

Growing national “pushout” crisis

US “school reform” throws students into the street

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Adding to the many hardships faced by children in poor communities, thousands of teenagers are now being forced from their classrooms. Reports from New York City and Texas reveal how reliance on high-stakes testing to raise standards of education is compounding the effects of the underfunding of public schools.

In the most recent revelation, the *New York Times* disclosed a massive undercounting of dropouts in New York City. While the Department of Education reported 12,885 dropouts in the class of 2002, or 20 percent of the class total, an additional 14,891 students were categorized as “discharged” to other cities or to adult programs. Most of these discharged students are in fact believed to have been forced out, which would make the true drop-out rate 25 to 30 percent. Including these “pushouts,” the actual graduation rate for those in the city who began 9th grade in the fall of 1998 would be 39 percent rather than the 51 percent reported.[1]

Even the city’s official drop-out rate, which had dropped to a low of 15.6 percent in 1998 during the economic boom, has returned to its recession-year 1991 level of over 20 percent, or 1 in every 5 students.[2]

Instead of using the term “dropouts,” which suggests that the students are themselves to blame for leaving school, children’s advocates have taken to calling these students “pushouts.” The terminology is meant to indicate that they are the victims of educational policies flowing from the corporate-backed “school reform movement” that originated under the Reagan administration, stressing standardized testing and “accountability” of the public schools.

A class-action lawsuit filed against the New York City Department of Education cites examples of these pushouts, including a special-education student who was told that services were no longer available, an injured student who was unable to climb stairs, and an 18-year-old student who was held back due to repeatedly failing the state-mandated Regents exam in English. Many of these students were told they had no option to stay in school.

Students with few of the credits needed toward graduation when they turn 17 are told they can no longer be enrolled, even though state law gives them the right to remain in a regular high school until they are 21. Many of these students are told they must get the less-valued, out-of-school General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Adult education centers that give tutoring for the GED have reported a large increase in the number of 16- to 18-year-olds who are signing up. Azi Ellowitch at the Lehman College Adult Learning Center told the *Times*, “Those kids are the least appropriate for the GED programs. If they need brushing up, we can certainly help them. But that’s not what most of these kids need. They need years of basic learning.”

Elisa Hyman of Advocates for Children said, “We’ve had guidance counselors calling on their cellphones from bathrooms saying they’ve

been told to get rid of kids.” Her organization has filed suit against the Education Department to readmit hundreds of students dumped from Franklin K. Lane High School in Brooklyn in the last three years.

Taft High School in the Bronx listed 253 students as “discharged” and 157 as dropped-out from the class of 2002. Only 123 students from that class graduated. At Brandeis High School in Manhattan, recent budget changes resulted in the layoff of the only staff member assigned to visit homes of absentee students. Brandeis graduated fewer than 200 students in June from the class of 2003, which had begun with around 900 students four years before.

New York City officials have been aware of the push-out phenomenon for at least two years, when then-Director of the Office of Assessment and Accountability Robert Tobias recommended an audit after noticing the heavy use of discharge codes, which can mislabel students who leave the schools as having left the city. Last November, the non-profit group Advocates for Children and the city’s public advocate Betsy Gotbaum issued a special report entitled *Pushing Out At-Risk Students: An Analysis of High School Discharge Figures*. It pointed to the city’s failure to provide an adequate breakdown of the circumstances under which students left schools and what became of them. Schools Chancellor Joel Klein declined to comment for months, finally declaring the problem “a tragedy” that required the introduction of new programs. He refused to specify, however, what programs would be implemented.

President Bush’s secretary of education Rod Paige faced his own drop-out scandal last month. In appointing Paige in 2001, Bush touted his reputation as schools superintendent in Houston, Texas, where reported drop-out rates plunged to an unbelievably low 1.5 percent during his tenure. A recent state audit, however, found that some 3,000 of the 5,500 teenagers who left school in the 2000-2001 school year should have been declared dropouts but were not. In fact, Houston’s graduation rate of 52 percent places it with Dallas and Fort Worth among the 10 worst school districts in the state for high school graduation.[3] There are obvious parallels between the way the Houston school system under Paige undercounted its dropouts and the accounting methods employed by Houston-based Enron to hide its debts.

George W. Bush made the so-called Texas miracle in education a model for the rest of the country under the federal “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB). He used his record as governor of raising scores on tests—which some experts criticized as too easy—to win congressional passage of the bill in January 2002. The NCLB is the most well known of a number of right-wing measures inspired by the misnamed “school reform movement.” Rather than provide funds for a crumbling public education system—including building repairs, smaller class sizes, and support for students with special needs—these measures substitute high-stakes testing as a cure-all.

Besides their students' scores on standardized tests, schools are rated on their drop-out rates, absenteeism, and percentage of students who graduate in four years. Students pressured to leave are listed as "discharged" rather than "dropouts," since schools with high drop-out rates face new sanctions—up to and including being taken over and completely reorganized—under the Bush administration's NCLB. Principals are under great pressure to improve their schools' ranking in the various categories. For many students pushed out because they drag down the ratings, the result is to deprive them of an education altogether.

