

Bush on education: a fast track for deschooling

by Carol White

President Bush's concern to improve the quality of American education is no more credible than his claims regarding the fundamental soundness of the American economy; both are in serious trouble precisely because of the policies of George Bush and his administration.

On April 19, the very day that Bush gave a press conference at which he released his plans for *upgrading* U.S. school performance, one of his bellwether school districts announced that it was closing its schools on May 1, six weeks ahead of schedule.

The northern California school district of Richmond had filed for bankruptcy, announcing that it had only money enough to pay teachers' salaries until April 30. The state of California refused to assist it in keeping the schools open, unless the district got an agreement from its teachers agreeing to salary and benefit cuts in order to keep the schools open. The situation in California is paradigmatic of what is going on throughout the United States. At best, next year will see larger class sizes and cuts in athletic and other programs.

It is a fair estimate that nationwide, as many as 5% of teaching jobs may be lost by next September, compared with the year before. It may be the case, however, that the debt load facing state and local governments—where the bulk of the cost of supporting public schools falls—will cause more catastrophic school shutdowns, as was threatened in Richmond, California.

Rhetoric, but no funding

Two key features of Bush's education program are a system of tests to set a national standard of school performance, and a drift toward privatization of education, under the guise of giving financial assistance to parents to educate their children in the school of their choice, public or private. While national testing is not a revolutionary proposal, for it

to have any value, there must be a perspective for how the curriculum should be upgraded. Furthermore, unfortunately, the majority of today's teachers are themselves sadly under-educated and miseducated.

With the poor quality of U.S. public schools and the amount of outright criminality tolerated on their campuses, it is difficult not to sympathize with parents who send their children to private or parochial schools; however, Bush's proposal is intended to create the appearance of helping, without generating the funds necessary to allow middle- and low-income families any hope that their children will receive a decent education.

Public schools are funded primarily by state and local governments. These are now literally on the edge of bankruptcy nationwide. Police, sanitation, and other city workers are being laid off and vital services are being cut back, unemployment is so high that millions are homeless and without resources while welfare and even unemployment insurance funds run out. The truth is that U.S. cities are rapidly reproducing Third World conditions, and the conditions in the public schools reflect this.

George Bush knows this, and he knows that his policies, such as the fast-track approval of a free trade pact with Mexico, would swell the U.S. unemployment rolls. Considering the callous disregard of this administration toward the unemployed and poor—a disregard which is coherent with the brutal policy now being implemented against the children, as well as the adults of Iraq—who can believe that he really believes it important to improve the education of American school children whose parents are not affluent white Anglo-Saxons?

The Richmond story

The actual content of President Bush's "vision" for education was dramatized when the debt-ridden Richmond uni-

fied school district, once praised as a pace-setter for the kind of program which Bush now proposes for the whole country, filed for bankruptcy.

In order for the Richmond district to keep its 47 schools open and its 31,500 young people in school after May 1, it needed a \$29 million bailout. California Gov. Pete Wilson attempted to make a state loan contingent upon the state teachers' union granting a state administrator broad financial powers, including the right to suspend union contracts and unilaterally lower teacher salaries and benefits, and a three-year suspension of collective bargaining, i.e., union-busting. This would have permitted wholesale chopping up of the district's budget and programs, resulting in layoffs of hundreds of teachers, huge pay cuts, and the termination of all high school guidance counselors.

Twelve days later, as it appeared that students of the district would indeed lose six weeks of school, the Contra Costa County Superior Court ordered the state of California to come up with the money needed to keep the schools open. This was in response to a lawsuit filed by 200 parents, urging the court to force the state to step in. The court decision was bitterly denounced by Wilson, a Bush Republican, who announced that the state will appeal the decision. The context for Wilson's public howling is the anticipated \$7.1 billion budget shortfall over the next 18 months. Wilson's plans to meet this shortfall call for \$4.1 billion in budget cuts, as well as for new taxes totaling \$1.7 billion.

The California Teachers' Association has also gone to court, claiming that California has provided Richmond with less money per student than similar districts. Richmond is a working-class city located on San Francisco Bay. Seventy percent of the students are from minority groups.

Ironically, former superintendent of schools Walter Marks ran up a \$24 million deficit implementing a system for free choice by parents, based upon the development of "magnet" schools. The Richmond district received White House commendation for this program three years ago. Other districts which have created such programs elsewhere in the nation, have run into similar problems of insolvency.

Just 18 months ago, the Bush administration praised the Richmond district, which set up a "choice" system to attract white families back into largely black, inner-city schools, as a model of low-cost improvement of a failing education system. The district overspent its budget by \$60 million in the last three years, adding employees and equipment and setting up schools with special curricula.

The price tag for Bush's proposed program for upgrading education, would be a mere \$820 million, of which \$535 million would be earmarked to create one experimental school in each congressional district—i.e., \$1 million each—with another \$230 million in funding for children whose parents wish to take them out of the public school system. Another aspect of the program is the pledge by a private corporation, the New American Schools Develop-

ment Corp., to raise between \$150-200 million to fund three to seven "new American schools."

Whether or not the United States is willing to travel the full route down the British road of privatization of public services, the Richmond case is rallying support from those who back Governor Wilson in his claim that the state of California should not be required to ensure an education for children of school age resident in their state. But Richmond is only the tip of the iceberg. Take the case of New York City, with a budget deficit for next year of several billion dollars. On Jan. 16, Mayor David Dinkins announced that the city will lay off 16,000 workers over the next 18 months, and eliminate 9,000 more jobs through attrition. More than 10,000 of the layoffs would come in the Department of Education.

New York City schools a case study

The New York teachers won a 5.5% pay increase this past year, but only 1.5% of that money actually is to come out of the city budget—part is taken from the teacher's pension fund and depends upon the pension fund showing earnings above 8.8%, and the rest of the money is to come out of the \$70 million Excellence in Education Fund, which is to come out of the state budget. The contract was negotiated in October last year, but by January of this year, the city was asking teachers to accept either furloughs or layoffs. The union agreed to have each teacher forgo \$600 in salary per year, but this was only the beginning.

The teachers are again being asked to accept a furlough, as the New York City budget crisis goes out of control. Furthermore, Governor Cuomo is refusing to pay the \$70 million state share of the funding. This comes to approximately a \$1,000 additional pay cut for each teacher, and layoffs are still projected in the 10,000 range. This is one-sixth of the New York City teaching staff.

It is not only the case that the schools today are falling victim to the budget crunch, they are also being turned into breeding grounds for immorality. President Bush once declared that he believed birth control should be treated like vaccination against polio. In effect, everyone should be vaccinated against having children. This is in fact what is now going on in our schools. Children are being given condoms and thereby encouraged to be "sexually active" from pre-adolescence on, while family values and morality are being systematically undermined.

Money may not be there to pay teachers an honest wage, but there is no shortage of funding to thrust condoms on young people. Starting next September, all New York City schools will launch a program to distribute free condoms to high school students, as part of the AIDS prevention curriculum. This is, of course, part of a national pattern which condones any kind of sex as long as it is outside the family, and not intended to produce a next generation of school children.