

Whittle attempts to capitalize on disaster in U.S. education

by Joyce Fredman

The latest results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a congressionally mandated rating of schooling in America, underscore the horrendous state of learning that faces our students. With such a disaster as public education has come to be, proposals ranging from reform to revolution have been heard, all attacking the current bureaucracies of academia.

The latest challenger is one Christopher Whittle, who grabbed headlines when he snared the president of Yale University to head his Edison Project, a for-profit national school system. However, his proposals beg the question, "Might not the devil you know be better than the one you don't?"

Johnny can't read or write

Popularly known as the National Report Card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress issued its results from a study of approximately 13,000 students in 1988 and 25,000 students in 1990. The data was from grades four, eight, and twelve. Their answers spell national disaster.

One-quarter of fourth-graders and one-fifth of eighth-graders studied said they never discussed what they read in class. Forty-five percent of fourth-graders, 63% of eighth-graders, and 59% of twelfth-graders said they read fewer than 11 pages a day. Students' reading performance was rated on a scale of 0-500. For 1990, the national average proficiency for the fourth grade was 233; for the eighth grade, 261; and for American high school seniors, 289.

Not surprisingly, the same children have no problem turning on their television sets. Sixty-two percent of fourth-graders, 64% of eighth-graders, and 40% of twelfth-graders said they watch at least three hours of television a day. Twenty-five percent of fourth-graders said they watch more than *six hours daily*.

The results of another study from the same board released one month earlier had shown that students' writing abilities aren't any better. The board was to evaluate the "best" writing examples of fourth- and eighth-graders.

The average sample submitted for the eighth-graders was only 140 words, or a few paragraphs. Revisions were practically unheard of, and only 1% of the students indicated they had written a draft or used an outline. Analytic writing was

practically non-existent, as were poetry and research.

The conclusion of one member who oversaw this study was understandably grim. "Careful, analytic writing seems virtually absent from the schools. Quite frankly," said Phyllis Aldrich, "it appears that [students] are not asked to do very much and that the quality of their best efforts is often pretty poor."

When Benno Schmidt, Jr., the former president of Yale University and former dean of the Columbia University Law School, defended his decision to join the Edison Project, he cited similar studies which confirmed the dismal state of affairs in our classrooms.

"One in five young Americans drops out of high school. Nearly half of all high school graduates have not mastered seventh-grade arithmetic. American 13-year-olds place near the bottom in science and math achievement in international comparisons. One-third of 17-year-olds cannot place France on a map of the world. Only about one in 10 high school graduates can write a reasonably coherent paragraph," Schmidt said.

The above, of course, deals with those who stay in school. But many of our youth don't even get that far. The Management Information Center (MIC) book in Philadelphia offers a glimpse at the dropout rates in that city. The information becomes even more interesting with the realization that Philadelphia is probably quite typical of American cities today. According to the figures in the MIC book for 1990-91 (produced by the Office of Accountability and Assessment), just staying in school is an achievement in itself for more and more children.

For the Philadelphia school district, 44% of high school freshmen fail ninth grade. In 1987, some 17,438 students entered the ninth grade. By 1991, only 7,855 had made it to their senior year. Close to 1,000 of those never qualified to graduate. In other words, *less than half* of the pupils who entered public high school in 1987 in Philadelphia graduated in the next four years. This is after the passing grade for the district had been lowered from 70% to 65%.

It's little wonder that the present defenders of public school education are so defensive. But attack as they might, the truth is exemplified by what Arnold Fege, the director of

government affairs for the National Parent Teachers Association, conceded: "It's very hard to challenge someone who says he wants to improve the public schools." Thus, enter Christopher Whittle: businessman, millionaire, and would-be savior of the schools.

The Ross Perot of education?

H. Ross Perot has been characterized as a superslick, albeit successful, salesman, whose popularity is due to the lack of talent of his competitors, rather than his own merit. The same could easily be said of Christopher Whittle.

