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The NEA's Lobbying Agenda

The 2004 national convention of the National Education Association adopted its usual leftwing legislative goals, giving the green light to the NEA's highly paid staff to lobby the Congress that will convene in January 2005.

The NEA's lobbying goals for public schools include federal funding for public school child care, early childhood programs that are school-based, before- and after-school programs, big spending for school counselors, school-based health care for children, and of course increased federal spending for education.

The NEA's non-education-related lobbying goals include funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, a national universal health care system, reparations to African Americans, statehood for the District of Columbia, taxpayer funding of federal elections, and a national holiday for Cesar Chavez. The NEA's foreign policy goals include ratification of the United Nations treaties on the Rights of the Child and on Discrimination against Women.

The NEA's feminist lobbying goals include "reproductive freedom without governmental intervention" (but, of course, with tax funding), affirmative action, assigning women to military combat, and the Equal Rights Amendment. The NEA's gay goals include a federal statute prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, income tax benefits for domestic partners, and hate crimes legislation.

The NEA opposes all varieties of school choice, tuition tax credits, vouchers, parental option or "choice" in education programs, designating English as our official language, and any possible action that might impinge on the secularists' notion of "separation of church and state."

Washington D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams was not on hand to welcome the delegates to the nation's capital because he supports school vouchers, a position that NEA speakers are not permitted to express. The delegates were welcomed instead by U.S. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton,

who used her time at the podium to pitch for her legislation to give congressional representation to the District of Columbia.

To no one's surprise, the NEA convention voted six-to-one (7,390 to 1,153), to endorse John Kerry for President. The head of the NEA, Reg Weaver, opened the convention in Washington, DC with a call for public school teachers and employees to mobilize to defeat President Bush this fall. He said the union's political activism "takes center stage," and he predicted that "our 2.7 million members can be the X-factor in this election."

For the 2004 political campaign, the NEA will "partner" with the leftwing organizations MoveOn.org, ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), and the pro-Democratic Campaign for America's Future in order to achieve "the largest mobilization for education ever." Through a nationwide political strategy called "house parties" to be held on September 22, these activists will plan political rallies, register voters, meet with congressional candidates, and organize a get-out-the-vote program to cover teachers and parents.

Hillary Clinton was introduced to the NEA delegates as "one of our closest allies; she's so close, in fact, that she needs no further introduction." She brought the delegates to their feet with what the NEA's official newspaper called her "sharp wit," such as, "We are one day closer to the end of the Bush-Cheney Administration." Actually, she was just a warmup for a showing of Michael Moore's anti-Bush movie, "Fahrenheit 9/11," right after her speech.

The NEA convention speakers voiced the usual complaints about a stingy Congress not appropriating enough money for education. In fact, federal spending on education increased 51 percent since Bush took office, and Title I spending (for low-income schools) has increased from \$8.8 billion in the Clinton administration to \$13.3 billion this year.

The Problems with Dropouts

Poor Bill Cosby. He doesn't deserve the negative fallout that followed his remarks about the dropout rate of some poor students. "50% of African-American males drop out of high school. We're talking epidemic here," said Cosby. "People have to start seeing the light." Cosby was calling attention to a major social problem and daring to demand accountability from both parents and schools. And he certainly is compassionate about the subject: he is currently financing the college education of two blacks who did graduate from high school. Even Kweisi Mfume, president of the NAACP, admitted that Cosby's facts are true.

Cosby's remarks were made at a gala event at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC to commemorate the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. That school desegregation decision in 1954 came with high hopes that integrating public schools would assure a good education for black children and put them on the road to full integration in America's economic life.

But most of the *Brown* anniversary gatherings were clouded by the realization that the promise of *Brown* has not been realized. CNN's anniversary documentary dared to ask the question, "Did the Supreme Court make a mistake?", interviewing African-American students who complained about the assumption that "blacks can only learn when white kids are around."

Vashon High School in the City of St. Louis is a good example of why Cosby has reason to be exasperated with everybody's failure to educate blacks. It reopened with fanfare in the fall of 2002 after being rebuilt at a cost of \$40 million. A year and a half later, it's a symbol of the failure of big dollars to deliver education in a depressed urban area. Dramatic photographs in the liberal *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* showed students ruling as a "mobocracy," assaulting and intimidating teachers and students, disrupting classes, and ruling the halls with fist fights and "bold defiance."

According to a study released by the American Diploma Project, a consortium of education-reform groups, employers today consider high school diplomas as proof only that 18-year-olds attended school. They say that high school exit exams required by nearly half the states fail to measure what matters to colleges or employers, and generally assess only 8th or 9th-grade content. The Project's two-year review of education in five states found that more than half of all high school graduates need remedial classes in college.

As thousands of schoolchildren fail the federally mandated tests at the end of this school year, a debate has erupted about the pros and cons of social promotion. I believe that the "hold back" decision should be made at the end of the first grade, and that is the point where tuto-

rial help should be given. If a child can't read real books by the end of the first grade, there is no point in promoting him to the second grade.

