

*Why Is Corporate
America Bashing
Our Public Schools?*

Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian

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1

The Words That Bind

The trouble with words is that you never know whose mouths they've been in.

—DENNIS POTTER, BRITISH TV DRAMATIST

Using deceptively simple, clear, appealing language, those who spawned No Child Left Behind took a page right out of Newt Gingrich's *Language: A Key Mechanism of Control*. Gingrich mailed this booklet to Republican leaders in 1990; the methodology lives on. Here are the words Gingrich tells Republicans to use when describing themselves:

active, activist, building, candid(ly), care(ing), challenge, change, children, choice/choose, citizen, commitment, common sense, compete, confident, conflict, control, courage, crusade, debate, dream, duty, eliminate good time in prison, empower(ment), fair, family, freedom, hard work, help, humane, inventive, initiative, lead, learn, legacy, liberty, light, listen, mobilize, moral, movement, opportunity, passionate, peace, pioneer, precious, premise, preserve, principle(d), pristine, pro-flag/children/environment, prosperity, protect, proud/pride, provide, reform, sights, share, strength, success, tough, truth, unique, vision, we/us/our, workfare

Here are the words Republicans should use when speaking of Democrats:

anti-flag/family/child/jobs, betray, coercion, collapse, consequences, corruption, crisis, decay, deeper, destroy, destructive, devour, endanger, failure, greed, hypocrisy, ideological, impose, incompetent, insecure, liberal, lie, limit(s), pathetic, permissive attitude, radical, self-serving, sensationalists, shallow, sick, they/them, threaten, traitors, unionized bureaucracy, urgent, waste

Note that Gingrich draws much more from the simple, direct words of advertising campaigns than from Latinate obfuscation. Writing in *Mother Jones*, George Packard refers to this technique as the *danger of clarity*, observing that these seemingly simple and tough-minded words blow out as much theatrical

smoke as the jargon of the Pentagon of decades past.¹ Nowhere is this smoke thicker than in the lingo the corporate-politico-media squad uses when talking about public schools. The phrase *failing public schools* has a lot in common with *war on terror*: get the media to parrot these phrases often enough so that you can't hear *terrorism* without thinking there's a need for war, and you can't hear *public schools* without thinking they are failing and need to be fixed.

This language works: ordinary people without an ax to grind, people who haven't set foot in a school for thirty years or more, will testify to failing public schools. This technique forestalls debate about what matters in public schools because the corporate and political elite have already defined both the problem and the solution. We have all become prisoners of their rhetoric, and it's time we break the chains that bind us. The beginning of education for democracy is to call things by their right name. And then to stand by those words.

In the hands of the U.S. Department of Education, the very title No Child Left Behind, hijacked from the Children's Defense Fund, has become the moral equivalent of the Pentagon's *pacification*. Of course, other verbal pyrotechnics are at work here—what Orwell called doublespeak. No Child Left Behind means the opposite of what it says. It is a plan not to help every school succeed but to declare public schools failures and accelerate the use of vouchers, turning public education over to private, for-profit firms. It is also a plan to blame the victim: the government declares it's leaving no child behind, so if a kid ends up on the streets after tenth grade, it must be his fault.

There's nothing new about politicians using slippery language to round up and herd the citizenry. The rhetoric of *school reform of the twenty-first century*—and watch the buzzwords pile up in *this* phrase—is filled with refrains repeated so often that people accept them as normal and even descriptive of reality. Here's an example from the *Raleigh News and Observer*:

Wake County's dozen year-round elementary and middle schools will be the first in the state to learn whether their spring test results meet rigorous new federal standards for student performance.

Rigorous: the federal beacon for measuring up to the government's tough new rules. Think how the spin would be transformed by substituting *abusive*. Abusive isn't an overstatement to describe what's happening to third graders across the country. Those who think *rigor* is a terrific word to describe the education of children they care about should do what California teacher and mother of four Nancy Barr did and look it up in the dictionary.

