



## *League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces*

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### **Politicization of Teacher Quality**

Report Prepared for LWVGLC Education Study Committee

From the beginning of our American Republic, the control of public education was traditionally in the hands of state and local communities as was the responsibility to finance public education. However, during the era of the 1950s cold war, changes in this long held position on public education took root in ways that have dramatically affected the future of education. This is especially true with regard to the national government's position on teacher quality, defined as the impact of an individual teacher on student learning outcomes. Following is a brief outline of the events that sparked this shift in public policy at the national level and the accompanying political messaging, which struck fear into the hearts of parents, regardless of what the truth may be.

**1950s - Cold War, Sputnik Era** - When Sputnik was launched in 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower engaged the nation in a great public debate. The conversation focused on the concern as to whether our American high school and college graduates were well enough educated to protect the public safety and create the science and technological innovations that would maintain our position as a world leader.

**1960s - Civil Rights Movement & Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)** - In the 1960s following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the ascent to office of President Lyndon Johnson swept in a whole new era with his legacy campaign known as "The Great Society". He expressed deep concern about the inequity and lack of resources in public schools serving students in poverty and called into question the quality of teachers in these schools. This resulted in his signature legislation, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. For the first time, the federal government began to set policy that would provide money to many schools across the nation in return for some measure of accountability for improved results in student learning.

**1980s - A Nation at Risk** - Upon President Ronald Reagan's arrival in the White House, he commissioned a widely publicized ground breaking study titled *A Nation at Risk*. This report further stoked the fear that our students simply did not have the skills to compete in the global marketplace and that the "the rising tide of mediocrity" threatened our nation's future. The business community was encouraged to take a hand in seeing that this situation was corrected. This call to duty created great momentum for two movements: 1) the flowering of the accountability movement which had its roots in the politics of the 50's and 2) market place ideas like school choice, merit pay and the use of standardized testing.

**1990's - Berliner & Biddle** - During the 90s, two well-known experts in education philosophy, policy and measurement, David Berliner and B. J. Biddle, compiled their research in a book titled *The Manufactured Crisis*. The authors pointed out that if the data are controlled for poverty, American Students are right up at the top with the best countries on international tests of academic achievement. This is an important observation because a great body of research over time provides strong evidence that poverty is the factor that is most highly correlated with poor academic outcomes, hovering right around 30% out of the all the dozens of variables that are associated with academic achievement. Of course, correlation does not prove a cause and effect relationship, but strong evidence over the years supports such a hypothesis. If, in fact, this evidence is valid, it is important as the United States has the largest gap between the rich and poor of the 34 most economically developed countries. Teachers in Dona Ana County appear to be working miracles everyday with outcomes that are better than might be predicted with the extraordinarily high poverty level (39.4% of children and youth age 18 and under live below the poverty level). However, it seems absurd to hold teachers, alone, responsible for overcoming all the challenges to student achievement presented by such poverty.

**2000s - Reauthorization of ESEA** - In 2002, President George W. Bush presided over the reauthorization of his version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Once again, it was intended that the children who were struggling to achieve should benefit from these federal funds. The accountability portion of the act focused on the impact of "qualified teachers" on student achievement as gauged by standardized testing programs based on identified standards and 100% student proficiency in reading and

mathematics at select grade levels. Emotional rhetoric about the needs of poor and minority students literally catapulted the concept of "school and teacher accountability" into the mainstream across the country. Celebrities such as Michelle Rhee, Mark Zuckerberg, Shakira, and Oprah Winfrey have offered reform ideas. Bill Gates weighed in to support a concept called stack ranking of teachers and schools, an evaluation concept popularized within Microsoft which proved to be a highly demoralizing policy among employees and ultimately abandoned.

**Value Added Modeling (VAM)** - It is no accident that during the last decade the work of economists, mathematicians, and psychometricians that had been ongoing since the 1950s resulted in highly sophisticated models (statistical equations) for teacher evaluations known as value added models (VAMs). Numerous published research papers cite their accuracy on the one hand, and just as many cite their critical instability. The use of these models has become popular to stack rank individual teacher impact on students within a given school.

**Model Legislation** - At the same time that VAM models were popularized, think tanks from the left, right, and center begin to develop model legislation for states to adopt to guide education reform. The most well known is ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), one of the largest developers of education reform legislation, including the practice of teacher evaluations tied to standardized testing using VAM models. ALEC members include state and federal level legislators and governors from both major political parties and for-profit corporations. The goal of ALEC members is to take the model legislation back to their state and get it passed, which is then almost always followed by lucrative contracts with such corporations as London-based Pearson, the world's largest provider of testing services, packaged curriculum and education publications (the parent company of Prentice Hall publishers). The fact that education in the U. S. is a business of more than \$600 billion annually has not been missed in the corporate world. The VAM and model legislation movements are about privatizing public education and redirecting money out of the classroom and into for-profit corporations.

**2009 - "Race to the Top"** - Not to be outdone by past presidents, Barack Obama's administration came up with its version of an education reform plan. The plan provides state waivers for the most onerous NCLB requirements. The waivers initially were greeted with a sigh of relief only to discover the "accountability" portion of the plan requires heavy use of standardized test scores to measure teacher impact on student achievement. These requirements have greatly accelerated the testing craze and the use of VAM based teacher evaluations. Teachers, students, and parents are reeling from the amount of class time that is being spent on testing.

**Evaluation of Education Outcomes Across the States** - Jim Hull, Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Public Education has studied what the 50 states are doing to deal with evaluation of teacher impact on student learning outcomes. He reports:

- 47 states require or recommend that stakeholders, including teachers, provide input into the design of new evaluation systems,
- 46 states call for some kind of measure of teacher impact,
- 17 states provide local districts flexibility as well as support in developing an evaluation system, and
- 21 states leave almost all the responsibility for developing an evaluation system in the hands of the local school districts.

This last practice has been shown to work in communities like Union City, New Jersey, where over the past decade a determined collaborative effort of educators, elected officials, and families have turned around a failing district with 75% low-income and minorities students into a district of high achievers. This has happened with very little outside help or extra money, no charter schools, and the firing of very few teachers.

**Conclusions** - The accountability movement is here to stay. There is far too much to be gained by politicizing the teaching profession for many legislators, governors, celebrities or presidents to leave school personnel decisions in the hands of educators and their communities. Yet, the League of Women Voters genuinely believes that good public education for all children creates the bedrock foundation for a true democracy. Therefore, it is incumbent for citizens to be fully aware of the education issues that are shaping the success, or lack thereof, for our students in the public schools. Taking responsibility to know 1) positions on education issues of candidates for elected offices and 2) who will support a collaborative approach to involve our education professionals, parents, students, and community members in designing accountability systems that meet the needs of our local school districts is an important part of the process that will shape the future of our communities, state, and nation. As educator John Dewey said, "Democracy must be reborn in every generation." If a critical mass of citizens does not take this responsibility, in all likelihood, democracy is doomed.

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