The last 50 years have seen the spending of incredible sums of money for teachers, buildings, administrators, forced busing, and all kinds of extra-curricular resources. But the most essential factor was left wanting: the teaching of reading in the first grade.

We must get rid of the ridiculous myth that children will pick up reading naturally just like learning to talk. Reid Lyon of the reading and language branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development says, "The converging scientific evidence is very clear" that poor readers need to be taught the "building blocks" of words, also known as phonics.

If the schools don't teach your child to read in the first grade, then parents should take Bill Cosby's advice and teach your own child to read. That's what I did, and you can, too, if you use a good phonics system such as my *Turbo Reader*.

More Children Left Behind

A gaudy sign reading No Child Left Behind, the education slogan of the Bush Administration, guards the entrance to the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C. The more-than-a-thousand-page NCLB education law, enacted in 2002 with bipartisan flourish, combined a big increase in spending to please the Democrats with conservative buzzwords to please Republicans such as "standards," "tests," and "accountability."

If no child is to be left behind, why are so many students flunking and being left behind in failing schools? Why are schools in an uproar all over the country, with complaints coming from parents, teachers and students? The answer is plain for anyone to see. The mandated tests reveal the painful truth that the nation's schools are not providing a quality education, even though the taxpayers are paying a per-child rate that rivals expensive private schools.

Since the penalties for not complying with NCLB requirements are severe, states and school districts have devised ingenious methods to avoid the sanctions. The Texas State Board of Education reduced the number of questions students must answer correctly to pass the third-grade reading test from 24 to 20 out of 36. Michigan officials lowered from 75 to 46 the percentage of students who must pass statewide high school English tests in order to certify a school as making adequate progress. Colorado restructured its grading system, lumping "partially proficient" with "proficient" students.

It's not only students who are judged by test scores; it's the schools, too. The No Child Left Behind Act re-

quires schools to score higher on standardized tests each year, and also requires every racial and demographic group to show improvement. If any group fails to report higher scores for two consecutive years, a school is labeled "needing improvement." A school that does not improve its scores after being so labeled can have its principal and teachers replaced or even be closed by the state. Parents, teachers and taxpayers are shocked to learn that the first year's results are showing an extraordinarily high percentage of schools to be so labeled.

One of the sanctions imposed on failing schools is to give students the option of transferring to another school. Los Angeles and Chicago officials are bypassing this requirement by approving very few transfers, citing overcrowding concerns. New York City went ahead and approved 8,000 transfer requests, but a third of the students have been moved from one "failing" school to another.

Under the NCLB law, schools with low graduation rates risk being designated as "failing." Schools can manipulate the figures with "pushouts," students who are pressured to leave school long before graduation in order to improve its statistics.

During the 2000-2001 year, New York City schools graduated 34,000 students, while discharging 55,000 high school students. The discharges included students who moved away or transferred to private schools, but it is easy to hide thousands of "pushouts" in the "transfer" category.

The vision of No Child Left Behind is to close the gap between higher-achieving students and minorities. It's a noble goal, in President Bush's words, to end the "soft bigotry" of low expectations. Yet it appears that no government strategies introduced so far have done much to close that gap. The liberals' solution is always to throw more money at the problem, and billions of dollars have been spent through the Title I program.

A new study by the American Enterprise Institute called "Closing the Education Gap: Is Title I Working?" compared the scores of individual Title I students with the scores of similar students who did not receive Title I benefits. The researchers found no evidence that Title I programs had improved the recipients' academic performance. Nevertheless, despite a 20-year record of failure, Title I spending (for low-income schools) increased from \$8.8 billion in the Clinton Administration to \$13.3 billion in the Bush Administration.

The tests mandated by NCLB have ripped back the curtain and exposed a major national problem. How about trying some innovative solutions to introduce competition into the monopoly system, such as giving parents choice over which courses and which teachers they want for their children? And how about teaching every child to read by phonics in the first grade?

Ohio Evolution Plan Irks Liberals

"Why is it important for scientists to critically analyze evolution?" That's the first question in the "student reflection" portion of an optional new 22-page section called "Critical Analysis of Evolution," which is part of Ohio's 547-page science curriculum.

How could anybody object to such an innocuous question? Newspapers report a steady stream of news that scientists are questioning such dogmas as good cholesterol vs. bad cholesterol, vaccine links to autism, the causes of breast cancer, even fluoridation for children's teeth. Isn't the nature of science to question assertions and seek the proof from evidence?

The Ohio State Board of Education approved the new curriculum by a vote of 13-5 after 22 Ohio scientists testified that the new lesson plan promotes academic freedom and that it is good for 10th grade students to have an inquiring mind about evolution. "Are we about teaching students how to think, or what to think?" asked one parent supporter of the lesson plan. And it's all optional; no teacher will be required to teach criticisms of evolution, and no students will be tested on the criticisms. So what's the big deal?

