

Peeking behind the Blue Ribbon

By Vicki E. Murray, Ph.D

he No Child Left behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) was enacted to shine more light on student performance previously hidden by schoolwide, aggregate achievement results. NCLB makes

important progress toward that goal by requiring states to report the performance of various student subgroups, including minority children, students with disabilities, and nonnative English speakers. One of the country's most prestigious distinctions is to be named a U.S. Department of Education No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon School.

In 2007, only 133 public schools nationwide were honored as Blue

Ribbon Schools for scoring in the top 10 percent on state assessments. "These schools are proving that when we raise the bar our children will rise to the challenge," according to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. These schools also did not enroll many from disadvantaged backgrounds, and a closer look at these award-winning schools reveals that

many of them do not live up to that touted "Blue Ribbon" label.

On average, just 11 percent of students at those 2007 Blue Ribbon schools came from impoverished backgrounds, 3 per-

A closer look at grade-level student achievement in core academic subjects may cause some parents to rethink the Blue-Ribbon bumper sticker on the back of their family car.

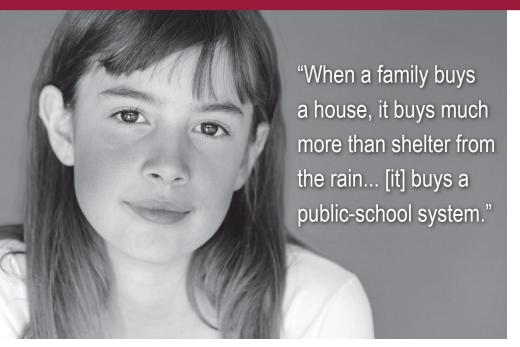
cent of students were classified with limited-English proficiency (LEP), and only 8 percent of students had disabilities. The median home value in the schools' neighborhoods exceeded \$300,000 on average, and the median family income approached \$100,000. Yet at one in three of those Blue Ribbon schools, at least 25 percent of students in at least one grade

were not proficient in at least one core subject tested.

On average, more than a quarter of students in two grades scored below proficiency in two subjects at those un-

derperforming 2007 Blue Ribbon schools. Specifically, at underperforming award schools, the percentage of students in at least one grade who did not score proficient ranged from 26 to 62 percent in reading, and from 26 to 56 percent in math. Many Blue Ribbon schools that underperformed in those core subjects also had similarly poor performance in at least one grade in science.

Our analysis at the Independent Women's Forum (IWF) finds many states are engaging in NCLB accountability-avoidance, unwittingly aided by the Blue Ribbon award designation. Such avoidance is likely to increase as the 2013-2014 school year deadline for 100 percent student proficiency approaches, making a U.S. Department of Education blue ribbon an increasingly unreliable in-



dicator of academic quality in the coming years, absent necessary reforms. Instead of piling on additional, expensive federal mandates, this analysis recommends improved public accountability through greater transparency to preserve the delicate balance between flexibility for states and accurate information for parents.

Specific recommendations from our new report (found at www.iwf.org) include reporting grade-level student proficiency in all core subjects tested as a condition for receiving federal NCLB funds. State proficiency results should also be reported alongside nationally representative proficiency results to make declines in state standards more apparent. To ensure universally rigorous assessment, states should publicize annual passing scores on their tests and their annual student proficiency targets. The best accountability assurance of all-better than any blue ribbon—is for the U.S. Department of Education to provide parents with information that is both accurate and actionable, and then enforce their children's right of exit from underperforming schools

Immediate Action Needed

Today, education is considered one of the biggest problems facing the United States. In a recent Associated Press poll, a majority of respondents were mothers. They ranked education as a more important policy issue than the Iraq War, terrorism, health care, immigration, the environment, and a variety of social issues. The poll found that half of those surveyed think schools are doing only a fair-to-poor job of preparing students for college and the work force. It is not surprising, then, that families are paying more than ever before for homes near what they believe are good public schools.

