

SCHOLASTIC INC.

Pushing Coal

A 4th-grade curriculum lies through omission

■ BY BILL BIGELOW

When I was in grade school in California, every once in a while a bunch of paperback books from Scholastic would arrive in our classroom. Our teacher let us take a break from our lessons and we could look through the books and put a check on an order form next to ones we liked, books like *The Wit and Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln*. Each cost 35 or 50 cents. We'd take the order forms home and get our parents to purchase the books, which would arrive a month or so later. I grew up thinking that Scholastic was the most trusted name in children's books—endorsed by the holy trinity of school, teacher, and parents.

These days, among other enterprises, Scholastic produces propaganda for the coal industry and passes it off as curriculum. Scholastic has partnered with the American Coal Foundation (ACF, www.teachcoal.org), the nonprofit arm of the coal industry, to publish a slick, full-color packet of elementary teaching materials designed to paste a smiley face on the dirtiest form of energy in the world.

Why would the coal industry want to partner with Scholastic? In a November 2010 blog, Alma Hale Paty, executive director of the ACF, celebrates the coal-Scholastic connection: "Over 90 percent of America's K-12 class-

Bill Bigelow (bill@rethinkingschools.org) is curriculum editor of Rethinking Schools magazine. His article on teaching about coal and mountaintop removal, "Got Coal? Teaching About the Most Dangerous Rock in America," appeared in the spring issue of Rethinking Schools.

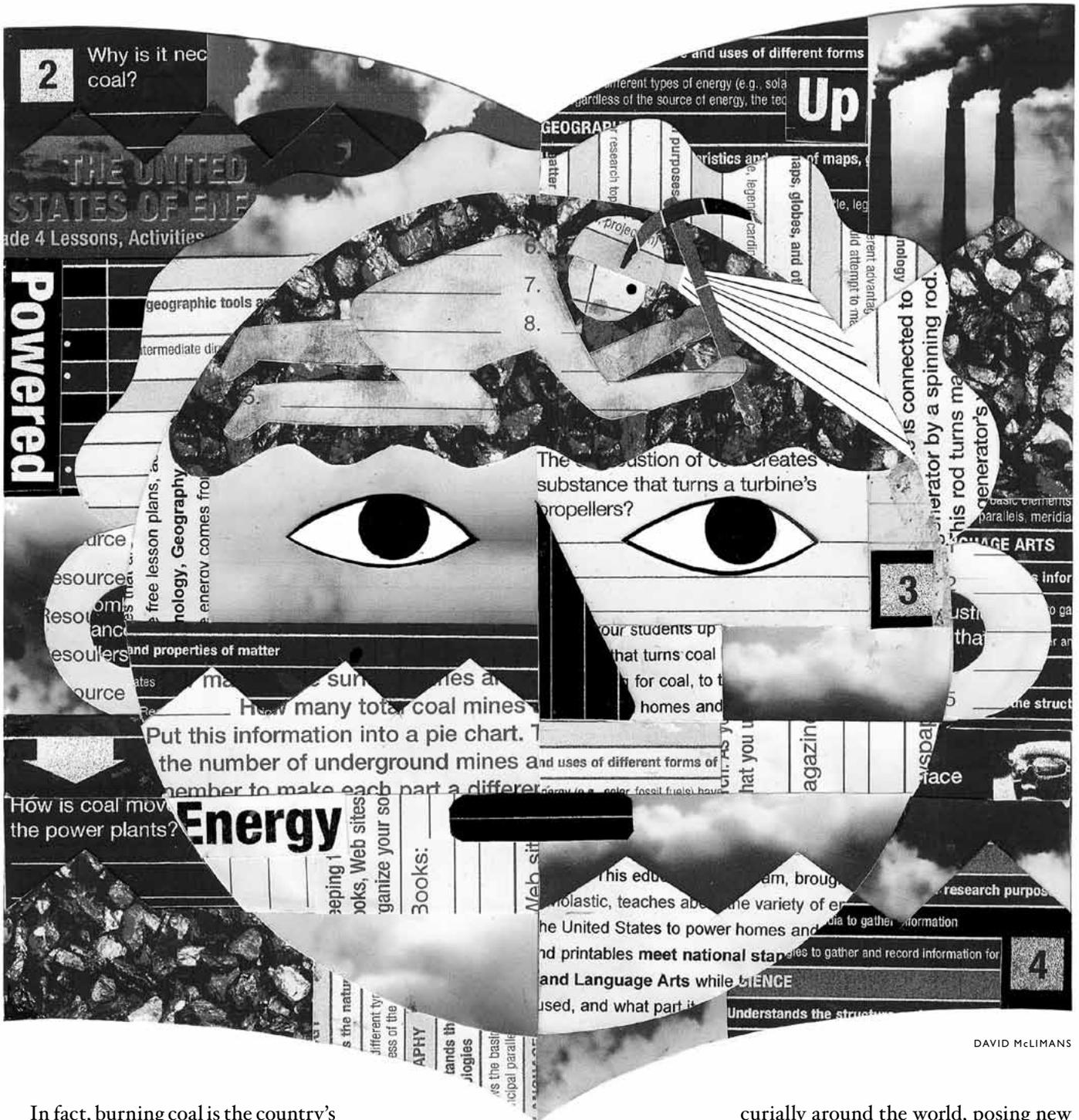
rooms use Scholastic products. Four out of five parents know and trust the Scholastic brand." Paty writes that Scholastic mailed its 4th-grade coal/energy curriculum to 50,000 teachers in nine states, another 16,000 copies to classroom subscribers to *Scholastic News* magazine for grade 4, and sent an email with a link to the curriculum to 82,000 teachers. In recent phone messages to me, Paty says that she hopes the curriculum can be expanded to 5th grade. Simply put, the coal industry is renting Scholastic's credibility and recognition.