To some people, it's a very big deal. The opposition to the new lesson plan was led by Case Western Reserve University lecturer Patricia Princehouse (whose academic position is philosophy not science) who said, "It's sad day for science in Ohio."

Another non-scientist, Florida State University law professor Steven Gey, flew in to warn Ohioans that the lesson is unconstitutional and would almost certainly be struck down if it reached the U.S. Supreme Court. Maybe he is seeking an activist judge to rule that the Constitution prohibits allowing students to question anything in science class. Gey's notions of constitutionality are unusual. He thinks that "moral relativism" is a "constitutional command," that the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional, and that nude sunbathing should be given "constitutional protection."

There is nothing religious, or about creationism, or even about intelligent design in the new Ohio standards. What is controversial is giving students the opportunity to question evolution; it's the inquiry and debate aspect that some people find so threatening.

The new lesson encourages students to consider both supporting and "challenging" evidence for evolution. The challenges to the theory are understated and are backed up with facts. For example, the lesson claims that the fossil record supports evolution with its increasing complexity of living forms. But the lesson also observes that "transitional fossils are rare in the fossil record" and "a growing number of scientists now question that ... transitional fos-

sils really are transitional forms,” and notes that some changes in species occur quickly in the fossil record relative to longer stretches that manifest no change.

The new lesson plan presents the overused English peppered moth story found in most textbooks, which teaches that black moths survived because they rested on trees blackened by soot, while white moths were eaten by the birds. The lesson points out that “peppered moths do not actually rest on tree trunks,” and that “no new species emerged” as evolutionists have long implied was the result of the soot.

Can it be that this kind of balanced information is so dangerous for high school students to hear that it must be censored out of textbooks? The diehard evolutionists have enjoyed censorship of any criticism of their beliefs for a hundred years, and they won't willingly give up their academic turf. Their censorship demands became so irrational that the Ohio Board's vice president, Richard Baker, called them “a bunch of paranoid, egotistical scientists afraid of people finding out [they] don't know anything.”

Ohio has become the cutting edge in the long-running evolution debate. Georgia, New Mexico, Minnesota, West Virginia, and Kansas have all wrestled with science standards and curricula on evolution. Alabama's “Academic Freedom Act” says that no teacher or professor in public schools or universities may be fired, denied tenure or otherwise discriminated against for presenting “alternative theories” to evolution. The bill would also prohibit any student from being penalized because he held “a particular position on biological or physical origins” so long as the student demonstrated “acceptable understanding of course materials” which include evolution.

Who's Responsible for Fat Kids?

Too many of our kids are too fat, so there ought to be a law. Turn the trial lawyers loose to blame the restaurants and the fast-food joints and give them the tobacco treatment. Right? As with many other problems in our society today, the government may not be the solution, but it could be part of the problem.

Recent studies show that 11% of American children and adolescents are obese, and one in three is overweight. They face a costly future as obese adults, plagued by heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol levels, and cancer.

Public schools should not be imposing an obesity-friendly environment on all students, even on those who come from homes where calorie-laden eatables are not allowed. Schools should not be pushing unlimited junk foods, sodas, snacks and sweets from vending machines, and non-nutritious school lunches.

Why? Follow the money. These foods are big money-makers, and the schools get their cut from the profits. Nine

out of ten U.S. schools now run lucrative *à la carte* programs at lunchtime. *À la carte* is French for selling kids sodas and junk foods as alternatives to school lunches.

Sodas from vending machines are sold in at least 60% of all middle schools and high schools. Texas statistics released by the state's Agriculture Commissioner are probably typical: with a majority of school districts responding to the survey, 52% had exclusive vending contracts with drink and food companies (63% of those contracts with Coca-Cola and 15% with Pepsi).

A study of Minneapolis-St. Paul-area schools published in the *American Journal of Public Health* tactfully described 93% of the *à la carte* foods sold to students as “foods to limit.” In the schools where they were sold, students ate fewer fruits and vegetables and consumed more calories from fat than health guidelines recommend.

Public schools must take a big share of responsibility for the current epidemic of childhood obesity, not only because of the kinds of foods and drinks they sell or give away, but because of the inducements that flow from constant promotion. Of course, parents can't be excused from responsibility, but it's unrealistic to say it's the parents' job to forbid their children to eat, drink or buy what the schools sell.

Where are the anti-prayer-in-schools and anti-pledge-of-allegiance lawyers who argue the right of atheist children not to be embarrassed in front of their peers? They should instead protect the health of schoolchildren who don't want to be embarrassed by the school-sponsored inducements to eat and drink unhealthy foods and sodas.

Corporations look upon school children as a very profitable market because even elementary school children have an estimated \$15 billion of their own money and may influence \$160 billion in parental purchases. The school administrators who sign the million-dollar contracts (without, of course, approval from parents), serve up the schoolchildren as a captive market to the corporations. Yet there's been no public debate, or even a debate within the education community, about the adverse effects of commercializing public schools or about making kids pay with obesity for their school's profits from vending machines and *à la carte* menus.

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