Harvard law professor Elizabeth Warren and health-care consultant Amelia Warren Tyagi co-authored the influential 2003 book The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Parents Are Going Broke. "The proportion of families who are 'house-poor'-that is, who spend more than 35 percent of their incomes on housing—has quadrupled in a single generation," according to Warren and Tyagi. Granite counter tops and three-car garages are not the reasons for this increase. Parents spend more on their homes because "when a family buys a house, it buys much more than shelter from the rain... [it] buys a public-school system."

"Talk with an average middle-class parent in any major metropolitan area," say Warren and Tygai, "and she'll describe the time, money, and effort she devoted to finding a slot in a decent school." They conclude, "For most middle-class parents, ensuring that their children get a decent education means buying a home in a small subset of well-reputed school districts." And one of the country's most prestigious distinctions is to be named a U.S. Department of Education No Child

Left Behind Blue Ribbon School.

Each year since 2003, fewer than 300 schools nationwide have been named Blue Ribbon Schools. Competition for this coveted distinction is stiff. The program recognizes public and private elementary, middle, and high schools that are either academically superior in their states or demonstrate dramatic gains to high levels in reading (referred to in some states as language arts or English) and mathematics. Schools must meet one of two eligibility criteria. They must enroll at least 40 percent of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and dramatically improve academic performance on state tests to high levels, or they must score in the top 10 percent on state assessments, regardless of student demographics.

Of the Blue Ribbon public schools scoring in the top 10 percent on state assessments for the 2007 award cycle, 133 enrolled less than 40 percent of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These public schools varied in size from 56 to 3,044 students, and averaged only 11 percent of students in poverty and 3 percent of students classified with limited English proficiency (LEP). A closer look at gradelevel student achievement in core academic subjects may cause some parents to rethink the Blue Ribbon bumper sticker on the back of their family car.

Accountability-Avoidance

Parents with children in Blue Ribbon schools not identified as underperforming in our study should not feel reassured. Education Sector released two withering analyses in 2006 and 2007 detailing states' efforts to circumvent NCLB requirements intended to give parents and the public accurate information about how well their children and their schools are really performing.

Education Sector singled out Alabama, with no underperforming Blue Ribbon schools in 2007, as one of the country's worst offenders. "When policymakers in the White House and Congress wrote the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001," writes Education Sector Research and Policy Manager Kevin Carey, "they undoubtedly had places like Birmingham, Alabama, in mind." Carey continues:

Less than 40 percent of Birmingham students graduate from high school

on time...Test scores still lag the rest of the state; there are still large achievement gaps between black and white children...But you wouldn't know it by asking the Alabama Department of Education. It says everything is fine....The serious consequences and strong interventions that NCLB's authors envisioned for chronically underperforming districts like Birmingham are nowhere to be found. The reason is simple: While NCLB was designed to raise achievement standards every year until 2014, when 100 percent of students are required to be "proficient," the Alabama Department of Education has lowered standards annually, to the point where districts like Birmingham make the grade.

And Alabama is not alone. Oklahoma, as an example, does not even report grade-level student proficiency; the same is true in Wisconsin. Education Sector developed an index in 2006 that ranks states according to how much they inflate their performance standards under NCLB. They dubbed it "The Pangloss Index" after the character in Voltaire's Candide who advocated optimism despite all evidence to the contrary. States' rankings on the Pangloss Index "are driven less by real-world education success," explains Carey, "than by the penchant of some states to misuse their standard-setting flexibility under NCLB to define and report performance data that are contradicted by objective measures."

For a state-by-state analysis, visit www.iwf. org/publications/ and go to the report "Peeking Behind the Blue Ribbon: How the No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Award Helps Conceal Accountability-Avoidance."

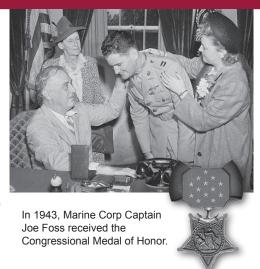


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ate and master's degrees in politics from the University of Dallas, where she was an Earhart Foundation Fellow.

Veterans Inspire Patriotism in **Schools**

The Joe Foss Institute **Promotes Patriotism** and Awards for Student Essays



his new program offers to schools free of charge a challenge to understand the freedoms established by the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and that the freedoms enjoyed in America are the basis for unlimited opportunities that each American has for creating his own future.

