

# Many Children Left Behind

## Reexamining the Texas Success Story

by William Lutz

“No Child Left Behind”: That poll-tested slogan is the centerpiece of an artfully designed, meticulously implemented p.r. campaign designed to portray Texas as a hotbed of educational reform and achievement.

Certainly, the Texas accountability system has put some focus on teaching basic literacy skills to low-income children who may have been ignored in decades past. However, it also ranks schools based mainly on the rates at which students (both whites and minorities) pass a single standardized test.

This feature of the Texas system, which has provoked the most controversy, is the basis of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Politicians and some in the Texas education bureaucracy have worked overtime to convince the nation that their accountability system, enacted in 1993, has improved student achievement and closed the academic gap between racial minorities and whites.

There is another story, however—one that many Texans, particularly those with children in the public schools, know—that is little told outside the Lone Star State. It is a story of education policy based not on helping all children learn but on creating headlines about a “miracle” in Texas education. It is a story of students doing multiple-choice testing drills instead of reading Shakespeare.

George Orwell would have understood what has happened here. In the name of raising standards, academic standards have been lowered. Educational programs described as “more rigorous” replace academic rigor with an emphasis on “creativity” and “critical-thinking skills.” Efforts to improve “local control” result in the concentration of power in the hands of an appointed commissioner of education, at the expense of an elected State Board of Education.

The best example of codifying lowered standards in the name of raising them occurred in 1997, when the State Board of Education rewrote the state’s curriculum, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). By law, all schools must teach the curriculum, and all textbooks and state standardized tests must conform to it. Former education commissioner Lionel “Skip” Meno, who served under Gov. Ann Richards, started the process by appointing teams from the education profession (along with a few noneducators) to study and propose revisions to the state’s curriculum. Each subject area had its own writing team. The process continued under the administration of Gov. George W. Bush and his education commissioner, Mike Moses.

When the TEKS writing teams issued their report, a firestorm erupted. Conservative members of the State Board of Education, parents, and some concerned teachers lambasted

the document as vague and lacking in academic content. They argued that the TEKS standards were so general that it was impossible to measure whether students were getting a good education. Additionally, identical skills often appear under several grade levels.

A group of high-school English teachers developed the Texas Alternative Document (TAD), an alternative to TEKS, emphasizing phonics for teaching reading in the early grades. TAD is generally more precise than TEKS, specifying exactly what students in each grade level should be able to do.

In sixth-grade English-Language Arts, for example, TEKS directs students to “use verb tenses appropriately and consistently such as present, past, future, perfect, and progressive.” By contrast, TAD expects students to

form the present progressive, past progressive, future progressive, present emphatic, and past emphatic verb tenses. Locate the entire verb phrase including modals (verbs that fall under no tense name) (e.g., those that begin with “must,” “can,” “could,” “may,” “might,” [plus] the main verb), locate all types of linking verb phrases (e.g., forms which come from “to be,” “to look,” “to smell,” “to sound,” “to feel,” “to taste”) and those which show condition or state of being . . .

After the outcry, Bush and Moses made a few improvements to TEKS. (Some pro-phonics language was added to the English-Language Arts TEKS, for example.) The Bush administration, however, put substantial pressure on all Republicans to support the revised draft of TEKS. When 6 conservative Republican members of the 15-member State Board of Education held out for higher standards, many in the education establishment tried to portray the opposition to TEKS, and the effort to adopt a high-standards curriculum in its place, as coming from the “religious right.” Conservative State Board of Education members faced challenges by fellow Republicans in the primary.

Relations between most of the Republicans on the State Board of Education and Moses were downright icy. Things got so bad that two Republican State Board of Education members—Bob Offutt and Donna Ballard—went to New Hampshire in 2000 to endorse Steve Forbes for president.

