

# The Public Eye

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## Teaching the Bible The Right's Attack on Public Schools

BY BARBARA MINER

The religious right, helped by more moderate conservative forces, has taken aim at the very concept of a system of public schools that provides education to everyone. While the religious right has not abandoned its high profile campaigns against reproductive rights and lesbian and gay rights, the attack on public education stands out as its current primary focus.

It is vitally important that progressives pay particular attention to the attack on public schools, whether or not, as individuals, they relate directly to the schools. The existence of a high-quality public education system affects the entire society, not just teachers, administrators, maintenance personnel, parents, and children.

In a report released this September titled, "A Right Wing and a Prayer," People for the American Way (PFAW), which has tracked the right and schools for nearly two decades, argues that the religious right's education goals are twofold: "To redirect substantial public funds into an industry of private sectarian schools that serves a core constituency of the right; and to use whatever public education system that remains to impose a set of beliefs and ideas on America's next generation."<sup>1</sup>

The main political emphasis of the

religious right, particularly on a national level, is implementing voucher programs which would provide tax dollars to send children to religious schools. Under a voucher system, fundamentalist parents would be able to send their children to religious schools controlled by Christian fundamentalists—and have the government pay for it.

Deanna Duby, director of education policy for PFAW, notes that national religious right organizations such as the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family have also put a high priority on affecting local policy for school boards. She points to the enormous amount of material generated by right-wing organizations—including radio programs, books, videos, and training manuals on how to become involved in education—as proof that the right has identified public education as a key sector for activism.<sup>2</sup> Because it is in the schools that our values as a nation are formed, the goal of the right is to institutionalize their values by replacing what they see as the current curriculum of "secular humanist" values.

On its own, the religious right does not have the popular support or political clout to implement its agenda. In recent decades, however, it has forged a working relationship with more main-

stream conservatives in the Republican Party—an unholy alliance in which each wing of the Party is trying to use the other for its advantage. The alliance also rests on an understanding by both religious and more mainstream conservatives that sustaining their coalition is crucial if the Republican Party is to dominate the country's political structures. Thus, even when more moderate conservatives disagree with the religious right, they rarely speak up publicly for fear of jeopardizing the alliance and/or incurring the religious right's wrath. This is particularly true in the case of the right's agenda for schools.

If progressives are to defeat the religious right's agenda, we must scrutinize both the points of unity and the points of difference within the right's attack on the schools, and begin to drive a wedge between the religious right and its allies within more mainstream conservatism.

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# From the Director

Common sense tells us that schools are a crucial site of socialization for children. It is less obvious why conservative Christians and more secular Rightists feel so threatened by contemporary school curricula that they have placed monitoring and attacking the schools at the very center of their agenda. Although much of contemporary public school curricula offends the Right's anti-modernism, their opposition reflects more than a simple difference of opinion.

For many conservative Christians, the values and practices of modernity are a palpable danger to their children. In their worldview, in which evil is a constant threat, only the vigilant will continue to reside safely in God's grace. Exposing children to allegedly dangerous, sinful, and wrong-headed ideas, such as sex before marriage and homosexuality, invites them to take up these practices. From this perspective, exposure is not an educational experience, but a victory for the forces of evil.

From the viewpoint of a conservative Christian parent, the school's role is to teach the basics of education, and leave the formation of children's values and attitudes in the parents' hands. A Christian school, or one with a strong Christian ethic as part of its culture, that imparts values that are consistent with those of conservative Christian parents is, therefore, a safe place for children. Control of children is not subject to debate; they are under the control of their parents until they are grown. The village *does not* raise the children.

Always on the look-out for good issues for recruitment and mobilization, the Right's leadership is keenly aware that parents anxious to prevent their child's exposure to the mores and practices of what is perceived as anti-Christian "secular humanism" are easily convinced that the public schools are the sites of grave danger. In this issue of *The Public Eye*, Barbara Miner analyzes the coalition of sectors within the Right that has been most active in mining the opposition to "secular humanism" in the schools. She identifies the shades of difference that characterize each sector, reviews the anti-democratic tactics used by the Right to gain control over the public schools and promote the fortunes of Christian and other private schools, and focuses especially on vouchers as a method of undermining and defunding public schools.

Progressives cannot defend the public schools without acknowledging the need for their reform. Barbara Miner's article reminds us that if we do not defend the public schools, we will lose a flawed—but crucial—system of public education that, at its best, transmits democratic values and habits of tolerance to each new generation. If the Right prevails, the values transmitted will be a narrow brand of conservative Christianity.

— Jean Hardisty

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A COALITION OF SECTORS

Different terms are used to describe the various forces in the conservative movement: traditional vs. religious right, economic vs. social right, mainstream vs. far right, Old Right vs. New Right. This article generally will refer to the two major groupings as the religious right and the more secular economic right.

From the outside, it often appears that these two sectors are of one mind on education: abolish the US Department of Education, return all educational authority to states and localities, and support school prayer, privatization and vouchers. But this seeming unity masks important differences among conservatives on education issues. The most significant point of cleavage is between the religious right—which not only bases its views on a literal interpretation of the Bible but also seeks to place Biblical law at the center of public policy—and those who remain secular in their orientation despite rhetoric that often matches that of the religious right. “The key difference is in the word religion,” argues George Kaplan, an educational analyst in Washington, DC who has studied the religious right.<sup>3</sup>

Kaplan sees a theocratic vision at the heart of the religious right’s agenda, in keeping with evangelical Christianity’s belief in a literal interpretation of the Bible. For this reason, Christian rightists are determined that their children receive religious instruction as the foundation of their school curriculum. A number of religious right organizations reflect this parental goal and have placed education issues at the center of their political work. These include Louis Sheldon’s Traditional Values Coalition, Rev. Donald Wildmon’s American Family Association, Citizens for Excellence in Education/National Association of Christian Educators, Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum, Rev. James Dobson’s Focus on the Family, and Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition.

