

Bushobama

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By Alfie Kohn

“Obama is, in effect, giving George W. Bush a third term in education,” remarked Diane Ravitch, who worked in the elder Bush’s administration. Was she exaggerating? Well, for starters, notice that two of the most enthusiastic endorsements of President Obama’s choice of Arne Duncan as secretary of education came from the individuals who had held that position under GWB. Margaret Spellings pronounced herself “thrilled” with the selection, while Rod Paige called Duncan “a budding hero in the education business.”

More to the point, pay attention to the remarkable overlap between the specific policies of the two administrations, including the reliance on high-stakes standardized tests; threats to close down schools with low scores; and enthusiasm about transferring resources to charter schools, using merit pay to “motivate” teachers, and forcing struggling students to repeat a grade.

Finally, there’s the rhetoric of the presidents themselves. Read each of these quotations and try to decide whether it came from the current Democratic chief executive or his Republican predecessor. (Answers follow.)

- 1. “We will insist on high standards and accountability because we believe that every school should teach and*

every child can learn.”

2. “We’re seeing what children from all walks of life can and will achieve when we set high standards, have high expectations, when we do a good job preparing them. ... [W]e will cultivate a new culture of accountability in schools.”

3. “We want to . . . not only raise standards, but make the changes that are required to actually meet those standards, by having the best teachers and principals, by having the kind of data collection that tells us whether improvements are actually happening, and tying student achievement to assessments of teachers, by making sure that there’s a focus on low-performing schools, by making sure that the standards that have been set are ones that mean a kid who graduates can compete at the international level... [and by] ending the practice of social promotion.”

4. “Too many American children are segregated into schools without standards, shuffled from grade to grade because of their age, regardless of their knowledge. This is discrimination, pure and simple.”

5. “Accountability is an exercise in hope. When we raise academic standards, children raise their academic sights. When children are regularly tested, teachers know where and how to improve. When scores are known to parents, parents are empowered to push for change. When accountability for our schools is real, the results for our children are real.”

ANSWERS:

1. GWB. From his Presidential radio address, Jan. 3, 2004, cited by Education Week, April 8, 2009

2. B0. From an address to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, March 10, 2009, cited by Education Week, April

8, 2009

3. *B0. From an interview with the Washington Post, July 23, 2009*

4. *GWB. From his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, August 3, 2000*

5. *GWB. From a speech at a Student Achievement and School Accountability conference, October 2002*

How did you do? More to the point, how well will our children do under a continuation (or even intensification) of the same basic corporate-style model of schooling, an approach that confuses competitiveness with excellence and high test scores with successful learning?

Back to Blogs