

THE ILLUSION OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN GEORGIA, 1984-85:
A SOCIAL-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS*

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The recent school "reform" bill which was unanimously passed by our legislature earlier this year was based on a gubernatorial recommendation which was in turn based on the report of the Governor's Education Review Commission. The "reform" aspects of the bill are overrated in significance, and the bill represents a quite controversial approach to American education.

Although the governor, the Atlanta newspapers, and the Reform Commissioners publicly contended that the reform package should remain intact to maintain its effectiveness, the Commission's recommendation that the method of choosing school superintendents be changed from election to appointment was not included in the bill presented to the legislature. A second example of failed reform is seen in the law's calling for a discontinuation of job training in vocational classes in all grades except the twelfth, to be replaced by "career awareness experiences" and "increased emphasis on vocationally relevant basic academic skills (reading, writing, math, science)." The dissatisfaction of the Commission with vocational education, based on the fact that job training quickly becomes outmoded, the lack of resources for state-of-the art equipment, and the possibility that vocational education courses will reduce the amount of instructional time spent on the mastery of basic skills, is not expressed in legislation. The bill does not call for the obvious solution of integrating vocational education into the regular curriculum, perhaps because of the strength and influence of the vocational education lobby. A final example of the timidity of the reform package is its effort to equalize educational funding provisions by districts. In light of the previous insufficient funding for the Minimum Foundations Program and the Adequate Program for Education in Georgia, and the fact that this legislature was able to delay the implementation of full funding, it is not likely that the current plan can succeed.

The bill also represents a controversial approach to American education, what can be called the "industrialization of the schoolroom." This metaphor describes the bill's effort to prescribe in more and more detail what is expected of students and teachers at all levels in all subjects, a process likely to make learning rote, mechanical, lifeless, and illiberal. A major illustration of this industrialization is the reform's call for a mandated statewide curriculum. The bill calls for periodic review of a core curriculum and the student "competencies" on which it is based. The centralization of curriculum in the state department removes responsibility from local schools where it should be, and reduces the input of students, teachers, and parents into the curriculum. Frequent standardized testing experiences including mandated "nationally norm-referenced" tests in "grades two, four, seven, and nine" and state-developed "criterion-referenced instruments" in grades "one, three, six, eight, and ten," provide more evidence of the reform's industrialization of education. This overemphasis on testing, which could lead to "teaching for tests," may benefit

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the testing industry but not students or society.

The final issue is the reform's proposal for performance - based evaluation of teachers, a "step toward the de-skilling of teachers." The existing Teacher Performance Assessment Instrument tests such trivial categories as "questioning" or "enthusiasm" and is an instrument sometimes testing factors unrelated to important aspects of teaching and learning. The rationale for such a system is accountability; however it serves to take control away from the individual teacher and to reduce the intellectual content of the teacher's job. Although performance based evaluation predated the 1985 school reform bill, the institution of a vague plan called a "career ladder" will be the complete responsibility of the governor and other reformers. The career ladder appears to be the "latest educational version of a merit pay system," a plan which may have been motivated to mitigate the consequences of rather substantial pay raises that have been implemented, thereby reducing the financial consequences of a salary scale. Merit pay plans in other states serve as examples of potential problems.

"The recent educational reform thrust in Georgia is anything but a reform," according to Prof. Urban. Significant reforms advocated initially were removed in light of political reality. Excepting salary increases for teachers, the reform bill presents the student of educational history with a sense of deja vu. "We've been there before" Urban concluded; "it wasn't good education then and it isn't now."