Whittle appalled many scholars and parents by taking coaching lessons from Republican media expert Roger Ailes. Showing his admiration of Hollywood techniques for pitching his plan, he stated, "Warren Beatty and Arnold Schwarzenegger can sit down at eight and not get up until five," doing non-stop interviews.

Needless to say, the education establishment was rankled when Whittle announced his Edison Project, a multibillion-dollar proposal to build 1,000 top-flight schools that operate for the same annual cost per pupil as do the public schools—\$5,500. The first 100 elementary schools are to open by 1996. Soon after the turn of the century, Whittle hopes to be operating all 1,000 campuses serving 2 million students. What's more, Whittle plans to make a substantial profit off what he characterizes as the "private research and development arm of the public schools." Not everyone would call it research and development.

Whittle first came to national attention with his controversial Channel One television network. This station provides a 12-minute news round-up for close to 8 million students within both the public and private school systems. News is not all that is covered on the station; so are advertisements for Nike, Burger King, and other commercial products. Through successful marketing of Channel One, Whittle made millions.

It isn't only the tacky commercials that give pause to Whittle's brainchild. There are connections to the Bush administration that bear investigation, given the well-known stance of the administration for a parent's right to choose schools. The vouchers that allow taxpayers to transfer their dollars from public to private education would more than assist the Edison Project financially.

The personnel of the Edison Project are clearly plugged into Bush. Chester Finn, Jr. is one of the board members of the Edison Project. He also is a former assistant U.S. secretary of education who advised both Presidents Reagan and Bush. Education Secretary Lamar Alexander was a business consultant of Whittle Communications and held stock in the company. Deputy Secretary of Education David Kearns used to be on the Time Warner board, members of which are now financial backers of the plan. While both Alexander and Kearns have been mum about Whittle's plan, they have been enthusiastic supporters for

the Bush administration's voucher proposals.

Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch is quite open about her support of the idea, claiming that competition is what is needed to improve the present state of affairs. "You are not betraying the American ideal if you leave a public school," she said. "It doesn't matter where kids go to school, as long as they get a good education."

Ravitch is not alone in her thinking. Peter D. Relic, president of the National Association of Independent Schools, a group representing 1,000 private elementary and secondary schools, was even more blunt: "We need radical change in American education, not tinkering, but a revolution. So my reaction to Whittle and Schmidt is that there is now a chance that change will come, I say, welcome into the fray."

The desperation about schooling is not limited to the conservatives. Liberal columnist William Raspberry stated that "if Whittle and his investors are willing to undertake all the risks on the bet that this time the miracle really is at hand, I say let them go for it. American education could use a miracle or two."

'New Age' education

The media mogul's idea of miracles is not necessarily everyone else's. Each school would be linked by closed-circuit television to a central studio, raising the possibility of a one to 1 million teacher-to-student ratio. Whittle wants his students equipped with the latest technology, predicting that students could spend up to three hours daily on "electronic learning systems."

In response to a query regarding the importance of traditional classrooms with walls, Whittle indicated he found the notion antiquated. "This is a question that worries me a great deal. It's part of the old model that feels almost inescapable. We all have this sense that you must have a physical facility. I want us to question that. One of my fears is that we're not going to be radical enough in that regard."

Whittle's technetronic orientation and New Age ideas about architecture are not the only problems. Other than empty phrases, there has been little discussion so far of curriculum. The brochures the Edison Project sends out are full of laudable goals, such as reducing bureaucracy, making learning fun again, introducing new educational technology to students, and abolishing current academic subject boundaries—otherwise known as "political correctness."

But nowhere is there mention of a classical curriculum or the in-depth study that is badly needed in order to turn around the poor performance of today's students. In fact, very few in this debate have mentioned anything other than finances and today's societal woes. Jonathan Kozol said, "I dread the thought of the profit motive infiltrating a noble area of public aspiration." But until noble aspirations have concrete agendas which address the lack of intellectual standards, students are not safe in any of our schools, public or