Within the economic wing of the conservative movement, there are greater internal contradictions than those within the religious right. The economic right encompasses three ma-

ior groupings: traditional conservatives, neoconservatives, and libertarians. The diversity in these groupings covers venture capitalists, small and large entrepreneurs, free-market ideologues, so-called “moderate” Republicans, and cultural conservatives. These forces are united, however, in their belief in the wonders of the marketplace. While religious conservatives base their ideology on the Bible, economic conservatives pay homage to corporate capitalism.

Traditional conservatives, noted during the Cold War for their opposition to communism, have also always been opposed to the New Deal and to liberalism. Their views are best expressed in the *National Review* magazine, founded by William Buckley in 1955. The neoconservative movement sprung up in the 1960s and 1970s, founded by former liberals alarmed by what they considered the excesses of communism and by the anti-war, civil rights, gay rights, and women’s movements. These origins explain in part the cultural/social emphasis of many neoconservatives. Originally viewed as to the left of traditional conservatism, the neoconservative movement has steadily moved rightward over the years. Many, including the “godfather” of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, now argue that the movement is virtually indistinguishable from traditional con-

servatism.

Some of the most prominent conservative education reformers tend to be associated with the neoconservative movement and many served in the Reagan and/or Bush Administrations. These include Chester Finn, currently head of the Fordham Foundation; former presidential hopeful and former Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander; and William Bennett, former Secretary of Education, drug czar, and now best-selling author of *The Book of Virtues*. Of the three, Bennett is closest on education issues to those in the religious right, and his focus on culture and morals allows him to act as a bridge to many religious conservatives.

Libertarians are distinct from both traditional conservatives and neoconservatives. More ideologically driven, libertarians oppose almost any government regulation of the marketplace and champion individual liberty and choice. They support vouchers and privatization based on ideological principle, while other conservatives often support such policies in the more pragmatic belief that private business and private schools will provide services more efficiently and will foster increased “competition.” While libertarians are the religious right’s most consistent allies in the fight for school



THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT'S MODEL OF EDUCATION

vouchers, they are often at odds with the religious right over social concerns such as gay rights and the right to abortion. On these social issues, libertarians tend to favor protecting the individual's freedom to make personal choices.

It is also important to mention the business community, a sector that, while generally aligned with the economic wing of the Republican Party, has several distinct identities and often a decidedly bi-partisan approach. Business interests, in particular representatives of larger multinational corporations, are often reluctant to give up on public schools and advocate reforms such as school-business partnerships, school-to-work programs, and higher curriculum standards. Many in the business community have also resisted more grandiose voucher and privatization schemes, in part for economic reasons. As explained by Ann Bastian, an education policy analyst at the New World Foundation: "There is a real economy of scale to the structure of public education and business people are often quicker to recognize this than the ideologues. Many business people also don't want to come up with the tax dollars to pay for children in private schools because the costs would be prohibitive in the short run."<sup>4</sup>

#### DIFFERING AGENDAS

It is perhaps easiest to pick out the various areas where economic and religious conservatives agree on education issues. But if one is to try to drive a wedge into their working coalition, it is important to identify the issues on which they *disagree* — and to publicize those disagreements. The religious right, for instance, often emphasizes its opposition to gay rights and national curriculum standards, pointing out the evils of secular humanism, and its support for issues such as home-schooling, creationism, school prayer, and censorship of what they see as objectionable books. Such books range from novels by authors such as Maya Angelou (whose autobiography, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, talks of a childhood rape), to sex and health curricula, to books on tolerance towards gays and lesbians. Progressive

educators familiar with the religious right argue that their differences with the economic right sometimes appear to be based on rhetoric and emphasis—for example, how strongly they push for school prayer or how strongly they attack the rights of gay and lesbian students. Those differences ultimately stem from a fundamental split over the role of religion in education.

In particular, the leaders of the religious right are adamant in their desire to integrate their specific form of religion, fundamentalist evangelical Christianity, into the schools— either by taking over the public schools and remolding them as religious schools, or by pushing through vouchers for religious

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schools. Civilization, they believe, is driven by a correct understanding of God. The economic right, meanwhile, is primarily concerned with increasing the freedom of the market, by cutting taxes, privatizing government services, and reducing government social programs, especially federal programs that redistribute resources and serve the needs of low-income people and people of color. The public schools, particularly in urban areas, increasingly serve low-income communities, and this is where controversy over education is the strongest. Even in suburban areas, however, a growing number of middle-class and affluent parents are withdrawing their children from public schools and turning to Christian private schools or home-schooling.

A recent newsletter of the Heritage Foundation, which is generally aligned with the economic wing of the right, highlights some of these differences. Reporting on a survey of its member-

ship on a host of issues ranging from the budget deficit to tax policy, the Winter 1995 *Heritage Members News* says: "When it comes to education reform, 70% support school choice programs, while 86% said we should dismantle the Department of Education in order to return power to local school boards. Forty-three percent support setting national standards for education, while 16% support abolishing compulsory education laws." Nothing was mentioned about school prayer, sexuality education, creationism, discussion of sexual preference in the schools, secular humanism, or other education issues that are high priorities for the religious right.