After the trip to New Hampshire, Americans for Job Security—a political-action committee founded by executives of the American Insurance Association but no longer associated with the group—spent tens of thousands of dollars on a massive direct-mail campaign attacking Offutt, who was seeking reelection at the time. The mailers accused Offutt of opposing reforms, advanced by Governor Bush, that had raised test scores in Texas public schools. (Ballard had left the board by 2000.) The names of donors to the Americans for Job Security’s mail-

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ers were never disclosed, and Offutt was defeated. This is but one of many examples of how some of the major Republican and corporate campaign donors helped obstruct the cause of true education reform in Texas.

The adoption of TEKS, combined with a 1995 rewrite of the Texas Education Code, introduced some questionable fads to Texas classrooms. In 1995, the state legislature made it much more difficult for the elected State Board of Education to reject textbooks: Any error-free book meeting half of the TEKS standards had to be adopted.

One result of this new policy was the introduction into some Texas classrooms of mathematics textbooks emphasizing critical-thinking skills and creativity over computation and correct answers. Both the Austin and the Plano (a suburb of Dallas) independent school districts adopted one of these textbooks, *Connected Math*, for all middle schools. In Plano, a group of outraged parents organized and even sued the school to try to get the district to offer a traditional alternative to *Connected Math*. The courts did not stop the introduction of *Connected Math* or order an alternative, but they did rule that the school district violated parents' free-speech rights by preventing them from passing out literature critical of the text at parent meetings.

Keeping TEKS vague was an essential part of Team Bush's p.r. strategy. If the TEKS standards are grade-level specific and demanding, the state's standardized tests will be more difficult, and more children will fail. If they are vague and repetitive, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has the freedom to make the test easier, meaning that more children are likely to pass. The latter course ensures a steady stream of headlines that read "Educational Improvement in Texas."

The other critical decision concerned the design of the state's standardized test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Once again, a battle ensued between conservative State Board of Education members and the commissioner's office over whether Texas would favor high standards or—in pursuit of happy headlines—keep the test so easy that most children will pass.

State Board Member Richard Neill (R-Fort Worth) raised criticisms to TEA staff about some of the questions. He gave as one example a question on the end-of-course U.S. history exam. "There is an outline of the United States. It's divided up into four sections, and there's a fifth section for Alaska and Hawaii. And it says give the number of the section that has the most islands in it. All you have to do is count up the Hawaiian Islands. You don't even have to know what Hawaii [and] Alaska are."

Another subject of controversy was the Texas Education Agency's practice of "statistical equating." During the presidential election, Bush campaign officials talked in glowing terms about increasing the passing rates of Texas public-school students. What they did not tell voters was that the TEA often lowered the number of correct answers needed to pass the test during Bush's term of office. In order to pass the TAAS, students must achieve a Texas Learning Index of 70. The number of correct answers required to get that score varies based on TEA estimates of the difficulty of the test. (The TEA uses field-test data to judge the difficulty of the test.)

This policy meant that students did not have to get many questions right in order to pass the test—particularly in the years leading up to the presidential election. On the 2000 exit-level mathematics test (tenth grade), students could get fewer than half the questions right and still pass.

Politicians of both parties noted that, while passing rates on the TAAS improved substantially, scores on college entrance examinations (the SAT and the ACT) remained flat throughout the 1990's. Texas scores on the SAT went from an average of 490 verbal and 498 math in 1993 to 493 verbal and 500 math in 2003. Between 1998 and 2003, average scores actually went down. Defenders of the Texas system note that, for a state of its size, Texas tests a large portion of its students and that Texas has a high proportion of low-income and minority students. (These are usually the same people who decry "the soft bigotry of low expectations.")

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Additionally, until recently, Texas required enrollees at its universities to take a state exam to determine whether they needed remedial education. In 1997, only 48.2 percent of high-school students graduating with "advanced honors" and enrolling at state-run colleges either passed the test on the first attempt or were exempted from it because of high SAT and ACT scores. Only 26 percent of the remaining students passed or were exempted.