Rigor: a harsh or cruel act; a state of rigidity in living tissues or organs that prevents response to stimuli; death stiffening; inclemency; rugged sternness; relentless severity; cruelty; severity of life; voluntary submission to pain; inflexibility; something hard to endure.²

Rigor: Strictness or severity, as in temperament, action, or judgment.

A harsh or trying circumstance; hardship.

A harsh or cruel act.

Physiology: A state of rigidity in living tissues or organs that prevents response to stimuli.

Syn: Stiffness; rigidity; inflexibility; severity; austerity; sternness; harshness; strictness; exactness.³

It is hard to imagine parents giving permission for the state to apply *any* of these principles to their children.

Daily, the media bombards us with news of the movers and shakers. In this chapter we're going to ask, What about the moved and the shaken? We'll start by looking at the lingo of a few Standardistas, peeling away the onion-layered duplicity.

Refrain: *I've walked in your shoes.*

Example: "I've been a superintendent of a large city and I've walked in your shoes. . . . I think being a superintendent is one of the roughest jobs in America."

Speaker: Secretary of Education Rod Paige, in a speech approving the District of Columbia Accountability Plan under No Child Left Behind, June 9, 2003.

What It Means: In education, I'm a hero. In education policy, I'm a hero.

What It Hides: The shady practices in Houston, such as grossly underreported push-out rates.

Subtext: Did he mention he's a hero?

Refrain: *preparing all students for the twenty-first-century economy*

Example: "Today, more than ever, we live in a global economy where competition and technology are changing the workplace and impacting economic success for all Americans. U.S. schools must change if they are to prepare all students for the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century. This is not a partisan issue."

Speaker: Edward B. Rust Jr., chairman and CEO of State Farm Insurance Companies, former cochair of the Business Coalition for Excellence in Education, former chair of the Business Roundtable's Education Initiative, director of Achieve, Inc., former chair of American Enterprise Institute, member of President Bush's Transition Advisory Team committee on education, member of the National (Glenn) Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the Twenty-First Century.

What It Means: When you and your kids can't find living-wage jobs, blame the schools.

What It Hides: We're shipping tons of jobs overseas.

Subtext: Don't try to figure out whether Rust is a Democrat or a Republican. Both political parties joined corporate America in selling out public education. Does any worker in the cutthroat competitive marketplace want his child's school to operate the way corporate America does?

Refrain: an opportunity to give them more credibility and status than they've ever had

Example: "One strength of the AFT [American Federation of Teachers] is that we are very good at walking and chewing gum at the same time. Our paraleaders, just like our teacher leaders, are fighting to save jobs and, at the same time, working to raise professional standards, which will lead to better outcomes for students and better pay for a group of people whose contributions have long gone unrecognized. Remember—early in the reauthorization process, there was an effort to eliminate paraprofessionals from Title I. Instead, we got an opportunity to give them more credibility and status than they've ever had."

Speaker: Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers, keynote address. QuEST Conference, Washington, D.C., July 10, 2003.

What It Means: Union members are helpless without their unions.

What It Hides: Paraprofessionals will have to obtain two-year college degrees to keep their jobs.

Subtext: The status of paraprofessionals comes from the communities to which they contribute invaluable services. Forcing them to learn calculus to keep their jobs, part of the corporate redefinition of *skill* in schools, is both unjust and immoral and may well be part of the ongoing plan to deprofessionalize and decertify teachers.

Refrain: You can't manage what you don't measure.

Example: "You can't manage what you don't measure. No executive can run a business without accurate, granular data that explains what's working and what's not. Our school systems should be no different. Better reporting of student performance will allow educators, parents, and policy makers to see where we need to improve and by how much."

Speaker: Joseph M. Tucci, president and CEO of EMC Corporation and chairman of the Business Roundtable's Education and the Workforce Task Force.

What It Means: Character traits like faith, hope, and charity count for nothing; talent in music, the arts, woodworking, or mechanics counts for nothing.

What It Hides: Learning for the sake of learning will be wiped out of the public school system. Everything must have a measured and measurable value.

Subtext: Data warehousing is the growth industry of our time. Public schools will be structured as businesses and treat the people in them as badly as businesses treat their employees.

Refrain: schools, just like any business . . .

