

RJR Nabisco funds education 'reform'

by Susan Welsh

The RJR Nabisco Foundation brought in 80 self-proclaimed "radical educators" from around the country on June 20-23, to "break the china" at a posh resort outside Leesburg, Virginia. "The China Breakers Conference," as it was officially titled, was planned, according to foundation President Roger D. Semerad, to assemble "the shock troops of education reform—avant garde educators committed to breaking the mold of schooling."

At least one participant didn't believe that breaking the china was enough. "We must become more than china breakers," wrote Maggie Lodge of Chelsea, Massachusetts in the conference brochure. "Indeed, we must become demolition experts. We must tear down walls which prevent equity and access in public education."

Another participant, speaking of school colleagues who do not wish to adopt New Age education reforms, said bluntly: "Shoot them. Shoot the dinosaurs and dinosaurettes. Just get rid of them."

In other words, the "china breakers" want to smash traditional educational institutions and oust teachers who oppose their methods, while branding parents who reject the reforms as "members of the Religious Right."

The junk bond kings

RJR Nabisco is the junk bond empire whose bankruptcy was averted in 1988 by one of the biggest leveraged buyouts in history (\$20 billion). Since its inception in 1989, RJR Nabisco's Next Century Schools program has awarded \$30 million in grants to 42 schools. The program's literature says that the fund "bypasses bureaucracy and provides venture capital directly to individual schools, the frontline educators who have developed bold approaches to improving student academic performance."

Robert Jones, the vice president of the RJR Nabisco Foundation and a former assistant secretary of labor, described the plan for the conference at a press briefing on June 21. He and his staff drafted a description of a fictional community called Sizerville (after Theodore Sizer of the Coalition for Essential Schools—a moderator at the conference who is one of the theoreticians of outcome-based education). Sizerville wants to reform its school system; it has voted in a new school board, which is looking for a new superintendent, "a modern CEO who can deliver." Conference participants are supposed to come up with reform proposals for this fic-

tional community to adopt. Jones insisted that RJR is not steering the discussion in any way, and is not promoting OBE or any other particular program.

But Jones was not being quite candid. The foundation's own literature says that "computers are easing the transition to performance-based education. The technology is a tool that allows students to work at their own pace, the essence of mastery learning." These words are key and code for OBE.

Sizerville's desire for a "modern CEO who can deliver" reflects the unstated premises of the Next Century Schools program. As Jones explained, during the past three or four years, "the whole education debate has become much more an issue of the work force, of human resources." This has occurred since the Bush administration issued a mandate for increased corporate involvement in education issues. RJR Nabisco, Xerox Corp., Dow Chemical Corp., and others jumped right in. Under the buzzword "Total Quality Management" (TQM), they are applying their own business management techniques—the kind that made RJR Nabisco infamous—to the schools.

Group dynamics

The China Breakers Conference was an exercise in how to get a group of people to come out "spontaneously" calling for exactly what you want them to, without their knowing that you want them to do it. The technique used is a method of brainwashing called "group dynamics," perfected by psychologist Kurt Lewin.

The China Breakers broke down into small teams, to address the problems of "Sizerville." After two and a half days of rambling discussions, each group was supposed to come up with recommendations. The solution? "Let's just let the group leaders pull it together." And so, they did. The results will be published as a brochure, which RJR Nabisco will mail all over the country.

So, what did they recommend? If you think they talked about reading, writing, and arithmetic, you're wrong. Some samples:

"A New Social Order, a New Social Covenant. Flexible, nonlinear, organic, not Newtonian. The model should be a kaleidoscope, not a clock."

"Learning clusters begin at birth."

"An ungraded, untracked system, with continuous progress toward mastery."

"Teacher serving as facilitator and mentor."

"Our idea is 'sperm to worm.' We think 'cradle to grave' is not enough."

During one panel, in which participants conducted "role-playing" in a Sizerville School Board meeting, a member of the audience stood up and drawled (also role-playing), "I'm just a good old boy. I have a 10th grade education. And I don't know *what the hell y'all are talking about.*"

The response, from a conference moderator, playing the part of a member of the school board: "That's why we use this language."