

# Rod Paige, George W. Bush's Secretary of Education and the public face of "No Child Left Behind," dies at 92

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Rod Paige, US Secretary of Education under George W. Bush from 2001-2005, died on December 9, 2025, at the age of 92. While Paige himself is not particularly well known, his death provides an opportunity to review the bipartisan assault on public education in which he played a pivotal and disgraceful part.

Paige is best known for promoting Bush's reactionary "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), signed into law on January 8, 2002. Paige, the first African American to head the Department of Education, framed the legislation as a defense and extension of civil rights. He argued that NCLB was the "logical next step" to the landmark Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*, by claiming NCLB would end the "soft bigotry" of educational neglect that allowed poor and minority students to fail.

This was, in fact, a grotesque lie. NCLB led to an estimated 4,000 school closures nationally, mostly in impoverished districts. Meanwhile, edu-businesses and charter school chains cashed in. Paige oversaw the most significant reorganization of education in 50 years, shifting the education landscape from neighborhood public schools to market-style choice systems. Siphoning funds from public education, NCLB systematically subordinated education to corporate interests and promoted Christian indoctrination.

Paige's education policies contributed to a ruthless triage of working-class youth. Schools in poor and racially segregated communities were disproportionately labeled "failing" under standardized test-based "accountability" schemes and faced the loss of funding, teacher firings and closure. Students who needed the most resources were the first to lose them. Entire neighborhoods were destabilized as local schools were closed and replaced by charter schools (many for-profit) with selective enrollment and high attrition.

Rather than narrowing achievement gaps, NCLB institutionalized a two-track education structure: One of enriched programs for the privileged, and another of test, drill, austerity and punitive discipline for the working class.

But while Paige is justifiably notorious for these measures, none of them could have been implemented without bipartisan Democratic Party support. Subsequent history shows that Democrats' role has been more systematic and ultimately more effective at embedding market-based "reforms" into American education.

The open partnership of the teacher unions with the capitalist reorganization of public schools was decisive. The well-heeled bureaucracy suppressed teacher opposition and in coming years would preach "reform with us, not against us," enabling the big business agenda to be imposed on districts across the US.

## Paige, the origins of NCLB, and Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy

Paige rose to national prominence as superintendent of the Houston Independent School District (HISD) in the 1990s. He presided over the so-called "Houston Miracle"—a fabricated narrative of soaring test scores and declining dropout rates used to justify mass testing, school closures, merit pay schemes and charter expansion. These claims were later exposed as statistical manipulation, administrative coercion and extensive "pushouts" of low-performing students.

Nonetheless, the myth served its purpose. In 2001, Bush elevated Paige to run the Department of Education, where he became the public face of NCLB, the most sweeping federal intervention in K-12 schooling in half a century.

The No Child Left Behind Act was not a Republican imposition but a bipartisan initiative with Democratic fingerprints throughout. The legislation was co-authored by Senator Edward Kennedy (Democrat-Massachusetts), the party's liberal icon, alongside Republican Judd Gregg, while California Congressman George Miller served as a key Democratic architect in the House. The Senate passed NCLB 87-10, with overwhelming Democratic support, and the House approved it 381-41.

Kennedy and Miller worked directly with the Bush administration to mandate annual standardized testing, establish "adequate yearly progress" requirements and impose punitive measures on schools failing to meet benchmarks. The law's central premise—that education quality could be measured through high-stakes testing and market-style accountability—reflected the "New Democrat" ideology of the Clinton era, which sought to demonstrate the party could be "tough on education."

The consequences were immediate and devastating. NCLB promoted a deeply anti-intellectual view of education where, as education historian Diane Ravitch noted, "knowledge was irrelevant." The law's testing requirements narrowed the curriculum to test preparation, punished schools serving the most vulnerable students and built the accountability system that later enabled widespread school closures.

## Obama and Race to the Top: Building on NCLB

If NCLB laid the foundation, the Obama administration built the demolition apparatus. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative, announced in 2009, represented a quantum leap in federal pressure for privatization. RTTT required states to commit to

specific policies to be eligible to compete for federal funding: increasing charter school caps, implementing test-based teacher evaluations and closing “persistently low-performing” schools.

The impact was dramatic. Thirty-four states changed education policies and 48 states collaborated to create Common Core standards. The initiative’s competitive structure—pitting states against each other for federal dollars—created a “race to bureaucracy” that expanded standardized testing, data collection and centralization.

Standardized testing was wielded to produce a steady supply of “failing schools” that could be targeted for closure, forced reorganization, or conversion to charters.