Example: “In tough financial times, schools, just like any business or organization, must take a good hard look at why they exist and what are the critical steps necessary for fulfilling their primary mission. It may be appropriate for schools to eliminate past practices that no longer produce the kind of academic gains required in NCLB.”

Speaker: Michigan Business Leaders for Educational Excellence (MBLEE) press release: “Tough Financial Times Offer Great Opportunity for No Child Left Behind,” January 27, 2003.

What It Means: For the Business Roundtable, schools exist to serve the needs of corporate America. Increasingly, “eliminating past practices” means zapping recess, kindergarten nap time, libraries, the arts, and so on.

What It Hides: It hides the real agenda of schools’ corporate partners.

Subtext: You’re never good enough, you’re never good enough, you’re never good enough.

Refrain: clear, honest, bold data

Example: “This nation has a deep moral commitment to the principles of No Child Left Behind. Reporting achievement by student groups will be eye-opening for many people. We must be clear, honest, and bold about the data and use it to make changes to ensure that all students are performing at high levels.”

Speaker: John J. Castellani, president of the Business Roundtable.

What It Means: The BRT is going to use the data to screw public schools.

What It Hides: The Business Roundtable commissioned a national telephone survey to get an early signal about parent and voter understanding of the new accountability systems to help state leaders communicate effectively about the new changes.

Subtext: The proliferation of uncontrolled data would scare parents—if they knew about it.

Refrain: highly qualified teacher

Example: “Rod Paige has opted to define *highly qualified* in an eminently sensible way: knowing something about what one is teaching. In doing so, he has run up against the AACTE.⁴ Traditional certification, as championed by this educators’ guild, emphasizes the ‘how’ of teaching as much as, or even more than, the ‘what.’ Prospective teachers fill their days with courses in ‘Educational Psychology’ and ‘Social & Philosophical Foundations of American Education.’ By the time a new math teacher graduates, he may or may not know what calculus is, but he’ll sure know every theory about how to teach it.”

Speaker: Editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*.⁵

What It Means: The *Wall Street Journal* and its corporate allies have contempt for teacher-training institutions.

What It Hides: The transformation of schools of education into test-prep academies. The elimination of the history and philosophy of education, of different ways to teach reading and math, so teachers will be dependent on the test-prep materials handed to them by district officials who have contracts with McGraw-Hill et al.

Subtext: Media giants are readily available as mouthpieces for corporate policies.

Refrain: if a school is failing

Example: “The whole idea is that if a school is failing, the students that happen to be there ought not be doomed to attending that school for the rest of the academic year.”⁶

Speaker: Frances Marine, Florida State Department of Education.

What It Means: The “failing” label comes from a jerry-rigged federal formula that will have nearly every public school in America so labeled. Vermont, for one, anticipates 100 percent failure.

What It Hides: The label is not reality. Parents may be very well satisfied with the education their children are receiving. When given the opportunity to transfer to other schools—schools receiving a “successful” label—the vast majority of parents opt to keep their children where they are.

Subtext: Public school failure is being decided and decreed by forces not in the community and for purposes not linked to the school.

Refrain: strip away costly activities which drain resources and distract schools

Example: “NCLB is not just “another thing” that schools are being asked to do. It provides a structure and a challenge to schools that will help them strip away costly activities and practices which drain resources and distract schools from completing their central purpose, which is to educate kids.”

Speaker: Jim Sandy, executive director of Michigan Business Leaders for Educational Excellence.

What It Means: Only tested subjects count in reports of school adequacy.

What It Hides: Art, music, and drama, regarded as “costly activities” and even frills by the business community, are being dropped by schools. Libraries, another frill, are disappearing. In states that don’t test science, even science is vanishing.

Subtext: At the demand of corporate America, public schools are being standardized into sterile mediocrity.

Refrain: the noble profession of teaching

Example: “We’re asking a lot of America’s teachers, and they deserve our full support. We have a President in office who has repeatedly emphasized the need for action to encourage Americans to enter and remain in the noble profession of teaching. Republicans have taken major steps under President Bush to give teachers more freedom and resources to do their jobs—and even more help is on the way.”

