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NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

EXTRA CREDIT

December 11, 2003

Ending The Soft Bigotry Of Low Expectations

Following is an excerpt from a column by Karin Chenoweth in today's Washington Post:

"The [No Child Left Behind] law simply declares that all children can learn a lot and that it is the job of adults to figure out how to teach them.

"Such a radical notion makes some educators very uncomfortable, because triage has been the organizational model of schools and school systems for generations.

"When my children were younger, I regularly volunteered in their classrooms. One fourth-grade teacher often would assign the 'low' (her word) kids to me, while she worked with the 'high' kids. The kids I was assigned were a mixture of recent immigrants (from Central America and Russia) and African American boys who were bright and interested in the world, but wiggly.

"One day I took them into the hallway while the teacher gave the other kids a test. The devastated look on one child's face will never leave me. 'I can't take the test?' she asked, quizzically. She was asking, 'Am I so stupid -- so 'low' -- that I can't even take a test?' I worked with the kids for a half-hour, and even had some success preparing them to take that day's test (no one had ever pointed out to the Spanish speakers the similarity between the Spanish word for earth -- tierra -- and terrarium, one of the words being tested.) But a half-hour with a parent volunteer was not what they needed. They needed all the time they could get with an expert teacher. Unfortunately, their teacher unloaded them onto any warm body who walked into the classroom -- teacher aides, parent volunteers, whomever. I should say that she was not a bad teacher. She was, in fact, a pretty good teacher -- for her 'high' kids. But, like thousands of her colleagues, she -- wittingly or not -- sorted her students, putting most of her energy into the kids she had deemed able to learn and writing off the 'low' kids.

"Such different treatment leads, not surprisingly, to quite different results. Kids can be considered 'low' by their teachers -- the people entrusted with their education -- only so long before their performance suffers, and they become trapped in a downward cycle of not doing much because they're not expected to do much.

"And it isn't long before entire categories of students -- learning disabled, poor, black, immigrant -- can be written off as unable to learn, not long before it affects our ability to function as a democracy, where power is invested in the abilities and common sense of ordinary people.

"Writing off the 'low' kids is what President Bush has called the 'soft bigotry of low expectations,' and it is the main target of the No Child Left Behind Act."

The complete text of Ms. Chenoweth's column can be found at:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A53379-2003Dec10.html>
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A53379-2003Dec10.html>>

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contact Geoff Goodman at NoChildLeftBehindUpdate@ed.gov or call (202)
205-9191.

NCLB Extra Credit provides a regular look at the No Child Left Behind Act, President Bush's landmark education reform initiative passed with bipartisan support in Congress. For more information, contact the U.S. Department of Education at (202) 401-1576.