The Constitution and Bill of Rights were created to be the foundation of our government. Each presentation includes a 15-minute video that discusses our responsibilities as citizens to support and protect the Constitution in order to preserve our way of life for future generations.

Throughout the history of our country, a long line of American patriots and their families have sacrificed so that our freedoms remain. Upon entering the military service, each recruit took an oath:

"... I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

In conjunction with the video presentation, a United States veteran or active duty service member will visit students. This individual will speak about the oath he took, an oath he continues to honor. The veteran speaks about his/her personal pride to be an American and serves as a reminder that freedom is not free. The veteran then opens up for a question-and-answer period.

Each presentation includes a brochure for each student. For each middle/high school that participates, the book, Joe Foss' autobiography, A Proud American (available for purchase at our online store) is presented for use in the school library. For elementary schools, the book, America: A Patriotic Primer, written by Lynne Cheney, is presented.

The total length of the program is approximately 45 to 60 minutes and can be tailored to specific needs. The Institute is proactively offering this free program to schools (public, private, etc.) and various youth organizations (JROTC, Boys & Girls Club, etc.). The presentation has been successful in classrooms, assemblies, and during extracurricular meetings. We have found the program to be a successful way to commemorate important patriotic dates, such as Presidents Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, 4th of July, Veterans Day, and all other patriotic days.

In addition to the Veterans Inspiring Patriotism presentation, the Institute offers three essay competitions annually: Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Veterans Day. The contest is open to all 7th-12th grade students, the prize is a \$5,000 scholarship. The school where the recipient is enrolled will receive \$500; the recipient's classroom will receive \$250. ■

For more information, contact The Joe Foss Institute, 14415 N. 73rd Street, Suite 109, Scottsdale, AZ 85260; or visit www.JFlweb.org.

Teacher Buried at 70, Died at 25!

Rediscovering Your Passion for Teaching

"It is a shame when you are buried at seventy years old, but you died at twenty-five. Many teachers enter the profession at twenty-two years old and within three years, have allowed their fire to be wiped out by a deluge of societal problems which every day affects the minds of our children and the learning process..."

By Calvin Mackie, Ph.D.

If I have heard it once from educators, I have heard it a thousand times: My students are not motivated, they are not inspired. Well, I say this:

Many teachers and other educators are neither motivated, inspired, nor prepared to accept and deal with the daunting challenges facing us today.

Education is not for the faint at heart nor the easily discouraged. However, I ask anyone to walk the halls of any public K-12 system and observe the behavior of the teachers or look deep within their eyes, and tell me what you see? When I do it, I do not see the fire, the will, or the hope necessary to grab a life in the critical moment of development and send it on a trajectory of personal growth and development and professional success.

I was taught that he who controls the diameter of your learning controls the circumference of your actions. A teacher is charged with motivating and inspiring students to go further than ever imagined. As such, as a teacher, if I do not want my students to go anywhere, all I have to do is not teach them anything. We know we have succeeded when the prodigal student returns and begins to teach us things we do not know.

To teach, one must be passionate, motivated, and inspired—full of life. However, many teachers die soon after entering the system, showing up routinely everyday as part of

the walking, breathing, living dead, with no hope, inspiration, or motivation. The poet William Bulter Yeats stated, "Education is not the filling of the pail but the lighting of a fire." Famous boxing promoter Don King, when asked what is success, replied, "Set yourself on fire and people will show up to watch you burn." Maybe our students are not on fire because we, the educators, are not on fire. Many of us have become fire fighters, pouring water on the fire of our children's hopes and dreams, rather being the fire lighter, and igniting them every day to go beyond their limited view. Be honest, which are you: fire fighter or fire lighter?

I am convinced that graveyards hold much of the community's rich potential. So many people go to their graves with their dreams, hopes, and true maximum potential never tapped or reached. It is a shame when you are buried at seventy years old, but you

...many of us have allowed the enormity of the challenge, the growing bureaucracy, and the unfair public criticism to steal our fire, our dreams, and our passion.

died at twenty-five. Many teachers enter the profession at twenty-two years old and within three years, have allowed their fire to be wiped out by a deluge of societal problems which every day affects the minds of our children and the learning process. Martin Luther King, Jr., stated in a 1963 Detroit speech, "If a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live." For educators, it is our children and students for whom we must be willing to die. I am convinced that many of us became educators because we believed that one day we were going to transform lives and change the world. However, many of us have allowed the enormity of the challenge, the growing bureaucracy, and the unfair public criticism to steal our fire, our dreams, and our passion. Many of us have allowed our dreams to die too soon.