One disagreement between the religious right and more mainstream conservatives involves standards, in particular federal standards. More mainstream conservatives have tactically backed away from the issue of federal standards, in part due to pressure from the hard right and in part due to the fact that a Democrat now sits in the White House and controls the US Department of Education. But in general, mainstream conservatives have long stressed the need to return to "excellence" and "standards"— which they often use as code words for a curriculum focused on Western civilization and traditional interpretations of history. At this point, the more mainstream right is focusing on *voluntary* federal standards and on instituting state standards in those states where Republicans hold power and where standards can be used to mandate a more conservative and traditional curriculum.

But there are those in the religious right who oppose even *voluntary* federal standards. The argument is that standards will turn children into objects of government mind control.<sup>5</sup> As Linda Bowles, a nationally syndicated conservative columnist, wrote in September 1997, "Federal testing will lead to federal control of the curriculum, which opens the door for political ideologues, social change agents and heathen predators to imprint our children with their messages and agendas."<sup>6</sup> Similar criticisms were launched against the standards-reform known as Outcome-

Based Education (OBE), which was popular earlier in the decade, and the federal initiative Goals 2000, an education reform package first proposed by former President Bush. The hard-right attack has been so successful that you never hear the term OBE anymore and rarely hear reference to Goals 2000, even though it technically remains a bipartisan initiative to improve the nation's schools.

Deanna Duby of People for the American Way notes another critical difference between the two sectors of the right: the religious right stresses education based on rote obedience and memorization and prefers to provide children ready-made answers instead of encouraging them to think for themselves. This approach is at odds with that of most economic conservatives, who want to see children improve their problem-solving skills and are not necessarily opposed to sexuality education, or drug prevention programs, as long as academic "excellence" is not compromised. "One of the beliefs that underlies a lot of the religious right's work is that they really don't want any discussion at all about certain issues," Duby said. "They believe that if children are exposed to an idea, or even hear about it, they are vulnerable to being swept up into something different from their parents—that if you hear about sexuality, you are going to have sex, or that if you hear about homosexuality, you are going to become gay."<sup>7</sup>

#### THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT'S SAVVY

One reason that differences between the religious and economic right are sometimes unclear is that the religious right has become media-savvy and has learned to couch its views in high-sounding rhetoric. However, when reading the literature distributed to its members, a different picture emerges.

A typical tract is a book titled *A Guide to the Public Schools for Christian Parents and Teachers and Especially for Pastors*, by Robert Simonds, president of Citizens for Excellence in Education/National Association of Christian Educators. The book notes

that there are three ways to educate one's child: home-schooling ("the only truly biblical plan to educate our children"), Christian schooling ("the next best thing") and public schooling. Simonds says he understands why parents might use the public school ("the most convenient school") but says of public schools: "Morally, children are exposed to many unnecessary courses on human sexuality; occultic New Age indoctrination including necromancy (under hypnosis, talking to the dead); witchcraft; black magic; T.M.; eastern religions, etc.. Social and psychological programs, diaries, visiting morgues, writing their own obituaries and gravestone inscriptions, etc., as English as-

#### ONE IMPORTANT TACTIC FOR PROGRESSIVES IS TO EXPOSE THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT'S COORDINATION OF SEEMINGLY ISOLATED LOCAL SCHOOL ISSUES AND TO PUBLICIZE ITS FULL AGENDA.

signments, have duly and rightfully upset parents."<sup>8</sup> No matter how much the William Bennetts of the world may choose to align with the religious right, it's hard to imagine that they believe in the full range of these charges.

The religious right also often masks its true agenda when it organizes parents at the local level. Thus it is able to build coalitions of parents and community people who may not agree with the religious right's overall goals but who are concerned about educational issues raised by people they see as religious conservatives. For instance, well-meaning parents might become involved in a religious right campaign around curricular issues, such as sex education or the teaching of reading, with the religious right demanding an approach that emphasizes only phonics and, unlike the reading philosophy known as whole language, downplays the need to teach young children to

understand the content of what they are reading. One important tactic for progressives is to expose the religious right's coordination of seemingly isolated local school issues and to publicize its full agenda.

Lee Berg, a Baptist minister who has studied the religious right for over 20 years and now works with the human and civil rights division of the National Education Association (NEA), argues that too many people underestimate the extent to which the religious right is committed to a theocracy, a government based on literal interpretation of Biblical principles. Berg points out that many of the top leaders in the religious right have been strongly influenced by Christian Reconstructionism, which, in essence, seeks to replace democracy with a theocratic form of government.<sup>9</sup> It argues that secular law is always secondary to biblical law, and that it is the duty of Christians to see that God's law is paramount throughout society. Though the movement has received minimal attention in the mainstream media, some analysts consider it the driving ideology of the leadership of the religious right.

The religious right has been most successful at organizing at the grassroots level. In the last decade, it has emphasized both electing fundamentalists to local school boards and training fundamentalist parents and pastors to organize in local schools. No one knows for sure how many religious conservatives serve on the country's 15,000 local school boards, but the number is possibly in the thousands.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the candidates are openly affiliated with religious fundamentalist organizations; oftentimes they run for office as "stealth" candidates who conceal their true beliefs until elected. As one Christian Coalition member said at a workshop during the coalition's 1995 convention, "We are told not to identify ourselves as Christian Coalition members, just as John Q. Public."<sup>11</sup> Ralph Reed, then executive director of the Christian Coalition, told convention-goers: "I would exchange the Presidency for 2,000 school board seats in the United States."<sup>12</sup>

The religious right can feel com-

forted by success even when its school board candidates are not elected: first, because it uses the electoral campaigns to organize parents who can then be mobilized on various issues; second, the right-wing organizing puts the public schools on the defensive and drains energy away from implementing reforms; third, the organizing creates doubts in the public's mind about the well-being of our nation's schools; and fourth, the organizing gets media attention for the right's issues.