Of course, the most effective propaganda is that which seems fair and neutral—and, at a glance, that's the feel of Scholastic Inc.'s *The United States of Energy*. The cover features photos of windmills and solar panels, as well as oil wells and shimmering piles of coal. Inside, the guide promises "alignment with national standards for grade 4" and features a large U.S. map with

icons for coal, nuclear, hydroelectric, oil, wind, natural gas, and solar energy. The three lesson plans, "Bonus Worksheet," and family "Energy Challenge" activity all seem factual and straightforward.

However, the lessons in the curriculum fail to alert children that there might be any problems with the mining, washing, transport, and burning of coal.

Interestingly, in the grid showing how the lessons align with national standards, the very first standard states that children should learn "that different types of energy (e.g., solar, fossil fuels) have different advantages and disadvantages." Sure enough, the lessons are full of "advantages," but there is not the slightest hint—none—that coal might have any problems. Nothing about the mountains being scraped away throughout Appalachia, or the resulting flooding that has destroyed people's homes, or how communities' water supplies have been poisoned. Nothing about the busting of unions or the exploitation of nonunion miners. Nothing about the billions of gallons of toxic waste created by washing coal and, of course, by burning it. Nothing about the poisonous coal dust that blows off trains and barges as the coal travels from mine to coal-fired plant. Nothing about the toxins released when coal is burned—like sulfur dioxide, mercury, and arsenic—which kill many thousands of people a year, according to the American Lung Association.



DAVID McLIMANS

In fact, burning coal is the country's largest source of mercury pollution. In her book *Coal: A Human History*, Barbara Freese cites a National Academy of Sciences report warning that every single year as many as 60,000 babies are born in the United States with enough in utero mercury poisoning to cause poor school performance later in life. "Once mercury is introduced into the environment," Freese writes, "it is impossible to clean up because it keeps re-evaporating and raining down again indefinitely, ping-ponging its way mer-

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curially around the world, posing new risks wherever it lands."

And the Scholastic curriculum includes nothing about perhaps the worst aspect of burning coal: that it is the single greatest contributor to human-created, climate-altering, civilization-threatening greenhouse gases.

True, a full exploration of these "disadvantages" of coal might overwhelm 4th graders—or anyone else, for that matter. But the alternative is not to leave them out entirely and, thus, turn coal into an energy superhero.

