Introduction:
THE 500-POUND GORILLA
ALFIE KOHN

The best reason to give a child a good school . . . is so that child will have a happy childhood, and not so that it will help IBM in competing with Sony. . . . There is something ethically embarrassing about resting a national agenda on the basis of sheer greed.

—Jonathan Kozol

I give a lot of speeches these days about the accountability fad that has been turning our schools into glorified test-prep centers. The question-and-answer sessions that follow these lectures can veer off into unexpected directions, but it is increasingly likely that someone will inquire about the darker forces behind this heavy-handed version of school reform. “Aren’t giant corporations raking in profits from standardized testing?” a questioner will demand. “Doesn’t it stand to reason that these companies engineered the reliance on testing in the first place?”

Indeed, there are enough suspicious connections to keep conspiracy theorists awake through the night. For example, Standard & Poors, the financial rating service, has lately been offering to evaluate and publish the performance, based largely on test scores, of every school district in a given state—a bit of number crunching that Michigan purchased for more than $10 million. Pennsylvania took the bait, too, and other states may soon follow. The explicit findings of these reports concern whether this district is doing better than that one. But the tacit message—the hidden curriculum, if you will—is that test scores are a useful and appropriate marker for school quality. Who has an incentive to convince people of that conclusion? Well, it turns out that Standard & Poors is owned by McGraw-Hill, one of the largest manufacturers of standardized tests.
With such pressure to look good by boosting their test results, low-scoring districts may feel compelled to purchase heavily scripted curriculum programs designed to raise scores—programs such as Open Court or Reading Mastery (and others in the Direct Instruction series). Where do those programs come from? By an astonishing coincidence, both are owned by McGraw-Hill. Of course, it doesn’t hurt to have some influential policy makers on your side when it’s time to make choices about curriculum and assessment. In April 2000, Charlotte K. Frank joined the state of New York’s top education policy-making panel, the Board of Regents. If you need to reach Ms. Frank, try her office at McGraw-Hill, where she is a vice president. And we needn’t even explore the chummy relationship between Mr. McGraw (the company’s chairman) and George W. Bush (see “Reading Between the Lines” on p. 49). Nor will we investigate the strong statement of support for test-based accountability in a Business Week cover story about education published in March 2001. Care to guess what company owns Business Week?

Stumble across enough suspicious relationships like these and your eyebrows may never come down. However, we don’t want to oversimplify. The sizable profits made by the CTB division of McGraw-Hill, as well as by Harcourt Educational Measurement, Riverside Publishing, Educational Testing Service (ETS), and NCS Pearson— the five companies that develop and/or score virtually all the standardized tests to which students and prospective teachers are subjected—cannot completely explain why public officials, journalists, and others have come to rely so heavily on these exams. Let’s face it: For a variety of reasons, people with no financial stake in the matter have become boosters of standardized testing.

More important, even if one could point to a neat cause-and-effect relationship here, the role that business plays in education is not limited to the realm of testing. Indeed, its influence is even deeper, more complicated, and ultimately more disturbing than anything we might reveal in a game of connect the corporate dots. To begin with, schools (and children) have been turned into sources of profit in at least three ways. First, large corporations sell educational products, including tests, texts, and other curriculum materials. Second, many more corporations, peddling all sorts of
products, have come to see schools as places to reach an enormous captive market, and they have done so by insinuating advertisements into the curriculum itself, and by paying off school districts so that they can advertise their brands in school buildings, on buses, and even in television commercials that students are compelled to watch. Third, some corporations make money by taking over the management of the schools themselves, or simply by owning schools outright as they would a car dealership or any other profit-oriented venture.

What those three methods share is their directness. Vivendi Universal, which owns Houghton Mifflin, which in turn owns Riverside, makes money selling textbooks or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Coca-Cola makes money by arranging to sell their brand of liquid candy, to the exclusion of all others, on school property. Edison, Inc. makes money (or will do so eventually, it assures its investors) by running whole schools. You'll find more information about each of these three strategies throughout this book. But you'll also find discussions about a more indirect way of turning learning into a business. When corporations can influence the nature of curriculum and the philosophy of education, then they have succeeded in doing something more profound, and possibly more enduring, than merely improving their results on this quarter's balance sheet.

