greaney wrote. While not directly endorsing homeschooling, the court said officials need to trust that parents who choose homeschool over public school are capable of educating their children – although it may be in a different way than a public school. "We doubt that parents like the [Brunelles and Pustells], who are so committed to home education that they are willing to forgo the public schools and devote substantial time and energy to their children, will let the children's progress suffer for lack of adequate instructional space," he wrote. (*Boston Globe*, 12/17/98)

Black Parents Want Focus On Academics

African-American parents, by an overwhelming margin, want the public schools to focus on achievement rather than on racial diversity and integration, a survey released in July 1998 says. When asked what the bigger priority for schools should be, 80 percent of black parents chose raising academic standards and achievement, according to the survey by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan public-opinion research firm in New York City. Nine percent chose achieving diversity and integration, and 11 percent said both.

The findings "challenge some commonly held assumptions about what African-American parents consider most important," said Deborah Wadsworth, executive director of Public Agenda. While black parents bring different experiences to the issue of public education from those of whites, she said, "their concern about quality of education and academic standards and their agenda for achieving these is nearly identical."

The study concludes that both groups of parents show "a distinctive lack of energy and passion for integration." These attitudes stem from both races' doubts that integration improves learning. Black parents' insistence on academic achievement reflects their fears about how their children are faring in schools. Most black parents (56 percent) estimated that fewer than half of black students attend good schools with good teachers. By contrast, 74 percent thought that white students attended good schools.

Black parents believe the problems facing black students are widespread, affecting even those outside inner cities and without regard to family income. In fact, 60 percent said they would switch their children from public to private schools if money were not an obstacle. Only 38 percent would stay with their public schools. (*Education Week*, 8/5/98)

Our Apologies

If you've been wondering why you haven't received a Blumenfeld Education Report in a while it is because the computer on which we had been writing our newsletters for the last ten years finally bit the dust. It was a small Macintosh Classic that served our purposes very well. But in the world of computers it is like a Model T Ford. Once it's gone, it goes on the junk heap of technological history. It's not old enough to be a valuable antique worth saving. One repair shop said that its best use is as a doorstopper.

The virtue of the Macintosh Classic, however, was its simplicity. It was so easy to use. We've replaced it with a Windows 98 Gateway, a machine so complicated that it will take months before we shall feel comfortable using it. We've already lost one document without even trying. And those helpers on the Gateway hotline seem to be as helpless as their customer. So please bear with us as we make our way in the brave new world of high tech. Meanwhile, rest assured, that as a subscriber you will get twelve reports regardless of how many months it takes to produce them.

Thanks ever so much for your patience and understanding.

Samuel L. Blumenfeld, Editor