Perhaps the sharpest critique of the TAAS came in November 1998, when the Tax Research Association of Houston and Harris County presented a report on the test. The group invited Mathematically Correct, a California group advocating traditional standards in mathematics, to evaluate the math section of the TAAS. The group opposes "fuzzy" methods of teaching mathematics that emphasize "critical-thinking skills" and collaboration over correct answers and learning how to solve algebraic equations.

Mathematically Correct found TAAS wanting in many areas. Most notably, the group argued that the exit-level test—administered to high-school sophomores as a graduation requirement—tested at a sixth-grade level in mathematics. The group also found that the end-of-course test given to high-school students completing Algebra I contained mostly pre-algebra content.

The response from the Bush administration came fast and furious. An associate commissioner and the communications director of the TEA flew down and attended the news conference where the report was presented. Moses told reporters that the presenters of the report were not testing experts.

Despite the politically driven spin control, Moses understood Bush was vulnerable on this issue. In 1999, the legislature passed—at Moses' request—Senate Bill 103, which revamped the Texas testing system. The state tested more subjects and more grades. After Bush left office, the state implemented

a somewhat more rigorous testing program, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Once the state made the test more difficult, scores plummeted in Texas middle and high schools, though the elementary-reading passing rates remained respectable. The Texas Education Agency finally labeled the TAAS passing rate as “minimum expectations.”

According to TAKS statistics collected in the spring of 2003, just 51 percent achieved the score in eighth-grade mathematics recommended by the Texas Education Agency’s panel of stakeholders, compared with 92 percent who achieved minimum expectations on the TAAS. For students with limited English proficiency, only 15 percent achieved the panel-recommended standard, compared with 71 percent on the TAAS. Similarly low scores were found for other minority groups, which clear-

ly demonstrates that the gap between white and minority test scores has not yet been closed. In the 2004 testing cycle, these numbers improved slightly to 57 percent, meeting the panel’s standard in eighth-grade mathematics (28 out of 50 questions — or 56 percent right), and 20 percent of students with limited English proficiency meeting the standard. In general, passing rates decrease in the higher grades.

The single-minded focus on standardized testing found in the Texas Accountability System also resulted in some highly publicized cheating incidents, most notably in two of the state’s largest districts — Austin and Houston. In Austin, the school district and several administrators were indicted for tampering with the test. Specifically, some school officials were caught changing the student ID number on some answer sheets so that the exam would not count. In Houston, teachers were caught erasing wrong answers and filling in right ones.

Another running scandal in the Texas education system is the reporting of dropouts. The state had often bragged that it had an annual dropout rate of less than five percent. Civil-rights groups in Texas did not believe these numbers. The Intercultural Development Research Association took the number entering ninth grade, compared it with the number of twelfth graders earning high-school diplomas four years later. IDRA found attrition rates of more than 30 percent. Because of IDRA’s work, the state legislature has since changed the dropout rate used in the state accountability system, and the federal No Child Left Behind Act does not take annual dropout rates into account.