The religious right has found it particularly useful to use issues of gay rights to attack schools and teachers' unions, especially the NEA. In a typical attack on the NEA in the fall of 1995, the right-wing religious group Concerned Women for America (CWA) launched a campaign against the NEA because the union had passed a non-binding resolution at its convention—which included support for using Lesbian and Gay History Month as a means of acknowledging the contributions of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals throughout history. CWA, often called the most powerful women's organization in the conservative movement, placed ads in several major newspapers attacking the NEA resolution and sent out a 600,000 piece direct-mail appeal to ask for financial support in its campaign against the NEA. The mailing included pre-printed postcards to be sent to U.S. Senators and then-NEA President Keith Geiger arguing that "pro-homosexual programs" were being "forced on children."

"The right-wing is looking for goblins," notes Jesse Greenman of the PERSON Project, a national network focused on education issues affecting gays and lesbians. "It's like the McCarthy era, except that instead of Communism, now the goblins are gay people."<sup>13</sup>

## POINTS OF AGREEMENT

Economic and religious conservatives agree on a range of education issues. Most important, they both are pushing on the federal and state levels for vouchers that would provide tax dollars for private and religious schools. They also support other privatization efforts, such as contracting with for-profit businesses for everything

from food service to, in some cases, the entire running of a school. They both have an antipathy toward federal education programs, in particular those designed to lessen inequalities due to race, gender, disabilities, or economic status, and they want to eliminate the US Department of Education and federal involvement in education. They also have found broad unity in a rejection of the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. They both argue that the federal government tilted too far to the advantage of poor people and people of color, and that liberals tilted too far to the left on cultural issues. They have also united around so-called

## FOR RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES, THE VOUCHER MOVEMENT PROVIDES A WAY TO FUNNEL PUBLIC DOLLARS INTO PRIVATE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS.

"Parents Rights" legislation. Although varying slightly from state to state, the campaign uses legitimate concern over parent involvement to argue, in essence, that schools serve no broader purpose than meeting individual parental concerns. As People for the American Way notes, "[I]ts core purposes are to aid would-be censors in 'cleansing' public schools of all controversial material, challenge mandatory education laws, jeopardize the effective application of child abuse laws, and pave the way for the passage of legislation that would permit the use of public funds in private, religious schools."<sup>14</sup>

Although they publicly downplay anti-unionism as an explicit strategy, economic and religious conservatives both understand that breaking the power of the teachers' unions is essential to cementing Republican control over state and federal education politics. The unions are not only important allies of the Democratic Party, but are one of the few forces in education able

to match the financial and organizing resources of the right. Economic conservatives also know that unions want decent wages for their members, which drives up the cost of education. Religious conservatives, on the other hand, believe that teachers' unions, in particular the NEA, have opened the school doors to secular humanism and practices such as cooperative learning, whole language, the teaching of evolution, and sexuality education that acknowledges the existence of homosexuals and sexually-active teenagers. (Secular humanism as a movement exists primarily in the religious right's conspiracist theories. While the right uses it to condemn teaching philosophies not based on religion, secular humanism can be best understood as a philosophy, with roots in the Enlightenment, which stresses ethical behavior based on the innate goodness of human beings and the need to promote the larger social good. Because it offers a worldview that is not based on the Bible and the innate "evil" of human beings—an "evil" that can only be controlled by strict adherence to narrowly interpreted Biblical mandates—secular humanism is inherently threatening to religious fundamentalism.)<sup>15</sup>

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VOUCHER ISSUE

Of the various education issues uniting religious and economic conservatives, vouchers is the most important. Using public dollars to provide vouchers to private schools remains the main political goal of both the religious right and its allies in more mainstream conservatism. Defeating the voucher movement is key to defeating the right-wing education agenda of both the religious right and its allies in more mainstream conservatism.

For religious conservatives, the voucher movement provides a way to funnel public dollars into private Christian schools. For economic conservatives, vouchers serve a number of purposes, including furthering an overall goal of privatizing government services and dismantling social entitlements, as well as undermining the role of government in providing for the good of all. "To privatize public education is the center-

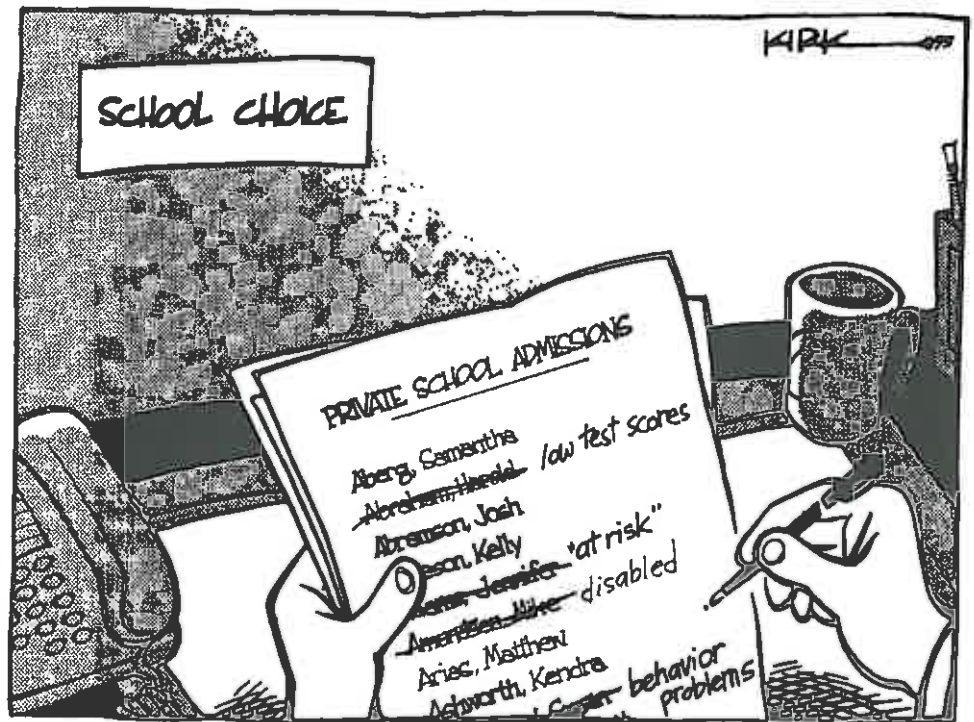
piece, the grand prize of their overall agenda," Ann Bastian writes in the booklet *Selling Out Our Schools: Vouchers, Markets, and the Future of Public Education* published by Rethinking Schools.