Speaker: U.S. House Education and the Workforce Committee chairman John Boehner (R-OH), in honor of Teacher Appreciation Week.⁷

What It Means: The Bush administration wants licensure and certification requirement eased so that other Americans can enter the profession. Funny that he specifies *Americans*. Several states are recruiting in India.

What It Hides: The Bush administration insists that any Tom, Dick, or Harry—retired military personnel, Wall Street analyst, or candlestick maker—can be a teacher and that professional courses offered by colleges of education are a waste of time.

Subtext: There’s a move afoot to deprofessionalize teaching by instituting a tier system: master teachers will get upward of \$100,000, and they will direct subteachers to dish out direct instruction. You don’t need a professional to read a script, but you reassure parents by announcing someone making \$100,000 is in charge of their children’s education.

Refrain: stakeholders

Look at these examples—what’s being said and who’s saying it (indicated in end-notes). Think about the subtext.

Examples:

- Establish a decision-making process that ensures input from all affected stakeholders.⁸
- A Letter to Citizens and Other Stakeholders in the District of Columbia⁹
- 7.1.14 Communicate effectively with stakeholders via electronic mail (email, video conferencing, electronic newsletters, presentation software, etc.)¹⁰
- The Plan was developed under the leadership of the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education (MBRT) by key stakeholders throughout Maryland that represented not only the educational community but the public and private sectors as well.¹¹
- Our membership—which includes the leading CEOs in Ohio—is excited about this opportunity and we will work vigorously with Battelle, Governor Taft, the Ohio General Assembly, the State Board of Education, education

stakeholders, and others in the business community to make Ohio's public schools the most improved in the nation by 2006, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.¹²

Refrain: global marketplace/economy/knowledge

Examples:

- In an era of ongoing transition where globalization is creating unprecedented world competitiveness, and redefining how society lives, works and plays, education is facing a myriad of challenges as it prepares students for the world of tomorrow. A significant challenge is in ensuring their ability to work effectively in a technically focused society, and use its tools in a productive and efficient manner to find, exchange and leverage information.¹³
- Pennsylvania's business leaders believe all high school graduates entering the workforce need to have the academic knowledge, skills and work habits required in the high-performance workplace. The challenges of global competition have changed business and industry conditions dramatically. We believe Pennsylvania's education system also needs to change to ensure that our students become the successful learners and workers of the future.¹⁴
- In order for MPS [Milwaukee Public Schools] to attain our goal of providing every student a world-class education that will allow them to be competent and competitive contributors in a global economy, District administrators and teachers must be able to immediately access information to monitor results, evaluate progress, plan for and act to implement improvements, and, finally, report back to stakeholders. (Milwaukee Public Schools superintendent Carol Johnson)¹⁵

Some word generators combine stakeholders and globals.

- The enhanced global perspectives brought on by exploding information technologies have precipitated dramatic changes in industry. Recognizing that suppliers and customers are stakeholders in the product realization process and bringing them onto the production team has resulted in significant improvement in quality and efficiency.¹⁶

Putting the Data Before the Kid

No question: the Business Roundtable and its bedfellows insist that schools become data-driven depots, or, as Frederick W. Smith, CEO of Federal Express, puts it on the Business Coalition for Education Reform website:¹⁷ "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it."¹⁸ One would point out to Smith and his allies that kids aren't packages to be delivered from one teacher to the next.

In November 2002, business leaders were invited *to hear leading thinkers on the power of data to drive educational change* at the Business and Education

2002 Conference: The New Era of Education Reform—Corporate Opportunities to Strengthen Tomorrow’s Workforce. Codirected by the National Alliance of Business (NAB) and the Conference Board,²⁰ the conference featured a panel discussion titled “The Business Role in Pre K–16 Learning: Aligning the Knowledge Supply Chain,” which was moderated by Robert T. Jones, NAB president and CEO. Panel members included Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education; Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust; Andrea Leskes, director of the Greater Expectations Project and vice president for education and quality initiatives for the Association of American Colleges and Universities; Gabriella Morris, president of the Prudential Foundation and vice president of community resources for Prudential Financial, Inc.; and Nancy Zimpher, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Keynoting was Edward B. Rust, chairman of the board and CEO of the company of the year, State Farm Insurance Companies. If your eyes glaze over from reading the names, keep the corporate connections in mind.

