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## Coming Soon to a School Near You: Big Ed

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*by: Marion Brady, truthout | Op-Ed*

Deeply embedded in the conventional wisdom is the idea that educating is mostly about making a living rather than making a life. Given that assumption, education reforms that promise to "make America competitive in the global marketplace" or "prepare learners for productive work" are an easy sell. There's broad agreement that what industry wants, industry should get.

The campaign to turn schools into industry boot camps began in earnest about 20 years ago. Business leaders convinced politicians that teachers and kids needed to work harder, so No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was put in place to jerk them around until they shaped up.

Promoters of NCLB are now admitting that it failed, but insist that the problem wasn't really with the legislation. NCLB failed, they argue, because the 50 states didn't follow through. The standards and tests they put in place weren't tough enough.

From the perspective of the US Department of Education (DOE) and the business and industry groups which whisper in the DOE's ear, moving the present reform effort along, failure of NCLB turns out to be a good thing. It's a perfect excuse for bypassing the states and the complications arising from their various idiosyncrasies and replacing their work with national standards and tests. The department's Race to the Top competition is giving the states something to divert their attention, while The Common

Core State Standards Initiative quietly takes the wheels off their school buses and puts them on the one being assembled in Washington.

Everything is falling into place. The Common Standards Initiative has broad appeal. The fact that the Constitution gives the states responsibility for education is a bit discomfiting, but that's been gotten around by making state adoption of national standards "voluntary." Now that that little technicality has been finessed, the federal school reform effort is on a roll.

American education is going to be changed forever. Just about everybody thinks that standards are a good thing, so replacing a hodge-podge of state standards with a single national set has broad support. The playing field will be leveled. Teachers will know exactly what to teach. Kids will know what they're expected to know. Textbook publishers will know what to print. Schools of education will know what to emphasize. Testing companies will know what they can peddle. Data collectors will know what data to collect. And taxpayers will know what they're getting for their money. Sort of.

Education reform shaped by *Race to the Top* and *The Common Core State Standards Initiative* is rocking merrily along, but the enthusiasm for it is, well, curious.

Maybe because those originally pushing it were leaders of business and industry rather than educators, the effort was begun and continues, without several relevant issues being addressed.

There has been, for example, no discussion of the wisdom of standardizing knowledge in the middle of a knowledge explosion. Nor is anyone asking if the "core" school subjects - the ones being standardized - are up to the challenges the future will bring.

No provision has been made for coordinating or prioritizing the work of the various standards-writing committees.

No one has been assigned responsibility for mediating the conflicts which will arise as the supporters of various school subjects compete for learner time and public money.

No apologies have been offered to professional educators for telling them they don't know how to do their jobs.

No one is addressing the fact that the world that school subjects try to explain is an interconnected whole that can't be understood using a random handful of disconnected school subjects.

That last problem alone - the one that helped make NCLB an intellectual farce - is reason enough to dump Race to the Top and The Common Core State Standards Initiative.

But perhaps most curious of all, is the present reform effort's disregard for deep-seated American values.

With the possible exception of Australia, no other country matches America in professed admiration for the nonstandard person.

We're big on individualism, personal freedom and autonomy. We resent authority, chafe at regulation and are amused by the comedian's line, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." We admire the Lone Ranger, the self-made man and the movie characters played by John Wayne and Clint Eastwood.

We distrust central planning and point to the history of the Soviet Union and other East Bloc countries as evidence of its dangers. We know that no two kids are alike and insist that individual differences be respected, a cultural trait we think explains why Americans have won more than their fair share of Nobels, Pulitzers, medals, patents, and other awards for scientific, artistic and athletic accomplishment.

Why, then, is there near-universal enthusiasm for national standards? Why are we destroying what little autonomy and adaptability is left in America's schools after years of battering by NCLB? Why are we ignoring educators from high-scoring but super-standardized countries who come here looking for the secret of America's intellectual productivity? Why are we putting our kids in the service of corporate interests rather than demanding that corporate interests serve our kids? When did we abandon our

belief that educating wasn't about filling industry job slots, but about exploring the dimensions and potential of humanness?

Should there be national standards? Sure! But not national standards for math, science, and other school subjects. School subjects are just tools, means to an end. If we're shopping for a jacket, we don't care about the loom that wove the cloth, the scissors that cut it or the sewing machine that stitched it together. We care about the quality of the finished jacket.

The same holds true if we're in the market for a house or car. We don't care whether the carpenters drove the nails with a hammer or a nail gun, don't care whether a robot or a human installed the grill. We leave tool choices to the judgment of professionals, in whose interest it is to constantly look for better ones. Our interest is in the quality of the completed house or car. That's when we bring standards to bear.

But not in education. The whole standards and accountability fad has been a monumental, misguided, amateurish, maybe even criminal waste of time, money, brains and educator reputations.

Should a standard for reading say, "Learners will be able to sound out unfamiliar words," or should it say, "Learners will develop a love of reading"? Should a standard for math say, "Learners will be able to solve quadratic equations," or should it say, "Learners will understand statistics that reveal the trends of the era"?

Corporate America has given us Big Banks - banks too big to fail. Corporate America has given us Big Pharma - a pharmaceutical industry too big to fight. Coming soon to a school near you, courtesy of corporate America: Big Ed - a centralized education system too big to question its self-serving, profit-driven, intellect-destroying priorities.

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*Author's note: A shorter version of this was in the Washington Post on 4/30/10.*