

Maryland Teachers Fight Bush's Testing Policy

by Donald Phau

In Maryland, teachers have begun to battle the nationwide "dumbing down" of education being implemented through school testing policy. Every state is now scrambling to meet Federal testing requirements mandated by President George Bush's National Education bill. The misnamed "The No Child Left Behind Act," passed by Congress this year, requires annual testing in math and reading in grades 3-8. If states fail to meet testing standards, they will lose Federal funds, which can then be allocated for non-public education. The new standards are thus a big foot in the door for replacing public education by privatized, for-profit schooling.

Immediately, the multibillion-dollar testing industry is benefitting from the large sums being spent from shrinking state education budgets. The testing companies have a common approach: what's been called "drill and kill" assessment of student abilities. School districts are seeking to eliminate "expensive" testing—which involves any creative, cognitive judgment by the student. One such test is the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP).

For the past ten years, Maryland has been using MSPAP. The week-long test does not assess the abilities of each student, but tests the entire school. According to the *Washington Post*, "The test was designed to change the way teachers teach. It is not designed to test how well a student remembers facts, as most standardized tests do. Rather, it asks students to apply facts and perform tasks." In one example, students are shown a ball which is dropped and bounces. They are then asked to jointly formulate a report, including graphs, which explains the action of the ball.

In an interview with *EIR*, Montgomery County, Maryland, Teachers Association President Mark Simon said that the MSPAP test "is an heroic effort . . . with what is trying to be done with student assessment." But, he said, the test is now being used to "dumb down" education; "just the opposite" of what it was intended to do. The county—adjacent to Washington, D.C.—which was testing number one in the state, has seen its scores plummet. The reason, Simon said, is how the test's grading was changed by the private company managing the testing. To the company, the "rate" of scoring was primary. "The emphasis was on speed," he said. "The graders didn't read the essays but just slapped the score on them."

Simon said that with the private companies running the test, "You have a problem between teachers and profit." Also, with the passage of Bush's "standardized" testing bill, he said, "I'm sure the value of the stocks of these companies went

way up. There's a lot of money being spent."

One Maryland teacher said that Measurement, Inc., the company managing the grading of the MSPAP test, was giving out rewards to those who scored more than 100 test books a day. Simon said that they were told to give credit based on "key words." One teacher said, "If a child had an excellent answer but didn't use a buzzword, or didn't use material from the text, they could conceivably get a zero. But if a child used the buzzword, but didn't make much sense, they'd get a point. I couldn't believe the zeros I had to give out, because they didn't have the buzzword." In a discussion with *EIR*, a Measurement, Inc. representative flatly denied all of the teacher's charges.

'Artificial Intelligence'

Such mindless grading practices are comparable to the growing use of computers to grade examination answers, including that of open-ended essay questions. Using "artificial intelligence" (AI) computer software, Pennsylvania and Oregon have contracted with testing companies which use AI to grade state examinations (see *EIR*, Jan. 18, 2002). Maryland is now having teachers imitate a computer's AI program. AI programming, developed in the 1950s, is based upon the false belief that there is no fundamental difference between the mind of a human being, and that of a laboratory rat or a computer. Computer AI grading, therefore, does not acknowledge that a student could use his or her creative capacities. To an AI computer, students have no such capacity, and creative answers could never even exist.

Maryland Assistant State Superintendent of Schools Ron Peiffer wants to use AI computer grading, and admitted to this writer that the state is going to end the MSPAP. Education "is a business," he said, and with the Federally mandated "standardized testing," "the pressure is tremendous and we're going to have to make changes." Peiffer said the state will stop hiring teachers for grading tests and go to private testing companies. "I don't know if there are enough testing companies out there. We may have to send tests out of state for grading." He wants a "national standard" for education, and praised think-tanks, such as the Fordham Foundation, that helped create Bush's testing policies. He added that the state will hire more private companies and that the use of computers using AI is "the way the state will go."

When asked why the grades in Montgomery County dropped, Peiffer said it had nothing to do with the way the tests are scored, but was due to a change in demographics in this largely well-to-do county. There's been a large increase of poor students, he said. "They're from the Third World, and many have never been in school at all." He said that the teachers and parents are making a big deal about the grading method "because there were major scandals over cheating" in the county.

To cover this up, the county brought in a bush-league "psycho-matrician" to show that the problem was in the grading.