

HOW OUR “CHILDRENS” LEARN

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The tag line for a Shell Oil advertisement on the inside back cover of the October issue of *National Geographic* was: “Do you suffer from not invented yet syndrome?”

President George W. Bush undoubtedly does, so I have invented a name for his. I would call it DQLBS (Dan Quayle Linguistic Butchery Syndrome) in honor of then-Vice President Quayle’s insistence to a student at an elementary school in New Jersey, on June 15, 1992, that the proper spelling of the name of the common tater was “potatoe.” After the student put the correct spelling on the chalkboard, VP Quayle bullied him into adding the final “e.”

The most recent manifestation of the president’s DQLBS was on September 26, in a New York City public elementary school classroom. He was using the school—with an audience of 4th and 5th graders, school officials, and Mayor Bloomberg—as a soapbox to urge Congress to reauthorize, without altering, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

He started his brief remarks with the statement, “Childrens [*sic*] do learn when standards are high.” The text that had been typed for him, and from which he read, said, “Children do learn.”

The president’s sub-literate alteration of the prepared text should have been a national embarrassment, especially coming inside a school, in a speech about education.

This was not an understandable gaffe, such as struggling to pronounce, say, Ahmadinejad would be.

No. It was one of a series of unforgivable linguistic lapses on the part of this president. If anyone should accuse me of nit-picking, I would reply that if I am, this is a nit that should be picked. It should be picked now, because the spotlight that shone on the Petraeus-Crocker testimony during the second week of September left in darkness the beginning of the so-called debate on the reauthorization of about all that is left of what can only charitably be called the president’s legacy, namely NCLB.

Since its inception, I have decried the flaws in this legislation that was foisted upon us by an inept president, an unqualified Secretary of Education, and a bumbling legislature.

Finally, some voices are beginning to arise that see the same flaws in the legislation that I do. This was manifest in a series of statements solicited by the *Washington Post* and printed in its September 10th issue.

Predictably, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings praised NCLB, citing as its chief virtue that it has allowed us to see how badly we are doing, a necessary first step on the road to doing better.

Just as predictably, others called for making the standards “more flexible.” This means lowering the standards through exceptions for individual schools and school systems. Such an approach would guarantee the continuing decline of our schools.

Still others complained that the legislation short-changes the top students. This could be addressed by following the advice of Jack Dale, Superintendent of the Fairfax County (VA) Schools: “We need a new vision of education. We need to create aspirational standards, not just adequate standards.” If only more superintendents knew that this is exactly right. When the curriculum was rigorous for all students, no student was short-changed, and the top students were able to challenge themselves. This was demonstrated in the Sputnik-reaction era and in pre-World War II schools.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg put the central issue concisely: “The current law allows states to dumb down proficiency levels and create illusions of progress. We need a uniform measuring stick.” His diagnosis of the defect of the legislation is right on target, as is his suggested cure. Unfortunately, he did not explain what “a uniform measuring stick” means. If it means a uniformly rigorous and coherent national curriculum, assessed by nationally standardized tests, then it is precisely what is needed. Without that, the current crazy quilt of state-designated standards that are too low and of curricula that are empty, nonspecific, and unsequenced will continue to drag down the system.

As Kati Haycock, President of the Education Trust, said:

Congress should resist calls to add more measures to the current accountability system that would provide “extra credit” for schools failing to meet the needs of their students.... The clarity of the accountability system shouldn’t be muddied by variables that let schools off the hook..., even for just one group of students. Instead, Congress should provide funding for...strong, effective teachers empowered by rich curricula tied to high-quality assessments of student learning.

Bloomberg and Haycock’s comments should be emblazoned on a placard and set before our legislators as their guiding principles in education reform.

Congress should appeal to organizations like the Core Knowledge Foundation of Charlottesville, VA, for help in crafting the curriculum that such reform requires.

Sad to say, since the gap between what Congress “should do” and what Congress “will do” is massive, I am not optimistic.

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