Educators, we need to decide to live again, as our children depend on us. An old man taught me that a dead fish can go with the flow, but it takes a mighty strong and alive one to go against it. Many of us have blamed the children for things they cannot control. Many of the kids arrive at our doors unprepared, undisciplined, and clueless about why they are there. However, we cannot blame them because clay does not decide what it will become; we, teachers and educators, mold clay. Many educators, especially those occupying positions in institutions of higher education, are becoming like doctors in hospitals who do not

want to treat sick patients. They only desire and admit the healthy, well-prepared and equipped students who they can nurture and graduate. Then, they spend a lifetime bragging about how their great, healthy, and well students never became ill.

Many educators need to do three things to rekindle their fire and live again:

1. Rediscover your passion. If children, teaching, and/or education are not your passion, then please quit the profession. You, the school, your colleagues, and especially the students will be better for it. James Baldwin said, "A passion is not friendly. It is arrogant, superbly contemptuous of all what is not itself, and, as the very definition of passion implies the impulse to freedom; it has a mighty intimidating power. It contains a challenge. It contains an unspeakable hope." As educators, your passion is the

fire that will ignite you to challenge the status quo and bring out the hope in our children.

2. Become things as they are; push and work for the way things ought to be. We have begun to rationalize the failure in ourselves, our leaders, and our students. Create high expectations for yourself and become the example for your colleagues. George Bernard Shaw said, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man." It has always been the unreasonable teacher who gets the most out of students. The educator who is loathed and cursed is usually the one which is respected and loved in retrospect by the students.

3. Take Pride in your profession. It is up for their profession and claim their role as contributors to society. Teachers, if they came together, could teach an insurrection. However, as long as teachers are maligned and not respected, first and foremost, by themselves, their true power and abilities will never manifest. Teachers must police teachers and root out those who are disrespecting and damaging the profession. It is a shame that we need to debate dress codes for teachers. If we want to be treated as professionals, we must behave and carry ourselves as professionals. As teachers, we must understand that we can be among the most important 'real role models' for children...

Long Live Educators! ■



Speaker, professor, author, and inventor: Calvin Mackie is a former associate professor of mechanical engineering at Tulane University in New Orleans, specializing in heat transfer and fluid dynamics. President Bush honored him with the 2003 Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring.



Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, school officials and union leaders recently issued a memo ordering teachers to implement the district policy of never awarding a student a grade lower than 50 percent.

The district is attempting to adjust for what they contend is an unfairly weighted grading scale that gives a failing grade to scores ranging from zero to 50 percent. As an example, district spokeswoman Ebony Pugh explained that if a student gets a 20 percent during the first marking period of a class, he or she would need to achieve a 100 percent in the second marking period just to pass the class.

"We want to create situations where students can recover and not give up," she said in defending the district's policy.

However, not all teachers are happy with it. For example, one teacher expressed concern about the awkwardness of awarding a student a grade of 50 percent even though the student only correctly answers 3 of 10 questions on a math quiz.

Another teacher is concerned that better students may find the 50 percent "floor" as an excuse for skipping some assignments, reasoning that they will still receive 50 percent credit.

Source: Pittsburg Post-Gazette

New York Pays \$74 Million for Teachers Who Don't Work

With Wall Street in a panic and city tax revenues down, it's no surprise New York City Mayor Bloomberg has ordered city agencies to cut spending. For the school system, that amounts to taking a big cut of \$185 million,

nearly 2.5 percent of the district's budget—with the prospect of the cuts being doubled next year.