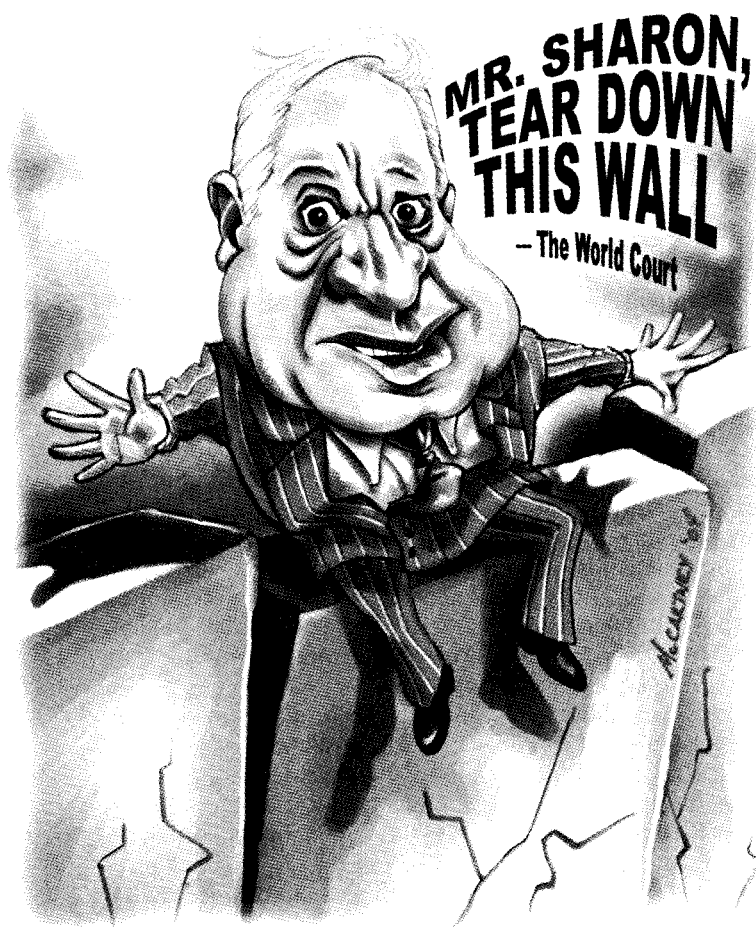
What can the rest of the nation learn from the Texas experience? Simple. Testing students, in and of itself, will not solve the nation’s education problems. (Nor will more money: In the 1990’s and 2001, Texas passed several pay raises for teachers and increases in education funding.)

This is not to say that meaningful testing or accountability is bad, *per se*. On the contrary, rigorous, high-standards tests are used throughout the world. As a Texas-style accountability system is implemented nationwide, however, voters should avoid taking headlines about “rising test scores” at face value. It is critical to ask whether the test actually reflects what students are expected to know.

I do not mean to imply that some gains and improvements did not occur in Texas schools during the 1990’s. Thanks to the outcry from conservatives on the State Board of Education, phonics received more emphasis in the early grades. The state authorized charter schools. And, while the Texas accountability system is not perfect, it does at least force schools to ensure that students from poorer backgrounds can fill out an answer sheet and read a standardized test, which is more than had occurred in some parts of the state in the past.

The lesson from the Texas experience, however, is that creating a high-stakes testing environment is no substitute for a sound curriculum, good textbooks, teachers who know their subject areas, and more parental involvement and control in schools.

Some of the most interesting reforms actually occurred after the national spotlight had left Texas. The TAAS was replaced by a more rigorous exam. The state passed a new program making it easier for degreed professionals to teach in high-school classrooms. There is serious discussion at the Capitol about giving the State Board of Education more authority over textbooks. Perhaps, over time, some of these ideas might achieve real gains in student achievement, without having to resort to p.r. campaigns and poll-tested slogans like “No Child Left Behind.”



**“Quick! Tell Wolfowitz to send all the King’s Horses and all the King’s Men!”**



# The Untold Story Behind *The Passion of the Christ*

In Defense of Mel Gibson

by Alberto Carosa

What could a world-famous multibillionaire Hollywood star like Mel Gibson have in common with an unknown, cash-strapped, freelance journalist based in Rome? Virtually nothing, it would seem. Yet there is a common denominator: We are both Catholics and cherish the traditional Latin Mass, the primary liturgy of the Church before its post-Vatican II transformation into the vernacular “Novus Ordo” rite. The pre-Vatican II Latin Mass is also called the Tridentine Mass, after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which codified the ancient Roman rite in its present form.