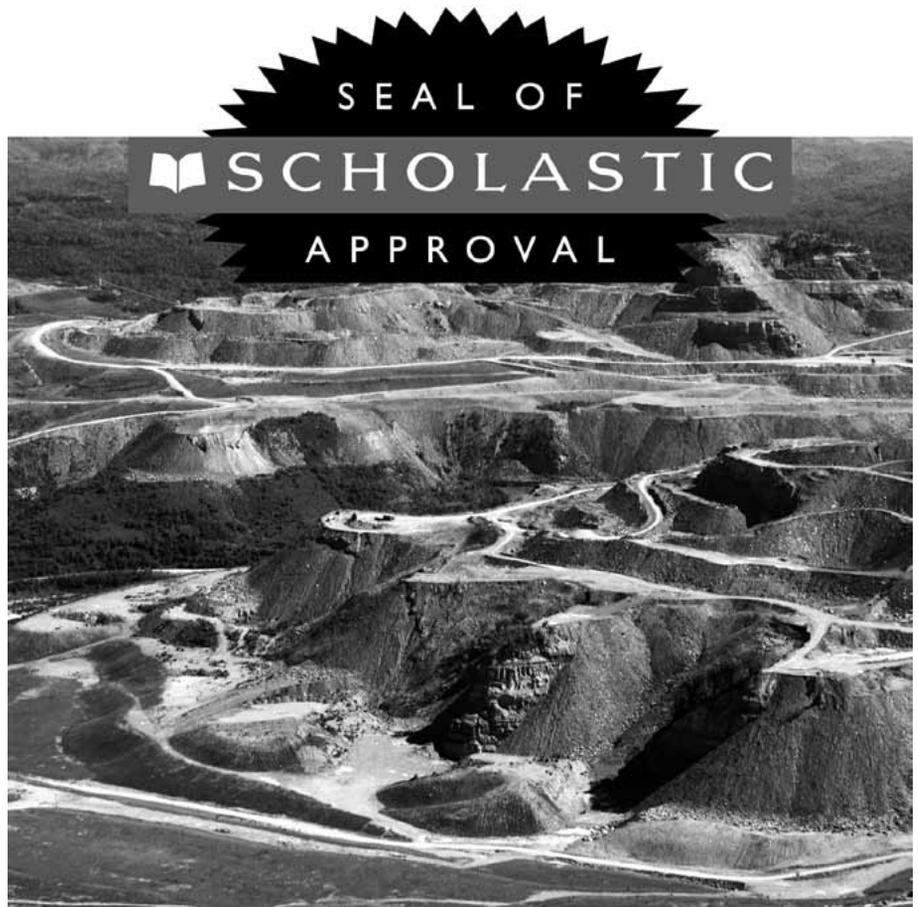
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Curriculum or Propaganda?

The guide's first lesson, "Our Energy," explores the sources of different forms of energy. Instructions ask the teacher to explain to students that "some energy sources are dug out of the ground," but includes nothing about what this fact means to people and the environment. The accompanying worksheet to guide students' research asks six questions. The first five are narrowly factual (e.g., "What kind of equipment is used to collect this energy?"). The final question asks, "What are the benefits of this kind of energy?" I turned the page to see if a seventh question asked, "What are the disadvantages of this kind of energy?" but no luck; that kind of question might lead kids to find some information that the coal industry is not eager for them to dig up.

A second lesson has students work with "The United States of Energy," a large U.S. map that shows sites of the country's energy production and indicates states' different patterns of energy consumption. Here, too, the "Mapping Electricity" worksheet offers loads of energy facts, but fails to engage children in thinking about the consequences of energy choices or about alternatives. The map's subtext is that we'd be lost without coal: "Coal is produced in half of the 50 states, and America has 27 percent of the world's coal resources. In fact, America has more coal than *any* nation has *any* single energy resource. . . . Coal is the source of half of the electricity produced in the United States. About 600 coal-powered plants operate around the clock, providing electricity to homes, businesses, and schools." [emphasis in original]

In contrast to this breathless recitation, we learn that solar power "supplies less than 1 percent of U.S. electric-



DAVE COOPER (www.mountainroadshow.com)

Join the Campaign to Demand that Scholastic Stop Pushing Coal

Rethinking Schools has teamed with the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) to demand that Scholastic Inc. sever its ties with the coal industry and remove the biased, pro-coal curriculum from its website.