This can happen when businesses succeed in creating "school-to-work" programs, by which children are defined as future workers and shaped to the specifications of their employers. It can happen when the whole notion of education as a public good is systematically undermined—an ideological shift that paves the way for privatizing schools. Finally, it can happen when a business ethos takes over education, with an emphasis on quantifiable results, standardized procedures to improve performance, order and discipline and obedience to authority. Students expect to be controlled with rewards and punishments, to be set against their peers in competitions, to be rated and evaluated by those who have more power than they do. None of this is particularly effective at preparing children to be critical thinkers, lifelong intellectual explorers, active participants in a democratic society—or even, for that matter, good friends or lovers or parents. But the process is exceedingly effective at preparing them for their life as corporate employees.
Rather ingeniously, some practices serve the interests of business in multiple ways simultaneously. For example, selling products in classrooms may immediately increase a company’s market share but it also contributes to a socialization process whereby children come to see themselves as consumers, as people whose lives will be improved by buying more things.

Standardized testing may be an even better illustration in that it manages to achieve several goals at one stroke:

$ it brings in hundreds of millions of dollars a year to the handful of corporations that produce the tests, grade the tests, and supply materials to raise students’ scores on the tests;
$ it screens and sorts students for the convenience of industry (and higher education);
$ it helps to foster acceptance of a corporate-style ideology, which comes to be seen as natural and even desirable, in which assessment is used less to support learning than to evaluate and compare people—and in which the education driven by that testing has a uniform, standardized feel to it; and finally
$ when many students perform poorly on these tests (an outcome that can be ensured from the outset, and then justified in the name of “raising the bar”), these results can be used to promote discontent with public education: “We are shocked—shocked!—to discover just how bad our schools are!” Again, this can create a more receptive climate for introducing vouchers, for-profit charter schools, and other private alternatives. (Anyone whose goal was to serve up our schools to the marketplace, where the point of reference is what maximizes profit rather than what benefits children, could hardly find a shrewder strategy than to insist on holding schools “accountable” by administering wave after wave of standardized tests.)

To the extent that colleges, too, are increasingly seen as ripe for a corporate makeover, testing younger students would make sense as part of a long-term strategy, as one instructor sees it from his vantage point in the university:

The whole standards movement, after all, is about restricting learning to what is actually useful: the memorization of information, the streamlining of knowledge to what can be evaluated by
a standardized test. By curtailing the excessive autonomy of K–12 teachers and requiring them to teach “to the tests,” we are preparing future college students for a brand of higher education designed and administered by the savviest segment of our society: for-profit corporations.3

There may be some sort of shadowy business conspiracy at work to turn schools into factories, but this seems unlikely if only because no such conspiracy is necessary to produce the desired results. Most politicians have uncritically accepted the goals and methods outlined by the private sector—and, with the possible exception of attitudes toward vouchers, there are few differences between the two major parties. Marveling that “Democrats and Republicans are saying rather similar things about education,” a front-page story in the New York Times explained: “One reason there seems to be such a consensus on education is that the economic rationale for schooling has triumphed.”4

More ominous is the extent to which even educators have internalized a business approach to schooling. Many of us defend “partnerships” between schools and businesses, willingly “align” our teaching to uniform state standards, shrug off objections to advertising in the schools, refer to learning as “work” or schooling itself as an “investment.” The next time you leaf through one of the leading education periodicals—or listen to a speech at a conference—try counting all the different telltale signs of corporate ideology.

There’s no need for executives in expensive suits to show up in schools: we’re already doing their work for them.

