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## Class Struggle

Jay Mathews



### Our 26 Most Dangerous Schools and Other Fables

By Jay Mathews  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Tuesday, January 4, 2005

It is awards time. Soon they will be picking the Golden People's Choice Academy Primate of the Year, or whatever. So why not have a prize for the most amusing and instructive educational graphic? We have many fine charts and maps in The Washington Post that I would be tempted to nominate, except that I keep thinking about a small, unobtrusive graphic map of the United States on page S7 of the Dec. 8 issue of Education Week.

I have been a fan of the Bethesda-based weekly newspaper for more than two decades, so much so that 10 years ago I persuaded them to put me on the board of directors of Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., the non-profit company that owns the paper, so that I could get my subscription for free. There is no other publication that covers kindergarten to 12th grade public schools with such breadth and depth, and yet it tends to be a very serious newspaper and I was surprised by the playfulness inherent in the editors' decision to run this little map entitled "Persistently Dangerous Schools."

As you can see if you study [the map](#), it shows how many public schools have been defined as "persistently dangerous" by each state under the rules of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Hmmm. There are just 26 schools in only three states. Pennsylvania has given the designation to 14 schools and New Jersey has done the same with 10. That makes a certain amount of sense. Those are heavily populated states with large cities where crime and poverty are rampant and some public schools would likely be affected.

But, uh, where are New York and Illinois and Ohio and Michigan and California and a lot of other places with similarly afflicted neighborhoods? And if all their schools are as safe as Sesame Street, what in the name of all the statistical deities is SOUTH DAKOTA doing on this map, with two persistently dangerous educational institutions?

So I laughed when I saw the map on page S7. Those hard-working friends of mine at Edweek turned out to have a sense of humor. More importantly, both the map and that issue's special pullout section, "Taking Root," conveyed a message about No Child Left Behind that often is overlooked.

The proponents of the law say it is going to make our schools accountable to parents and taxpayers by forcing the schools annually to report test scores and teacher qualifications and even crime statistics. This, the proponents say, will embarrass the schools, school districts and states that don't look so good on

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- [Map: Persistently Dangerous Schools](#)

About the Author

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these measures and help them, with some extra money and school change requirements, get better.

The opponents of the law say it is going to make our schools worse by forcing teachers to focus on test scores rather than the social, emotional and intellectual growth of our children. They say the accountability rules will overwhelm the states and districts with red tape and make good schools look bad just because one or two third graders in one demographic subgroup forgot to carry the 5 on a math problem on the state test.

The map on page S7 says something entirely different, which I think should be a comfort to No Child Left Behind bashers, and a reality check for supporters of the law like me. It says that this is still America, with a Constitution that gives states and localities power to slow down and frustrate whatever the federal government tries to make them do, and they are using it to turn No Child Left Behind into one more modest reform that will likely nudge our schools in the right direction, but not make that much difference and not do much harm either.

I tried to find which two woebegone schools in South Dakota were the only places west of the Ohio River so far forced to become part of the federal government's official Blackboard Jungle list. Rick Melmer, South Dakota's secretary of education, said they are Cheyenne-Eagle Butte Junior High School in Eagle Butte and the George S. Mickelson Education Center in Redfield. He also told me that he would have to warn the schools that he had identified them to me, since the state had not named them yet under rules allowing states to delay public identification. In South Dakota, a school is designated persistently dangerous if it has multiple violent criminal offenses in two or more consecutive years, any time of day or night, on school property or during school-sponsored events.

As the special section articles and charts provided by Edweek senior editor Lynn Olson, as well as assistant editor Bess Keller and research associate Erin Fox, make clear, state governments are not moving very quickly to align themselves with No Child Left Behind. And the allegedly harsh punishments in the law, such as closing low-performing schools in favor of charters or having the state take them over, have mostly been ignored in favor of lesser penalties that are similar to what districts have been doing with troubled schools for many years.

In Michigan, for instance, despite having 162 schools that are supposed to be restructured because of little or no test score improvement, "no schools were closed and reopened as charters," Olson reported, "and the state decided not to take over any schools because it lacked the capacity to do so."

The same thing is happening with No Child Left Behind's insistence that all teachers achieve "highly qualified" status by 2006. Kate Walsh and Emma Snyder of the National Council on Teacher Quality have put out a new ["Searching the Attic" report](#). They say the states are quietly defining themselves into compliance while leaving many teachers no more equipped for their jobs than before.

They congratulate Colorado for insisting that veteran teachers either pass a test in the subject they are teaching or complete coursework that is nearly the equivalent of a college major. Oregon has set a similar standard, although only for its newer teachers, and Alabama, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Maryland and Hawaii are requiring that all teachers hold the equivalent of a least a college minor in the subjects they teach.

But most of the efforts in the other states to make teachers highly qualified "are half-hearted, achieving a gossamer-like quality whereby elaborately crafted state plans reveal themselves to be little more than an elaborate restatement of the status quo," Walsh and Snyder said. As a worst case example, they note that seven states grant "highly qualified teacher status by achieving what all but a tiny fraction of teachers routinely achieve: a satisfactory mark on their annual evaluations."

So those who worry that our schools are being crushed under the heel of the No Child Left Behind storm troopers should relax. And those, like me, that think the law's bipartisan supporters in Congress had mostly the right idea should remember that no matter what we learned in eighth grade civics class, passing a bill in Congress often doesn't mean much.

No Child Left Behind has given states and school districts more legal tools, and more money, to help more children learn, but

those new rules and programs are likely to gather dust in the basement, like most of the tools in my house, unless we repeatedly insist to the people in charge that they be used.

Otherwise, education in America is going to proceed pretty much like it has during the past few decades, getting a little better but leaving many children behind.

But why should we worry? I just saw in Edweek that there are only 26 persistently dangerous schools in America, and I have a feeling those unfortunate buildings will soon be relieved of their unattractive labels, without having to change much of anything at all.

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