Education was recast as a market. Parents became “consumers,” schools “providers,” students “data points,” and teachers “deliverers of measurable outcomes.” Public funds were shifted to charter operators, education management organizations (EMOs), and testing conglomerates such as Pearson and Educational Testing Service (ETS).

The result was a dramatic widening of social inequality, with working-class districts subjected to relentless pressure, budget cuts and the loss of democratic control.

High-stakes testing regimes served another critical function: weakening and disciplining the teaching profession. Merit pay schemes and “value-added” metrics stripped teachers of job security, intensified surveillance and eroded working conditions. By tying funding and employment to test scores—measures deeply correlated with poverty—the system scapegoated teachers for the growing social inequality caused by capitalism.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) bureaucracies “partnered” with both corporate-controlled parties throughout the process. Driven by their preoccupation with keeping their “seat at the table” and their dues revenue, the unions signed onto RTTT. Instead of opposing charter schools, which constituted a Trojan Horse breaking up the public education system and a key element of RTTT, the unions decided to “organize” them, looking to increase the bureaucracy’s bottom line.

## Who benefits?

RTTT was, for all practical purposes, designed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which invested hundreds of millions of dollars to reorganize the US education system as a reliable “human capital” pipeline for what was touted as a technology-driven economy.

Before RTTT, 50 different state standards made it difficult to scale educational software and testing products. By forcing a single set of standards (Common Core) and data systems, Gates helped create a unified national market ripe for corporate entry. The “business concern” was that public schools were failing to produce workers with the specific “analytical skills” required by companies like Microsoft to maintain global dominance without relying entirely on H-1B visas.

While teachers and students faced school closures and non-stop testing, the ed-tech industry realized record profits. This specifically benefited Pearson and Microsoft, as “data-driven instruction” required massive IT upgrades. RTTT’s emphasis on “personalized learning” meant not fully staffed classrooms and support personnel, but 1:1 device programs.

## “Important Partners”

Within months of Obama’s launch of RTTT, Gates invested \$335

million in “effective teaching” and “fairer and more reliable evaluative measures” to meet RTTT standards. This was welcomed by AFT President Randi Weingarten, who endorsed Gates’ policy, saying, “This process has been a thoughtful, deliberative, collaborative way to understand—and then design and implement—systems that improve teaching and learning.”

Gates explicitly noted that “Important partners in this effort are the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) and their affiliates in the participating communities.” Between 2009 and 2014, the Gates Foundation gave over \$10 million directly to the AFT and about \$4 million to the NEA to “train” members on the new standards and ensure ideological alignment with the Gates mission.

Rising anger among rank-and-file teachers eventually boiled over, prompting Weingarten to stop accepting Gates Foundation funds. However, by then the critical rollout period had already passed, and Common Core and teacher-evaluation laws were firmly established in state law.

Throughout this period, the AFT and NEA bureaucracies suppressed strike actions over the results of NCLB/RTTT and the destruction of jobs. When strikes exploded out of their control, they demanded “cooling-off” deals, imposed return-to-work orders and isolated struggles.

The most blatant betrayal was the sellout of the powerful 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike. In exchange for Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s help in recruiting teachers from city-run charter schools into the Chicago Teachers Union, the bureaucracy signed a deal that accepted expanded test-based evaluations and the elimination of 4,000 jobs. This paved the way for the closure of 49 schools.

Similarly, the AFT apparatus openly sabotaged a significant wave of wildcat strikes by Detroit teachers (2015-16) demanding safe and well-funded classrooms.

Rod Paige’s legacy is one of a brutal assault on education in line with the needs of the capitalist profit system. With Trump and current Education Secretary Linda McMahon repeating many of Paige’s lies and justifications, the lessons of the not-so-distant past are crucial.

Every attack on education has been carried out at the behest of the financial elite and executed by both Democrats and Republicans. The pro-capitalist union bureaucracies have acquiesced and prospered through the betrayal of workers and students. This underscores the necessity of forming independent rank-and-file organizations of education workers, politically independent from the union bureaucracy and the two capitalist parties.

These new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by workers themselves, must be built to link up the defense of public education, jobs and social rights with the escalating struggles against fascism and war by workers across the world.

The very existence of public education and all democratic rights is incompatible with the domination of society by a corporate and financial oligarchy whose interests are entirely antithetical to the interests of society. That is why the launching of collective action by educators—including the development of a nationwide strike to defend the right to public education—must be combined with a political struggle against both capitalist parties and the fight for the expropriation of the billionaires and mega-millionaires and the socialist reorganization of society.



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