In 1755, in the preface to his *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson wrote, “I am not so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of earth.” The words of the National Alliance of Business are sons of the compost heap.

Every time we hear the ubiquitous ed-bizspeak—*schools as data-driven institutions, data-driven reform, total data control, data-driven decision making*—we must stop and challenge it. Stop and ask about the numbers game that obscures the very real needs of real children. Think of the historical uses of data without social conscience, asking yourself if following orders to produce more data can ever be justified. As we read that IBM is pushing “a data warehousing solution packaged with technology, services and critical intellectual capital that can help improve student achievement through better information management and data-driven decision making,”²¹ we’re reminded that there’s a close relationship between the Auschwitz tattoo and IBM data sorters: IBM supplied the data solution to the Third Reich.²²

Today, IBM is in the *solutions* business. It offers eight data solutions “to leverage your school district’s technology investment to address and benefit from the NCLB legislation”: Insight at School, Riverdeep Learning Village, Network Infrastructure Services, professional development tools and services, and more. For starters, people who think data collection is the answer to education’s woes should ask themselves if a kid ever snuggled up to data. Or if data ever convinced him to read a book. Or listened to questions and concerns.

But data-mining entrepreneurs will shrug that off as so much romanticism, pointing to Wal-Mart’s massive data warehousing as a model for schools. Just keep in mind that not only does Wal-Mart mine its own databases, but it allows its suppliers to mine them, too. The idea of school data moving out to the marketplace scares and offends lots of people. Conservatives have long been

alert to the potentials for schools to collaborate on privacy invasion; it's past time for progressives to wake up. Maybe the U.S. Patriot Act sections 507 and 508, amending the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which prohibited disclosure of student records without consent, will wake up a few people.²³ Under Patriot Act section 507, the attorney general or a designee may "collect education records in the possession of the educational agency or institution that are relevant to an authorized investigation or prosecution of an offense." No suspicion of wrongdoing is necessary, only relevance to an investigation. The Patriot Act absolves the educational agency from notifying parents of their rights; it also removes legal liability from the educational agency for producing the data. Section 508 specifies as an additional source for data the National Center for Education Statistics, whose handbook provides 475 data elements—starting with prenatal information, number of dental fillings, religion, family income range, and so on and so on.

Those who worship at the data collection altar should remember that although data never disappears, it sometimes goes awry. Take the Air Force Academy. A confidential list of forty to fifty cadets suspected of stealing, drunken driving, making fake ID cards, and downloading pornography was mistakenly emailed to everybody at the academy instead of to the intended recipients, the school administrators. The list included cadets being counseled for emotional problems. Then there's the security breach in the computer system that stored data for the HOPE Scholarship program in Georgia. The Georgia Student Finance Commission inadvertently released personal data about thousands of students; at the same time, passwords allowing access to computers at the agency were exposed on Google. This meant hackers could have used the passwords and codes to gain access to any file in the commission's computer. Any file. They could have used the doorway into the commission's network to enter other state databases, including those containing tax and medical records.

Another concern is that once data is collected, it can follow you forever. Take the Florida woman who, years ago, under a physician's care in Massachusetts, took Prozac. Then, out of the blue, she received, unsolicited and without consultation with a physician, a free one-month trial of the prescription medication Prozac Weekly—delivered to her current home in Florida. She wonders how somebody got into her medical records and started sending her dangerous medications.²⁴ A counsel for the Health Privacy Project in Washington observes that health care data is being bought, sold, and used like any other commodity.

In December 2003, *Wired* reported that one of the nation's largest commercial distributors of voter data sold voter registration lists featuring detailed personal information without verifying the identity or intent of buyers.