Bastian argues that vouchers also serve an important political function for the conservative movement, whether efforts to legislate their use are successful or not. "Vouchers unify the different strands of the right: business entrepreneurs looking for a new public carcass to feed on, having used up the Cold War; anti-government libertarians who worship the free market, having noticed that education is the society's largest public institution; social and religious conservatives who want to break down the separation of church and state, while garnering public funds to run their own schools. Many issues divide the right; vouchers unite them and provide an organizing platform."<sup>16</sup> Politically, vouchers also provide a way to make inroads into the urban Democratic base. Most legislative voucher proposals have targeted low-income students in urban districts and support for vouchers has been stronger among urban African-Americans—who are the group most disadvantaged by the U.S. educational system—than among white Republican suburbanites, who tend, by and large, to be satisfied with their schools.

#### WHAT ARE VOUCHERS?

The voucher movement often uses the rhetoric of "school choice," masking its actual goal, which is to promote a system of vouchers to pay for private school attendance. In fact, most voucher proposals don't even use the term "voucher." Vouchers refer specifically to plans to use public tax dollars to help parents pay tuition at private schools, including religious schools. School choice, in contrast, is a much broader concept that encompasses proposals to let students attend public schools in other districts, or allows students to choose various public schools within a district.

In late 1997, the only operating voucher programs are small, experimental initiatives in Milwaukee and Cleveland. In both cities conservatives have



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tried to include religious schools in the programs. Courts in both cities have struck down that inclusion on the grounds that it violates the separation of church and state. The cases are currently under appeal and ultimately the issue of private school vouchers is expected to go before the US Supreme Court. In Cleveland, the courts have allowed religious schools to take part in the program until the constitutional issues are resolved: in Milwaukee, religious schools have not been allowed into the voucher program until the courts make a final ruling.

There have been four efforts to institute statewide voucher programs—in Oregon, California, Colorado, and Washington state. In each case, the issue was put to the voters and defeated by a margin of roughly 2-1. (One of the unexpected sources of opposition to vouchers came from suburban parents who were not dissatisfied with their schools and who did not want vouchers to be used as a way for urban children to attend suburban schools.) On the federal level, conservatives have tried to institute some form of voucher program either through tax measures or so-called "scholarship" programs for low-income students. Given the difficulties of getting a full-scale voucher program passed, some Republicans are emphasizing tu-

ition tax credits or tax free savings accounts. Such measures, which are politically appealing because they are packaged as a "tax relief," provide a backhanded way for the government to help middle class parents pay for private schools; while no money is directly given to parents, families are able to reduce the amount of money they would otherwise have to pay in taxes.

Bastian writes that one of the difficulties in organizing against vouchers is that many people are unaware that vouchers are a key goal of the right wing. "It is remarkable how often a voucher battle erupts and people think it is just happening in their own backward city or state, as a sort of random product of nasty times." She adds, "... While a variety of groups and individuals may support vouchers for their own reasons, vouchers are the agenda of the political right in this country and we ought to know it and say it."<sup>17</sup> One of the many tasks of progressives is to cut through the mystifying rhetoric of school choice and expose the reality of vouchers, while defending the right to student choice.

As Rita Tenorio, an editor of the newspaper *Rethinking Schools*, argues: "Public school students must have choices. Few would disagree with that. But choice is more than an individual concern. We must build a public school

system where all students have as many choices as possible—not where we provide public money for private school options for a few. Further, it is not simply a matter of parents choosing a private school but of private schools choosing students. And if a private school doesn't want your child, whether for academic, disciplinary, religious, or financial reasons, there is nothing you can do."

Another challenge is that the right has exploited widespread discontent with public education, particularly in urban areas, to promote its agenda, forcing progressives to both defend and reform public schools at the same time. There is, however, a way to do both. Above all, progressives must point out that vouchers have little to do with reform and everything to do with subverting the very concept of a public education system. As Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities* and other books on public education, argued in an interview in *Selling Out Our Schools*: "We've got to be blunt about the problems in a public system and be harsh critics of those problems. We don't want to be in the position of knee-jerk defenders of the public schools against the bad guys."

"But we have to be careful not to succumb to this nonsense that a public system is inherently flawed and that therefore we have to turn to the marketplace for solutions. I've never in my entire life seen any evidence that the competitive free market, unrestricted, without a strong counterpoise within the public sector, will ever dispense decent medical care, sanitation, transportation, or education to the people. It's as simple as that."

What holds true for vouchers is applicable for much of the religious right's agenda on education. While the religious right seeks to subvert the US Constitution—in particular the separation between church and state—and in many cases is attempting to mandate religiously-based curriculum in our public schools, the more mainstream conservative movement is locked in a dangerous alliance with this theocratic agenda. Which leaves the job of unmasking the right's agenda to the progressive movement.