The city is hoping to use the excuse of being broke to tackle an ongoing source of contention with the

local teachers union, brought to light last year by The New Teacher Project (TNTP). The group quantified how much it was costing New York to fulfill its obligation to the teacher contract, requiring that the city pay ad infinitum the salaries and benefits for 'excessed' teachers (i.e., teachers whose jobs went away) no matter how long it might take them to find another position. This

year alone, with over 1,400 teachers now in the reserve pool, the city paid out \$74 million to teachers who were not working.

Chancellor Klein wants to limit the city's largess, giving excessed teachers one

> year to find a new teaching job and, if they can't, the salary and benefits get cut off. The union has shot back, calling instead for a hiring freeze so that any vacan-

cies can be filled by these reserves. Klein labeled the union's proposal "a discredited practice which harmed our schools for decades," supported by some fairly persuasive evidence from the TNTP study that teachers in the pool are not among New York's finest: they are six times more likely to have been rated unsatisfactory by their principals.

The Illogical Logic of the AFT

On Labor Day, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) released its ninth annual AFT Public Employees Compensa-

tion Survey. It predictably concluded that public employees are woefully underpaid, but I'll leave the usual arguments against such conclusions to others.

No, what interests me is how AFT tries to square the circle regarding union representation. In one table, AFT compares public sector occupations in collective bargaining states with public sec-

tor occupations in nonbargaining states, and finds that in virtually all cases, collective bargaining improves wages. One point for the union.

In a second table, AFT compares public sector occupations with the same occupations in the private sector, and finds that

in virtually all cases, working in the private sector improves wages. From this, AFT concludes that public sector employees are underpaid. Two points for the union.

Screeech! Once we're done applying the brakes, we apply a factoid of which AFT is well aware: Only 7.5 percent of private sector employees are

unionized. How is it that nonunion employees earn so much more for comparable jobs (by AFT's own definition) than union employees? And if unions believe

they would be able to get private sector workers even more than they receive now, if given the chance, wouldn't that just increase the gap between public and private sector wages?

It's simple once you discard AFT's framing. In the private sector, wages are determined by market economics. In the public sector, wages are determined by political lobbying and tax rates. In the public sector, you'll earn more with AFT than without it. In the private sector, you'll earn more because AFT can't outperform Adam Smith.

Source—Mike Antonucci, The Education Intelligence Agency (EIA). For more information on EIA, visit www.eiaonline.com.



Free Resource for Teaching about America's Heritage

The Lynde and Harry Bradley report, "E Pluribus Unum," at www.bradleyproject. org, states, "A nation founded on an idea starts anew with each generation. Knowing what America stands for is not a genetic inheritance. It must be learned by both the next generation and those who come to this country. In this way, a nation founded on an idea is inherently fragile and must remind itself constantly of what we all share."

The American Heritage Education Foundation (AHEF) is a nonprofit, non-partisan educational foundation dedicated to the understanding and teaching of America's factual and philosophical heritage to promote constructive citizenship and Freedom, Unity, Progress, and Responsibility among students and citizens.

AHEF accomplishes its mission by writing, producing, and distributing free K-12 lesson plans to teachers, students, and families in all fifty states and through additional initiatives, programs, and partnerships. It asserts, "America's memory appears to be slipping away because of boring textbooks, a neglect of America's heroes, curriculum standards that push the Founding period out of high school and into the lower grades, teachers inadequately prepared in American history, and teaching students more about America's failings than its successes. College does little to close the civic literacy gap."

To learn more about the American Heritage Foundation and obtain its free K-12 lesson plans (value \$150), visit www.americanheritage.org.



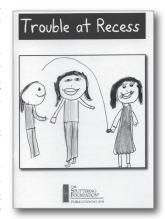
Trouble at Recess

Eight-year-old author and illustrator, Jamie, wants the playground to be fun for all students. She has expressed her desire in a new book *Trouble at Recess*, published by The Stuttering Foundation.

Trouble at Recess describes the trials and tribulations that many children who stutter encounter both

in the classroom and on the playground. The main character, Molly, struggles with stuttering and learns how to handle the teasing by teaching her classmates about stuttering. She also finds out what makes a good friend.

"This book deals with problems all children encounter, not just children who stutter." said Jane Fraser, presi-



dent of the nonprofit Stuttering Foundation. "Since teasing is a universal topic, we believe children will benefit by reading about how to handle teasing and make good friends."