CCFC has targeted Scholastic in other campaigns, including Scholastic's inappropriate marketing of toys, video games, and even make-up to children through its book clubs.

In its 2010 annual report, Scholastic brags that "the reputation of the Company is one of its most important assets." Scholastic is vulnerable to public pressure; let's demand that Scholastic stop pushing coal.

Please go to www.commercialfreechildhood.org/coal and sign our petition. Then spread the word. Organize your school to join the Stop Pushing Coal campaign.

ity." The only solar icon on the map is in the Mojave Desert, implying that solar may work in deserts, but the rest of us need to rely on more conventional sources of power, like burning coal. The mapping exercise treats all sources of energy as fundamentally equal: One is as good as another, except that coal

is a lot better, students will infer, because we have so much of it. The lesson manipulates students to conclude that coal is essential for life as we know it.

The third lesson, "Powered Up About Electricity!" continues to hide reality from students. The teacher is to explain that fossil fuels "are used

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in power plants. These fuels release large amounts of heat, and the heat is converted into electricity.” Of course, the fuels “release” a lot more than heat, but that fact is nowhere to be found in these teaching materials. The student handout presents a flow chart to show how coal is turned into electricity, beginning with a photo of a (clean) miner. The caption explains: “Miners dig for coal in surface or underground mines.” The entire flow chart presents a crisp, problem-free, step-by-step procedure. The smokestacks of coal-burning power plants are invisible. The chart concludes in a generator’s wire coils, exploding with bright electrical energy: “Out of these wires comes . . . electricity!”

As in Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average, in *The United States of Energy* all the skies are blue, all the energy is clean, and no one has to make any policy choices about sources of electricity because the coal industry has everything figured out.

To involve parents in this coal fest, a take-home “Fun Family Activity” asks families to go to a website to calculate their energy consumption and then figure out how they can save money through conservation. Nothing wrong with conservation—or conversation between children and parents—but the Scholastic worksheet addresses families solely as consumers, as people who care about reducing energy use only because they care about saving money.

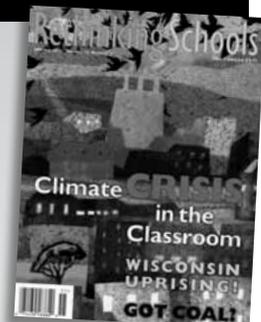
Scholastic’s coal industry cheerleading becomes even more blatant on the Related Resources section of its United States of Energy website. The list reads like a coal industry convention: the American Coal Foundation,

Women in Mining, the National Mining Association (“the official voice of the American mining industry in Washington, D.C.”), along with government sites that offer similarly uncritical approaches to coal, such as the U.S. Energy Information Administration. An additional list of 30 “helpful organizations” continues Scholastic’s obvious bias, featuring groups like the American Coal Ash Association, the American Coal Council, and the World Coal Institute. Of the almost 40 organizations that Scholastic recommends for teachers, there is not one single environmental organization. (If they were interested in a more diverse list of coal-oriented organizations, they might have started with the Sierra Club, Coal River Mountain Watch, iLoveMountains.org, and the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition.)

All these many years after my first introduction to Scholastic, I still carry with me the impression of this publisher as a mom-and-pop book company that carefully selects high-interest, quality literature to introduce children to the world of ideas. Of course, this warm and fuzzy image contrasts with reality: Scholastic had sales last year of almost \$2 billion; not surprisingly, the investor portion of its website is filled with corporate jargon like “earnings per diluted share” and “non-cash asset write-downs.” Nonetheless, there is something that seems fundamentally inappropriate about an educational institution—albeit a gigantic corporation—leasing its reputation to an industry that is putting the future of the planet at risk. Scholastic makes a lot of money off our children. It’s offensive that they promote curriculum that misleads those children about the world’s most polluting source of energy: coal. ■

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