## CONCLUSION

Despite popular concern about the state of our public schools, there is no indication that the public at large subscribes to the religious right's agenda. Indeed, there remains widespread and deep support for a public system of schools that provides an equal education to all—no matter how tarnished that ideal may be in reality. If the religious right were to win its agenda, that long-standing ideal would be abandoned. Progressives have the right and responsibility to appeal to the positive American tradition of public schooling for all, equally available. We must defend our system of public schools while at the same time working to transform it so that public schools do indeed provide quality education for all.

*Barbara Miner is managing editor of Rethinking Schools, an education newspaper based in Milwaukee, and co-editor of the booklet Selling Out Our Schools. This article is based in part on an article that originally appeared in Vol. 10 #3 of Rethinking Schools. For more information contact: Rethinking Schools, 1001E. Keeffe Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53212. 1-800-669-4192. www.rethinkingschools.org.*

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> People for the American Way, *A Right Wing and a Prayer: The Religious Right in Your Public Schools*, Executive Summary, page 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 10 #3, "Splits on the Right: What Do They Mean for Education?" pages 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Many progressive educators have also opposed attempts to institute federal and state standards, arguing that they can lead to more standardized testing. Most standardized tests have been shown to be biased against poor children and children of color. Many progressive educators also worry that the standards being designed are too rigid and Eurocentric, are punitive in nature, and are designed to increase tracking.

<sup>6</sup>Linda Bowles, "Federal testing will lead

to federal control," *Conservative Chronicle*, Sept. 24, 1997, page 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 10 #3, "Splits on the Right: What Do They Mean for Education?" page 13.

<sup>8</sup> Robert L. Simonds, *A Guide to the Public Schools For Christian Parents and Teachers, and Especially For Pastors*. Citizens for Excellence in Education: Costa Mesa, CA, 1993, pages 66-67.

<sup>9</sup> *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 10 #3, "Splits on the Right: What Do They Mean for Education?" page 13.

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Vail, "Conservatively Speaking," *The American School Board Journal*, December 1995, page 30.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Sides, "Conservatives Attack NEA Over Gay Issues," *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 10 #2, page 18.

<sup>14</sup> People for the American Way, *A Right Wing and a Prayer: The Religious Right in Your Public Schools*, Executive Summary, page 1.

<sup>15</sup>For a fuller explanation of secular humanism, see *The Public Eye*, December 1992, Chip Berlet and Margaret Quigley, "Traditional Values, Racism, and Christian Theocracy: The Right-wing Revolt against the Modern Age."

<sup>16</sup> Ann Bastian, "Lessons from the Voucher War," in *Selling Out Our Schools: Vouchers, Markets, and the Future of Public Education* (Rethinking Schools, Milwaukee, WI 1996) page 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



**PROMISE KEEPERS ANNOUNCES CLERGY CONFERENCES FOR 1998**

Promise Keepers has announced a 1998 Clergy Conference schedule. According to the PK website, PK is inviting all members of the clergy to attend the 1998 Clergy conferences which will be geared to the needs of senior/associate pastors; those in charge of shepherding a congregation; those in charge of discipling men; and those who are leaders in men's ministries. The free conferences are scheduled to take place in nine cities: Philadelphia on January 15, Denver on January 22, San Diego on January 29, Nashville on February 5, Charlotte on February 10, Dallas on February 12, Saint Petersburg on February 19, Portland on March 10, and Indianapolis on March 12.



tem. Nothing will ignite our economy, strengthen our families, or inspire our American entrepreneurial spirit like a Flat Tax."

**FORBES WOOS SCHLAFLY**

Steve Forbes continues to woo the social conservatives who were cool to him in his 1996 presidential bid. According to a short note in the December 12, 1997 issue of *Human Events*,

Forbes recently met with Eagle Forum president Phyllis Schlafly to discuss conservative issues, particularly abortion. The meeting took place on November 24 in Washington DC.

**FAMILY FRIENDLY TV**

Lowell W. Paxson, chairman of Paxson Communications and co-founder of the Home Shopping Network, has announced the creation of PaxNet, a 24-hour network that is scheduled to debut on August 31, 1998. The new network plans a prime-time line-up of family-friendly programming and has teamed up with Focus on the Family to produce programming and a series of feature films consistent with "traditional values."

**FEMINIST NEW MAN?**

*New Man* magazine, the former "official magazine of the Promise Keepers," published its November/December 1997 issue with a cover story on sexism. In an article titled "What are the Feminists Trying to Tell Us?" writer Michael G. Maudlin says there may be something to be learned from the feminist movement. "...as an evangelical, I'd like to make what many might consider to be a heretical statement: Christians need feminism," writes Maudlin. After charging "modern feminists" with being militantly pro-abortion and pro-homosexual and calling NOW a paranoid radical feminist group, Maudlin goes on to say that he thinks feminism is fundamentally a Christian idea.

In the same issue, another article titled, "Exposing the Wall: Are Men

Ready to Face the Sin of Sexism in the Church?" by Bishop T.D. Jakes Sr., explores the issue of sexism within the church. "Racism in this country pales when held up to its modern relative, sexism. Perhaps it is because we have an incessant need to be superior to others. We deny that we view women as less than men in many areas. The spirit of bigotry that exists within religious circles is staggering." In the end it's clear that the writers and *New Man* have no intention of practicing feminist values of equality and justice but rather, they are using feminist language to cloak a patriarchal agenda. "Let's pursue a revival of mutual respect and appreciation for women. After all, she was the gift God gave when He saw it was not good for us to be alone."

