



## Book Review: *State of Fear*

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My fun summer reading this year was a thriller by Michael Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park*, *The Andromeda Strain* and other exciting fictional books. The one I read is called *State of Fear*, another suspenseful book, this time about environmental issues.

It has nothing to do with education and the work of boards of education. It has everything to do with education and the work of boards of education.

The plot revolves around a conference being held by a powerful environmental lobbying group, which has many followers, including many of Hollywood's most famous celebrities. Some radical environmental groups attempt to cause environmental changes right at the time of this all-important conference in order to garner huge headlines that will push the media, the public and government to take far-reaching action to improve the environment.

Crichton included a long discussion of his own beliefs as a scientist and author on the environmental lobby and what is really happening in terms of climate change. Without giving away too much, he is skeptical about some of the claims made by some environmental groups... claims that have become "conventional wisdom." He also includes a lengthy bibliography with his comments on the research.

### Education... some cynicism needed

What I found "about education" is that the book challenges the experts and the information so prevalent in the news. One is left questioning what the truth is in the highly politicized world of environmental concerns.

What really got me intrigued was a series of conversations where one of his Crichton's characters discussed how funding of interest groups with particular views on issues got people interested in and supportive of what they were doing, leading to more funding. Then the funding paid for "scientific" studies. The question then becomes whether, because scientists are paid by a group with known views, can they really be "unbiased"? After all, their livelihood

depends on coming up with results that validate the work and opinions of those who fund them.

Of course, scientists are bound by their own ethics and those of their employers. But, like everyone else, while scientists have their own opinions, when enough momentum is built up on one side of an issue, it is difficult to swim upstream against it.

I don't know if Crichton's skepticism is warranted. I have family members involved in the environmental movement. But, the important lesson is that we should maintain a healthy cynicism about some "conventional wisdom."

I think we can all relate to seeing polls or surveys on educational issues that, *believe it or not*, support the opinions of those who commissioned them. I know I get studies across my desk and I can pretty much tell the results as soon as I know who paid for the study. The truth is that if the raw results come out in opposition to the position of the funder, the study, if published at all, is "spun" to explain away the results.

I am very proud that CABE and NSBA are known for providing factual and relevant information to our members, the media and the public. Both CABE in Hartford and NSBA in Washington are seen as providing fair and accurate information to the Legislature and to Congress. We recognize that this reputation is dependent on continuing to ensure that we are evenhanded when we provide research or other data.

### The role of the board

Boards of education, like the public on environmental and other issues, must rely on their experts. We hope that board members start with a relationship of trust with their superintendents and their staffs. No one expects a board member to know as much as a superintendent or director of curriculum about teaching and learning in the schools. And your experts are the first ones you should go to when examining an issue.

But the most powerful instrument you have for finding out the information you need to make your decisions is asking the right questions and not being satisfied until you feel you have a full answer. If you

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are unsure of what you have heard, don't be afraid to ask questions. These should be asked with proper respect and a real goal, both on the part of the staff and the board member, to do what is in the best interests of the children. That is the job you have been given by your community.

I think those of us who grew up during the Vietnam War learned a lot about skepticism. We learned that the so-called experts, our military, would use benchmarks that made little sense and put out over-optimistic views of what was happening on the battlefield. It was a time of skepticism about our

government, leaders in other fields and even our parents.

I hope that when you must make a decision, you look beyond the cover of the report you might receive and think about whether the contents make sense. And, keep in mind where that report came from.

This is also something we should be teaching our children. Think through issues, don't just accept things on blind faith.

A little skepticism can go a long way.