One reason I prefer the traditional Latin liturgy is that it prompted my wife’s conversion to the Catholic faith from the Lutheran church. She used to wonder whether there was any real difference between the Novus Ordo Mass and the Lutheran service of her childhood. I believe that her conversion was the clear sign that she was the woman God had chosen for me, as I was the man He chose for her. (Contrary to current belief, in fact, the traditional Catholic principle is that marriages are not decided by us but by God, and, if too many marriages today go awry, it is precisely because of the mistaken belief that one may choose one’s spouse while ignoring God’s will. The difference is obvious: God does not make mistakes in His choices, whereas human beings do.)

My initial acquaintance with Mel Gibson dates as far back as 1996, when, through a series of unexpected connections and coincidences, I ended up being privileged to act as his translator. I saw him again after a couple of years on the occasion of his youngest child’s confirmation, which was administered by a traditional-minded bishop who lived on the outskirts of Rome. And when, in late 2002, I read that Gibson was about to start shooting a film in Italy on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, I thought that it would be nice to see him again.

For obvious reasons, Mel Gibson is not a person who is easy to get a hold of, and, normally, it is best for him to establish contact at his convenience; for example, when he needs something that, for one reason or another, he is not able to procure. Can one seriously think, however, that there might be something he is not able to procure? My pessimism was proved wrong, though, and what happened is a typical case of reality going well beyond even the most fanciful of imaginations.

Gibson telephoned in the early fall of 2002, and we had a lengthy and pleasant conversation. The call came a couple of days after I had received a strange e-mail asking for help. I was about to delete the message—the sender was unknown to me, though I subsequently found out that he was Gibson’s assistant—but the subject line mentioned the need of a traditional priest for Mel Gibson.

Gibson needed to find a priest willing to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass daily on the set throughout the shooting of his film, including during an extended stay in Matera in Southern Italy. This request was being made not only for him, but on behalf of others involved in the production of the film, first and foremost the actor who played Jesus, James Caviezel (whom, to my delight, I found to be among the devout traditional-minded faithful).

My response to Gibson was very clear: I explained that it was not impossible to find a priest, but probably somewhat difficult and certainly time-consuming, especially with regard to Matera. I pledged, however, that I would not leave one single stone unturned in order to accommodate his needs.

Finding a priest to say the Tridentine Mass on the set in the Cinecittà studios in Rome would not have been all that difficult; the real problem was Matera. Obviously, he would have to be a retired priest without regular parish commitments—and one willing to move there for at least a couple of months. Where could I possibly find such a priest? My old friend Juan Miguel Montes came up with a brilliant idea: Why not ask those Vatican-approved traditional congregations to which a number of elderly and retired priests are usually attached? The solution came after I contacted Msgr. Gilles Wach, prior general of the Institute of Christ the King, Sovereign Priest, a traditional Latin Rite congregation based in Gricigliano (near Florence). In a subsequent meeting held at the Institute’s premises in Rome, Monsignor Wach, Gibson, and I agreed: The Institute’s Abbé (in the French sense of *father*, not *abbot*) Michel Debourges would be asked to serve as chaplain in Matera.

This solution could not have been more fitting, considering that Abbé Michel Debourges had worked for many years in theater (notably with Jean Vilar), cinema, and television before discovering, albeit belatedly, that he had a priestly vocation. Monsignor Wach, his superior, reached him at his home in Montpellier, inviting him to fly to Rome and then be driven by limousine to Matera.

While Father Debourges was “a priest” associated with Mel Gibson’s project and one of the three traditional priests involved in the offering of a daily Tridentine Mass for the film, he and the other two priests were each described in the media as “the priest” behind Gibson’s Mass. I had to deal with each of them, however, because I was responsible for arranging a suitable venue for the Sunday Mass, since the Cinecittà studios would be closed.

There is an interesting *Chronicles* connection to the chaplaincy performed by Abbé Debourges: The Institute of Christ the King, Sovereign Priest’s first church in the United States is in Rockford, Illinois, the home to this magazine and its publisher, The Rockford Institute. Rockford should be proud to house the congregation that provided a priest whose traditional religious

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