The Stuttering Foundation is distributing the thirty-page full-color book free of charge to school libraries across the country.

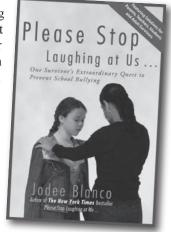
"I'm excited that my book might help other children who stutter," said Jamie.

For additional resources and more information, please contact the Stuttering Foundation at 800-992-9392 or info@stutteringhelp.org.

Please Stop Laughing at Us

One Survivor's Extraordinary Quest to Prevent School Bullying

Jodee Blanco's New York Times bestselling memoir, Please Stop Laughing at Me, about how she was shunned and tormented by her classmates from fifth grade through high school simply for being different, sparked a movement in this nation's schools and inspired thousands of pleas for help from people who came to recognize her as a kindred spirit. Since the book's release, Blanco has been responding to those pleas, working deep inside the trenches of America's schools sharing her still painful experiences to prove that bullying is not just joking around, it damages you for life.



Please Stop Laughing at Us is the sequel to Blanco's memoir and is the shockingly honest account of that journey. Written in response to the demand for more information from her devoted audience—teens, teachers, parents, and other Adult Survivors like herself, who have come to know Blanco as the champion of their cause—it provides advice and solutions set against the backdrop of her dramatic personal struggle adjusting to her new life as the survivor who unexpectedly finds herself the country's most sought-after anti-bullying activist.

Readers will learn about why some administrators deny there's a bullying problem in their schools, and how students who bully teachers and principals get away with it. The book also addresses student rapes that go unreported in an effort to avoid public shame and embarrassment.

Although *Please Stop Laughing at Us* discloses the bitter reality of adolescent suffering in many schools, it also celebrates the heroic efforts of countless educators; students and parents who are making a difference in their districts.

Calculating the Road Ahead

Algebra Teachers Want Better Prepared Students

To understand the experiences of algebra teachers in the classroom, the National Math Panel commissioned a national survey of randomly chosen Algebra I teachers designed to elicit their views on student preparation, work-related attitudes and challenges, and use of instructional materials. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago conducted the survey. Of the 310 public schools identified, 258 agreed to participate, and 743 teachers—a 72 percent response rate—completed the questionnaire.

Teachers Not Happy

The survey revealed that teachers rate their students' background preparation for Algebra I as *weak*. The three areas in which teachers report their students to have the poorest preparation are rational numbers, word problems, and study habits. When asked to provide a brief description of any changes they would like to see in the curriculum leading up to Algebra I, teachers most often cited the need for a greater focus at the elementary school level on proficiency with basic mathematical concepts and skills.

Sample responses representing this predominant view include:

- "Students need to be better prepared in basic math skills and not be quite so calculator dependent. Also, more training in thinking skills."
- "Make sure the 1st-8th grade teachers



teach the foundations of math and that the students know their basic skills."

 "More focus on basics—students should already know order of operations, positive vs. negative numbers, fractions, and decimals."

With regard to instructional materials, teachers, for the most part, do not regularly use technological tools. On average, teachers said they use these tools less than once a week. Low levels of computer use do not appear to be a reflection of insufficient access. About one-third of teachers never use the graphing calculator, and manipulative materials are used only occasionally.

Top Challenges

In response to ten options describing the challenges they face, a majority of the teachers (62 percent) rated "working with unmotivated students" as the "single most challenging aspect of teaching Algebra I successfully." Their second highest-rated challenge — 11 percent — was making mathematics accessible and comprehen-

sible. However, the written-in responses most frequently mentioned handling different skill levels in a single classroom. A substantial number of teachers consider mixed ability groupings to be a "moderate" (30 percent) or "serious" (23 percent) problem, an item with a combined rating of 53 percent for "moderate" and "serious," second only to the combined rating of 64 percent for "too little parent/family support."

The survey results reinforce the research findings presented in this report, particularly the need to strengthen students' proficiency with rational numbers. Further, the panel suggests that greater attention be focused on ways in which negative attitudes toward mathematics develop and how to overcome students' lack of motivation.

Source—Excerpt from Foundations for Success: The Final Report of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 2008.



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