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Some readers may dismiss as rhetorical excess any comparison of schools with factories. In fact, though, the analogy was first proposed by people who were quite explicit about wanting to make the former more similar to the latter. Back in 1916, one Ellwood Cubberley wrote that “our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life.”5 In the 1950s, this way of thinking was still in favor. The writer(s) of a Fortune magazine article, “The Low Productivity of the Education Industry,”
informed readers that we should strive “to turn out students with
the greatest possible efficiency . . . [and] minimize the input of man
hours and capital. In this respect, the schools are no different from
General Motors.”6

The popularity of such parallels may wax and wane over time,
but were Mr. Cubberley to find himself magically transported to
the early twenty-first century, he would almost certainly feel right
at home. He would immediately notice that thousands of Ameri-
can schools, some of them dating back to his own era are still open
for, um, business, but literally resemble factories. Inside them, he
would see, as Linda Darling-Hammond observed in 1997, that
the short segmented tasks stressing speed and neatness that
predominate in most schools, the emphasis on rules from the
important to the trivial, and the obsession with bells, sched-
ules, and time clocks are all dug deep into the ethos of late-
nineteenth-century America, when students were being
prepared to work in factories on predetermined tasks that would
not require them to figure out what to do.7

Cubberley would likely be impressed as well by the remarkable
power that business continues to have in shaping educational
policy. Every few months, he would notice, another report on
American schooling is released by a consortium of large corpora-
tions. These documents normally receive wide and approving
press attention despite the fact that they all recycle the same set
of buzzwords. Rather like a party game in which players create
sentences by randomly selecting an adjective from one list, then a
noun from another, these dispatches from the business world seem
to consist mostly of different combinations of terms like “world-
class,” “competitive,” and “measurable”; “standards,” “results,” and
“accountability.”

A few examples from the last decade that might set Mr. Cus-
berley’s head to nodding: The Committee for Economic Develop-
ment, consisting of executives from about 250 large companies,
demands that school curricula be linked more closely to employers’
skill requirements and calls for “performance-driven education,”
incentives, and a traditional “core disciplinary knowledge” ver-
son of instruction. Ditto for the Business Roundtable, which de-
scribes schooling as “competing in the education Olympics.”
Besides endorsing narrow and very specific academic standards, punishment for schools that fall behind, and more testing, it approvingly cites the example of taking time in high school to familiarize students with personnel evaluations. The National Association of Manufacturers, meanwhile, insists on more testing as well as “a national system of skills standards designed by industry.” And the Business Task Force on Student Standards says that “workplace performance requirements of industry and commerce must be integrated into subject-matter standards and learning environments.”

To scan these recommendations is to realize two things. First, most have been adopted as policy. To an extraordinary degree, business’s wish becomes education’s command. Second, they traffic in the realm not only of methods and metaphors, but of purposes and goals. The question is not just whether we will compare schools to factories, or even whether we will prescribe practices that will make schools more like factories. The question is what vision of schooling—and even of children—lies behind such suggestions. While a proper discussion of this issue lies outside the scope of this book, it is immediately evident that seeing education as a means for bolstering our economic system (and the interests of the major players in that system) is very different from seeing education as a means for strengthening democracy, for promoting social justice, or simply for fostering the well-being and development of the students themselves.

In the final analysis, the problem with letting business interests shape our country’s educational agenda isn’t just their lack of knowledge about the nuances of pedagogy. The problem is with their ultimate objectives. Corporations in our economic system exist to provide a financial return to the people who own them: they are in business to make a profit. As individuals, those who work in (or even run) these companies might have other goals too, when they turn their attention to public policy or education or anything else. But business qua business is concerned principally about its own bottom line. Thus, when business thinks about schools, its agenda is driven by what will maximize its profitability, not necessarily by what is in the best interest of students. Any overlap between those two goals would be purely accidental—and, in practice, turns out to be minimal. What maximizes corporate
profits often does not benefit children, and vice versa. Qualities such as a love of learning for its own sake, a penchant for asking challenging questions, or a commitment to democratic participation in decision making would be seen as nice but irrelevant—or perhaps even as impediments to the efficient realization of corporate goals.