**CONSERVATIVE LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE**

The ninth annual Conservative Leadership Conference was a virtual who's who of the Right. Speakers included Cal Thomas, Phyllis Schlafly, Fred Barnes, Steve Forbes, Gary Bauer and Bay Buchanan. Conference directors Morton Blackwell, Reed Irvine and Paul Weyrich billed it as "the training conference for grassroots activists." Co-sponsors of the November 20-22 event which took place at the Sheraton Washington Hotel in Washington, DC included Accuracy in Academia, American Conservative Union, National Right to Life, Regent University, National Rifle Association, *Human Events*, *Policy Review*, Family Research Council and the Free Congress Foundation among others.

**FORBES GOES GRASSROOTS**

Steve Forbes has started a new organization called Americans for Hope, Growth and Opportunity (AHGO). In a fundraising letter sent out in November, Forbes wrote, "I've created a grassroots organization specifically to champion an agenda of pro-family, pro-growth answers to America's most important problems." AHGO's main agenda is to institute a flat tax. "AHGO's agenda, then, is one that puts its trust and faith in the American people and our American sys-



“**A**ctually, the Catholic schools do pretty much admit all applicants, although they do not provide 'special' education—that is, they do not admit applicants who are mentally defective.

Yes, the public schools are obliged to provide 'special' education for students who really are medical cases. Such 'special' education is costly and often, useless.”

— *Syndicated columnist, Jeffrey Hart, in the Conservative Chronicle, October 2, 1996.*

**HAIKU**

Real democracy:  
public education seeds  
bloom informed consent.

# BOOKS RECEIVED

## *A Selected, Annotated List*

*Laura Flanders*

### **Real Majority, Media Minority: The Cost of Sidelining Women in Reporting**

Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1997. 293 pages, index, resources.

A compilation of articles and interviews by Laura Flanders of Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting. A literate look at many facets of sexism and media, with the wit and wisdom one has come to expect from this veteran journalist and activist. The adroit skewering of anti-feminists is very satisfying.

### *Staff, Center for Campus Organizing* **Uncovering the Right on Campus: A Guide to Resisting Conservative Attacks on Equality and Social Justice**

Houston, TX: Public Search, Inc., 1997. 134 pages, index, appendices, resources.

A collection of articles examining right-wing activity on college campuses. Includes resources for fighting the right; the right's youth training and alumni networks; describes common right-wing tactics; and lists key right-wing funders. A comprehensive compilation useful for progressive activists challenging the right on campus. Contributors include Dalya Massachi, Michael Kennedy, Rich Cowan, Sonya Huber, Jennifer L. Pozner, Ross Gelbspan, Sara Diamond, and Chip Berlet.

### *David C. Berliner & Bruce J. Biddle* **The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools**

Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995. 414 pages, notes, name index, subject index, references.

A passionate defense of the idea of public education by the authors who point out in their conclusions that:

"Public schools were instituted in our country to ensure that *all* children would have access to a common store of ideas, skills, and moral instruction so they could learn how to live in harmony with each other and how to build useful adult lives and institutions. And those schools were to be staffed by professional educators who could both impart the common store of knowledge and respond to the needs of individuals, thus helping all students to develop a love of learning. Great harm can result if we forget these ideals."

### *Chester Hartman, Editor* **Double Exposure: Poverty and Race in America**

Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1997. 258 pages, index.

A collection of original pieces and reprints on various aspects of race and racism, all short and very readable. The volume covers the question of racism's permanence in US society, the use of racial/ethnic categories, immigration, the "underclass," multiculturalism, affirmative action and a section on economic inequality. Though the voices of women are scarce, this is a helpful and accessible reader that covers the basics of the outrage of US racism.

### *Gil Alexander-Moegerle* **James Dobson's War on America**

Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997. 306 pages, notes, index.

A critical insider's perspective on Focus on the Family (FOF) from former FOF executive and co-host of the "Focus on the Family" radio program, Gil Alexander-Moegerle. Though lacking in any kind of deep analysis of FOF, this book is full of anecdotes that provide a personal view of Dobson and

FOF. Alexander-Moegerle repeatedly issues a warning call to progressives, liberals and concerned citizens to oppose Dobson and FOF. He writes, "Beware the man who speaks not about that which is best for our society but that which is right according to his personal moral code. Beware the man who angrily pounds his fist on the table of democracy instead of using it as a listening post and an anvil of compromise and consensus building."

*Ken Abraham*

### **Who Are the Promise Keepers: Understanding the Christian Men's Movement**

New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997. 211 pages, notes, suggested reading list.

Written in the style of a Harlequin Romance, this fatuous piece on the Promise Keepers merely serves as a soapbox for Coach Bill McCartney, founder of Promise Keepers. Abraham blithely accepts McCartney's response to concerns about the political nature of the organization: McCartney states that PK is apolitical, and therefore, that must be true. The book is filled with anecdotal stories about PK wives delighted to see changes in their newly-Christian husbands, and about McCartney as a warrior on the front lines of racism. Abraham utterly ignores the notion that "racial reconciliation" may be a cleverly planned strategy to recruit people of color into the Christian right. The most interesting part of the book is a single photograph— an image of a white man at a PK rally. His T-shirt reads, "Christian American Heterosexual Pro-Life Right-Wing Conservative. Any Questions?"

**EDUCATION RESOURCES  
CONTINUED**

National Committee for Public Education & Religious Liberty (PEARL)  
165 East 56th Street  
New York, NY 10022  
212.750.6461

[www.tiac.net/users/doyle/PEARL/](http://www.tiac.net/users/doyle/PEARL/)  
A broad-based coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to preserving strong public schools that are free from sectarian control. PEARL protects religious liberty for all citizens by honoring the separation of church and state in public education.