In May of this year, the Texas State Board of Education was faced with thousands of students failing a new statewide achievement test. To avoid holding all those students back a grade—and having hundreds of schools penalized under NCLB regulations—the board voted to reduce the number of questions that students must answer correctly to pass. Similarly, Michigan officials lowered the percentage of students who must pass statewide tests to certify a school as making adequate progress, and Colorado changed its grading system to lump students previously characterized as "partially proficient" based on test scores with those labeled "proficient."

The NCLB was passed with bipartisan backing four months after September 11, 2001. In order to avoid their responsibility for this law, many Democrats are now saying they are withdrawing support. Representative Richard Gephardt recently described the NCLB as "a phony gimmick," duplicitously claiming, "We were all suckered into it. It's a fraud." [4]

In the book on teachers' resistance to the attacks on education, *Silent No More: Voices of Courage in American Schools* (Heinemann, 2003), Alabama teacher Steve Orel describes an earlier example of the educational corruption that encourages students to leave school. In the spring term of 2000, the Birmingham school system expelled 522 high school students, or 5.6 percent of the city's total. The students were reported as having "withdrawn" for "lack of interest." The local school board was afraid that low SAT (Scholastic Achievement Test) scores were going to result in a takeover by the state. The students had been kept on the rolls to satisfy state regulations for school funding based on the number of students enrolled on the 40th day of the second semester, whether they actually attend school the rest of the year or not. On the 41st day, once the funding was achieved, the lower-performing students began to be administratively withdrawn as they reached their 16th birthday, since they were regarded as a liability to the schools' achievement test scores.

After exposing this sham, Orel was fired from a Birmingham tutoring program for school-leavers, which was then closed down (but which he succeeded in reopening as a free training program). Students are not dropouts, according to Orel, when they are absent because they were sick or hungry or afraid of gang activity, or leave school to help earn income for their families living in poverty, or because they are pregnant, or have a brother who is shot or a terminally-ill parent, or are living in shelters for the homeless. "I have yet to meet a single student who woke up one morning and consciously chose to leave school. My experience has been that the school system left them. Whether it is poverty or the drive to raise test scores, both of which leave students with a sense of low self-confidence and low self-esteem, they continue to feel coerced and pushed out of school... The tests become the subject of education, and the students become the objects. This completely reverses the role of education." [5]

Asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* about the New York City pushouts, Steve Orel said, "It is very tragic. Education is being controlled by a corporate agenda. Tests are being used to sort students out. Kids are being severed from their education and that is creating permanently unemployed people."

Another teacher, James Hope, who recently won a three-year court case in Georgia against suspension for publicly criticizing questions on a high-stakes test, has labeled the "politically motivated, phony high-standards

movement" as "child abuse." [6]

The focus by bureaucrats on high-stakes testing as a method of fostering educational reform, while ignoring the real needs of the students, affect most of all families of the working class. In 2000, young adults living in families with incomes in the lowest 20th percentile were six times more likely than their peers from families with incomes in the top 20th percentile to drop out of high school. [7]

Students of low-income families generally need more services and attention to improve their academic skill, but the requirements to administer and teach for the standardized tests mean the needs of these students are often ignored. These students are being pushed out of schools not only because of test scores but also because of the greater costs—in a period of severe budget cuts—of helping children with family problems, physical and learning disabilities, learning English as a second language, or just requiring more time to learn curriculum geared to standardized tests. The schools that these students attend are invariably the worst funded.

Many of these pushouts also face the need to look for jobs at a time of rising unemployment. These youth are more likely to face joblessness or low-wage jobs; the young women are more likely to become pregnant at earlier ages and struggle as single parents; they are more likely to need public assistance at a time when the system of welfare supports is being dismantled; and these youth make up a disproportionate percentage of the nation's growing prison population. [8]

While the National Center for Education Statistics shows the drop-out rate nationwide declined from 14.1 percent in 1960 to a still-high 10.9 percent in 2000, critics of the testing movement fear that this trend is reversing itself, masked by widespread inaccuracies in the data. In the 1990s, the difference between the rates for white and black and Hispanic youth had already ceased to diminish, although the gap had narrowed through the 1970s and 1980s.

Further analysis would find that the underlying motivation for a society in which the school system turns children into numbers, and can decide that they are disposable, lies in the needs of the profit system.

Notes:

1. "To Cut Failure Rate, Schools Shed Students," *New York Times*, 31 July 2003
2. "Graduation daze: Behind the numbers," *New York Teacher*, 19 June 2002.
3. "Education Secretary Defends School System He Once Led," *New York Times*, 26 July 2003
4. "States Cut Test Standards to Avoid Sanctions," *New York Times*, 22 May 2003.
5. *Silent No More*, eds. ReLeah Cossett Lent and Gloria Pipkin, (Heinemann, 2003).
6. Ibid.
7. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/droppub_2001
8. http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin026.shtml



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