Some people in the business world object to this characterization, of course. They insist that modern corporations have similar goals to those of educators, that business today needs employees who are critical thinkers and problem solvers skilled at teamwork, and so forth. But if this were really true, we would see cutting-edge companies taking the lead in demanding a constructivist approach to instruction, where students' interests drive the curriculum—as well as a Whole Language model for teaching literacy. They would ask why we haven't thrown out the worksheets and the textbooks, the isolated skills and rote memorization. They would demand greater emphasis on cooperative learning and complain loudly about the practices that undermine collaboration (and ultimately quality)—practices like awards assemblies, spelling bees, and honor rolls, or norm-referenced tests. They would insist on heterogeneous, inclusive classrooms in place of programs that segregate and stratify and stigmatize. They would stop talking about “school choice” (meaning programs that treat education as a commodity for sale) and start talking about the importance of giving students more choice about what happens in their classrooms. They would publish reports on the importance of turning schools into caring communities where mutual problem solving replaces an emphasis on following directions.

The sad truth, of course, is that when business leaders do address these issues, their approach tends to be precisely the opposite: They write off innovative, progressive educational reforms as mere fads that distract us from raising test scores. This is evident not only from the reports sampled here (from the Business Roundtable and similar groups) but also from the consistent slant of articles about education that appear in business-oriented periodicals.

Moreover, while there may be more talk in boardrooms these days about teamwork, it is usually situated in the context of competitiveness—that is, working together so we can defeat another group of people working together. (Business groups com-
monly characterize students as competitors—as people who do, or will, or should, spend their lives trying to beat other people. Other nations are likewise depicted as rivals, such that to make our schools “world class” means not that we should cooperate with other countries and learn, but that we should compete against them and win.) While social skills are often listed as desirable attributes, business publications never seem to mention such qualities as generosity or compassion. While it is common to talk about the need for future employees who can think critically, there is reason to doubt that corporate executives want people with the critical skills to ask why they (the executives) just received multimillion-dollar stock option packages even as several thousand employees were thrown out of work. Corporations may, as we have seen, encourage high school English teachers to assign students the task of writing a sample personnel evaluation, but they seem less keen on inviting students to critically analyze whether such evaluations make sense, or who gets to evaluate whom. In short, what business wants from its workers—and, by extension, from our schools—in the twenty-first century may not be so different after all from what it wanted in the twentieth and even nineteenth centuries.

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As must be obvious by now, this book makes no pretense of offering a “balanced” treatment of its subject, with an equal number of pro- and anti-business essays. Rather, as a collection of complementary critiques, it is itself meant to provide a small measure of balance, a tiny counterweight, to the overwhelming (and under-challenged) corporate point of view that surrounds us. In part because of their vast resources, the business community has no trouble disseminating its opinions on education. It doesn’t take a degree in political science to figure out why politicians (and sometimes even educators) so often capitulate to business. For that matter, it isn’t much of a mystery why a 500-pound gorilla is invited to sleep anywhere it wishes. But that doesn’t make the practice any less dangerous.

Indeed, we might even go so far as to identify as one of the most crucial tasks in a democratic society the act of limiting the power that corporations have in determining what happens in, and to,
our schools. Not long ago, as historian Joel Spring pointed out, you would have been branded a radical (or worse) for suggesting that our educational system is geared to meeting the needs of business. Today, corporations not only acknowledge that fact but freely complain when they think that schools aren’t adequately meeting their needs. They are not shy about trying to make over the schools in their own image. It’s up to the rest of us to firmly tell them to mind their own businesses.

NOTES

1. Notice that the phenomenon by which a company makes money by testing students, then turns around and sells the materials designed to prepare students for those tests, is not limited to McGraw-Hill. Many of the major textbook publishers are represented in this list of test manufacturers.


9. Many writers, of course, have grappled with education’s ultimate goals. I attempt to sort through some of the underlying issues in The Schools Our Children Deserve (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), pp. 115–20.

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