American Library Association  
50 E. Huron  
Chicago, IL 60611  
312.944.6780

Deals with issues of censorship, school curricula, library protests, and legal decisions. Coverage frequently involves local campaigns by religious and political right.

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)  
121 W. 27th Street, Suite 804  
New York, NY 10001  
212.727.0135

Activist organization dedicated to the safety and well-being of each member

of every school community, regardless of sexual orientation. GLSEN works to end homophobia in public schools through changes in policy and thinking. Publishes quarterly newsletter, *Blackboard*.

*It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School*, a film by Debra Chasnoff and Helen Cohen. *It's Elementary* looks at how different schools have incorporated an awareness of gay and lesbian issues into their curricula. To order contact Women's Education Media, 2180 Bryant Street, Suite 203, San Francisco, CA 94110, 415.641.4616.

*Rethinking Schools*, a quarterly newspaper advocating the reform of elementary and secondary public schools. Excellent resource for all issues related to public education. Available from Rethinking Schools, 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212, 414.964.9646.

*A Right Wing and a Prayer: The Religious Right and Your Public Schools*, published in September, 1997 by People for the American Way, 2000 M Street, NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036, 202.467.4999.

**OTHER RESOURCES**

*Moving a Public Policy Agenda: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations*, a report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) written by Sally Covington. This extensive report looks at right-wing funding including a summary of conservative foundation grants; types of institutions supported; strategic funding of conservative foundations; and the institutional, ideological and public policy impact of conservative philanthropy. To order contact NCRP, 2001 S Street, NW, #620, Washington, DC 20009, 202.387.9177.

*Extremists and the Anti-Environmental Lobby: Activities Since Oklahoma City*, by Tarso Ramos, published by the Western States Center (WSC). Details links between the militia movement and the anti-environmental movement. *Dangerous Territory: The Attack on Citizen Participation and the Environmental Movement*, by Jonn Lunsford also published by WSC. Details attacks against environmentalists and public employees. To order contact WSC, P.O. Box 40305, Portland, OR 97204, 503.228.8866.

A tool for defending democracy and diversity from Political Research Associates

**ACTIVIST RESOURCE KIT**

**PUBLIC EDUCATION**

This comprehensive package of materials is your national guide to resources for challenging the political right and its campaigns of misinformation and intolerance towards modern public education. Customized to meet your needs, your kit will include a basic set of materials plus a topical module on public education. The entire kit comes handily contained in a three-ring binder for easy updating and additions.

The kit consists of: Overview articles about the right; Ground rules and tips for organizing against the right; Guidance for publicity and working with the media; Fundraising tips and resources; Lists of resources including directories of social justice groups and right-wing groups; Topical overview articles about the right's attacks on public education; Activist success stories; An Issues & Views section covering vouchers, charter schools, bilingual education, privatization and parental rights; Primary and secondary source materials; and Lists of resources including progressive organizations supporting modern public education, right-wing groups opposing modern public education, and further reading.

Cost: Organizations \$40, Individuals \$30, Low-income \$20. To order call Political Research Associates at 617.661.9313 or send a check or money order with ordering information to PRA, 120 Beacon Street, Suite 202, Somerville, MA 02143.



POLITICAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

# Resources

## Center for Commercial Free Public Education

360 Grand Avenue, #385  
Oakland, CA 10001  
510.268.1100

[unplug@igc.org](mailto:unplug@igc.org)

Best known for its UNPLUG campaign against Channel One, the highly profitable, in-school commercial television program founded by media entrepreneur Christopher Whittle. Publishes the quarterly newsletter *Not For Sale*.

## National Coalition of Education Activists (NCEA)

P.O. Box 679  
Rhinebeck, NY 12572

Multiracial organization of parents, teachers, union and community activists, child advocates, and others working for fundamental changes in public education. Publishes a quarterly newsletter, *Action for Better Schools*. Serves as a resource for activists.

## Facing History and Ourselves

16 Hurd Road  
Brookline, MA 02146  
617.232.1595

Engages students in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. High school curriculum on the Holo-

caust, slavery, Armenian genocide, and theory of prejudice and violence.

## Parents for Public Schools (PPS)

P.O. Box 12807  
Jackson, MS 39236

[www.pps.net](http://www.pps.net)

Dedicated to supporting and strengthening public schools in communities throughout the US. PPS is committed to restoring and sustaining constructive parent involvement and advocating community-wide support of public education.

## National Education Association

1201 16th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
202.833.4000

[www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org)

Write for a complete listing of resources on challenging censorship in schools, school prayer, and privatization of public schools.

## Freedom to Learn Network

2020 Downyflake Lane, Suite 301A  
Allentown, PA 18103

Formed in 1992 in response to widespread attacks on books and programs in local public schools. Supports drug and alcohol programs as well as health, sex, and AIDS curricula.

## Parents (and others) United for Responsible Policies on Sexuality Educa- tion (PURPOSE)

Planned Parenthood League of  
Massachusetts  
1055 Commonwealth Ave.  
Boston, MA 02215

617.616.1660

[www.pplm.org](http://www.pplm.org)

A statewide campaign to bring together community members interested in developing and maintaining high-quality sexuality education in public schools. Provides information and technical assistance to combat opposition. Resources include the Massachusetts Advocacy Kit.

## Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)

130 West 42nd Street, Suite 2500  
New York, NY 10036

212.819.9770

[www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)

Develops, collects, and disseminates information and promotes comprehensive education about sexuality. Publishes *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Grades K-12*. Provides program consultation and assistance to communities. Publishes bimonthly newsletter, *SIECUS Report*.

*continued on page 11*

# The Public Eye

NEWSLETTER

Political Research Associates

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