Aristotle International used a website to sell the lists, which contain details

about registered voters from nearly every state. The data includes birth dates, home addresses, phone numbers, race, income levels, ethnic backgrounds and, in some cases, religious affiliations.²⁵

Children’s school data is just as vulnerable. Test scores, discipline reports, visits to the school psychologist—it will sit in the data warehouse until someone figures out how to make a buck off it.

Business Roundtable Threats and Braggadocio

When relating what he learned from his experiences in setting state standards in Georgia, Gary Lee, director of the United Parcel Service Foundation, offered advice to other employers should they encounter any opposition to the BRT’s agenda. Lee told them to remind their communities that U.S.-based companies can find skilled workers for everything from manufacturing to software development overseas, adding that companies increasingly decide where to locate their operations both in the United States and abroad on the basis of workforce quality and the performance of local school systems.

Does anybody believe that the BRT’s pricey lobbying for a permanent China free-trade policy had anything to do with the *schools* there? And funny thing: as we read about cities wooing Boeing during its relocation flirtation, it was tax breaks, not teacher qualifications, making the headlines. One newspaper dubbed it “the tax-breaks arms race.” Chicago won, with Illinois kicking in \$41 million in tax write-offs and the city ponying up another \$19 million.

Standing by Words

In a document titled “ ‘Knowledge Supply Chain’: Managing K–80 Learning,”²⁶ the National Alliance of Business describes teachers as *knowledge suppliers* and schools as *the knowledge supply chain*:

- I dream of the day when I can go to a knowledge systems integrator, specify my needs and have them put all the partners together to deliver the people I need.
- Applying the principles of the material supply chain to the process of lifelong learning is a cost-effective, efficient way businesses can ensure that worker knowledge is put to use to help companies’ bottom line.
- Increased understanding by students and faculty at all levels of the education system of business and competitive needs of industry.

Teachers need to speak up, reminding the NAB and others of its ilk that *teacher* and *student* are honorable words, that their relationship is sacred; knowledge

systems integrators and the competitive needs of industry be damned. Even so, we must acknowledge that there's plenty of evidence that *teacher* and *student* as honorable terms is merely a quaint notion—hence the nostalgia for the *Dead Poet's Society* or *The Emperor's Club* and the fantasy revenge on Professor Umbridges, who only get their comeuppance in the world of wizards and witches.

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2. From <http://dictionary.reference.com>.
3. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th edition. 2000. Boston, Houghton Mifflin.
4. American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.
5. "Teacher Liberation." 2003. Editorial. *Wall Street Journal*, 2 July. This editorial's wretched excess in attacking colleges of education and teachers who have made the profession their life's calling is a good example of a writer being unable to contain his bile. Here are the last two sentences: "Three cheers to the Bush Administration for picking this fight. Alternative certification will clear the way for intelligent, talented (and much-needed) teachers to head to the front of the classroom." The clear implication is that the stupid, untalented ones are there now. Accessed at <http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB105710414522406500,00.html?mod=opinion>.
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17. See *www.bcer.org*. BCER members include American Business Conference; Business–Higher Education Forum; the Business Roundtable; the Chamber of Commerce of the United States; Committee for Economic Development; the Conference Board; Council of Growing Companies; Council on Competitiveness; National Alliance of Business; National Association of Manufacturers; National Association of Women Business Owners; U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and Utility/Business Education Coalition. Affiliate members include Achieve, Inc.; National Association of Partners in Education, Inc.; and U.S. Department of Education.

18. This is a popular adage, employed at various times by Peter Rucker and Rudy Giuliani, among others. As noted earlier in this chapter, Joseph M. Tucci said pretty much the same thing.

19. National Alliance of Business. 1998. “‘Knowledge Supply Chain’: Managing K–80 Learning.” *Work America* 15 (5).

20. Conference sponsors were Merrill Lynch and Pfizer. Presenting assistance were Prudential Financial; ACT; Johnson & Johnson; Target Corp.; State Farm Insurance; Glaxo-SmithKline; AOL Time Warner Foundation; and Thomson DBM.

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23. The authors wish to thank Peggy Daly-Masternak, a Toledo, Ohio, parent activist in issues affecting education and neighborhoods, for making her valuable research available.

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