

EDUCATION REPORTER

NUMBER 153

THE NEWSPAPER OF EDUCATION RIGHTS

OCTOBER 1998

Judge Allows East Stroudsburg Lawsuit to Proceed *But genital exams remain part of the 'medicalization' of the public schools*

HARRISBURG, PA — A federal judge has ruled that the civil lawsuit filed by the parents of seven Pennsylvania schoolgirls who received genital exams in 1996 can move forward. The judge ruled, however, that the families may not seek punitive damages. The case is expected to come before a jury next April.

The court action was the result of physical examinations given to 59 6th-grade girls in March of 1996 at the J.T. Lambert Intermediate School in East Stroudsburg, PA, which included internal examination of genitalia without parental knowledge or consent (See *Education Reporter*, June 1996). The students' requests to call their parents or opt out of the exams were denied. In May of 1996, the family of one of the girls filed suit and was later joined by other outraged parents.

The East Stroudsburg case created a

public controversy over the issue of conducting genital exams and other health care procedures in the public schools. The Sept. 7, 1998 edition of the *Washington Times* quoted a spokeswoman for the National Association of School Nurses as saying that millions of school physicals, some of which include genital exams, are being performed on school children every year. To her knowledge, the East Stroudsburg lawsuit was the first legal action taken against such exams.

Since the controversy began, reports of similar exams in other states have surfaced. In Aiken, SC, kindergarten children were given visual genital inspections by school nurses without parental knowledge (See *Education Reporter*, April 1998). Former candidate for South Carolina state school superintendent Rebekah Sutherland says that, when the story broke

in March of 1997, many parents came forward to complain. "They told me that the consent form for the exam had been buried among numerous other kindergarten registration forms, and that they unknowingly signed it while being rushed through the registration process."

A total of 56 South Carolina school districts conducted the exams. The Aiken school district now claims that they are no longer being performed, but Sutherland and others remain skeptical.

Concerned citizens worry about the continued trampling of parental rights by governmental institutions. They question the government's authority to introduce medical procedures in the schools that have previously been conducted in physician's offices under parental scrutiny. State Rep. Sam Rohrer (R-PA) says that Title I and Medicaid are the vehicles through which government is restructuring public schools to become health care providers.

"The federal statute known as Title I has been around since 1965," Rep. Rohrer explains. "It was established to provide funding for 'extra' educational services for poor children. Title I has been reauthorized to incorporate the objectives of Goals 2000, specifically, the first of the eight National Education Goals which states: 'By the year 2000, all children in

America will start school ready to learn.'" Rohrer adds that schools receiving Title I funds must comply with the mandates of



Concerned citizens protest the visual genital exams given to kindergarten children in Aiken, SC.

Goals 2000, "whether or not they receive money under Goals 2000." Through "school-wide programs," students can now be labeled "educationally deprived," which allows them to be eligible for Title I funds.

The Medicaid program has been similarly expanded. Poverty guidelines have been dropped altogether in some states for children in certain age groups, and drastically altered in others. Terms such as "disability" have been redefined to include the inevitable stresses of growing up, and the end result is that almost any child can be "identified" as needing some sort of remediation under Title I, with medical services covered by Medicaid.

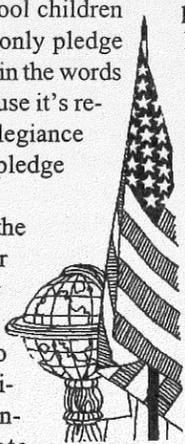
Marie Smith, an education researcher and school board member in Missouri, says that the Medicaid-funded Early Periodic Screening and Diagnostic Testing

(See *Lawsuit*, page 2)

Pledging Allegiance to the Planet

OAK PARK, IL — School children in this Chicago suburb not only pledge allegiance to the flag which, in the words of one teacher, "we do because it's required," but they pledge allegiance to the planet as well. The pledge goes like this:

"I pledge allegiance to the Earth, this unique blue-water planet, graced by life, our only home. I promise to respect all living things, and to protect to the best of my abilities all parts of our planet's environment, and to promote



peace among the human family, with liberty and justice for all."

In a tongue-in-cheek commentary that appeared in the Sept. 16 *Chicago Tribune*, columnist John Kass took the city of Oak Park to task for its political correctness, including the use of the pledge. He wrote: "It's possible that kids will confuse the two pledges, but isn't that the idea? Besides, we won't need sovereign nations in the new global village. We'll all ride bikes. Except for the Chinese. They'll drive tanks."

Paycheck Protection Movement Gaining Momentum *Michigan statute upheld; Oregon voters will decide issue in November*

LANSING, MI — The issue known as "paycheck protection," which means requiring unions to obtain members' permission before withholding money for political activities from their paychecks, has been gathering steam across the country for more than a year. In August, a U.S. District Court upheld the constitutionality of Michigan's limited paycheck protection statute, which requires the annual written consent of union members for PAC deductions from their paychecks.

Since its enactment in 1994, the Michigan law had been blocked by a legal challenge filed by the AFL-CIO and the Michigan Education Association. The district court's ruling upholds a previous decision by Michigan's 6th Circuit Court, which rejected the unions' argument that

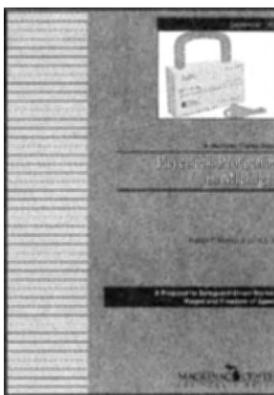
obtaining consent from union members for PAC deductions would create an unconstitutional burden.

The 6th Circuit Court noted: "Labor unions surely maintain some sort of records on their members already, and requiring the unions to make space in their files or databases for the inclusion of one or more pieces of information seems minimal — certainly a burden insufficient to rise to the level of a constitutional violation." The court also rejected the union's claim that asking for written permission violated their members' right of free speech, ruling that this argument "bordered on the frivolous."

Oregon citizens will vote next month on a paycheck protection initiative known as Measure 59, which will prohibit pub-

lic sector payroll deductions for politics entirely.

According to its sponsor, Oregon Taxpayers United (OTU), "If union members want to contribute, they will be required to write a check. That means the unions will



Organizations such as the Mackinac Center for Public Policy produce publications that educate workers about paycheck protection.

not even be able to coerce employees into signing permission slips."

Proponents of Measure 59 say it is so named because polls show that 59% of Oregon residents favor the initiative as it will appear on the ballot. OTU Executive Director Bill Sizemore states that many initiative groups make the mistake of polling the concepts behind their measures, rather than the ballot language as written. "The only poll number that really matters is voter response to the actual ballot title," Sizemore says.

Observers note that the Oregon initiative differs from California's failed Proposition 226 in several ways. Since it does not affect private sector unions as did California's initiative, the measure is not

(See *Paycheck*, page 4)

EDUCATION BRIEFS

Many courses offered at teachers' colleges focus on "diversity" and "oppression" rather than academics. In Massachusetts, where nearly 60% of prospective teachers failed a basic skills test last spring, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst lists the following courses for its education majors: "Social Diversity in Education," "Embracing Diversity," "Diversity & Change," "Introduction to Multicultural Education," "Oppression & Education," "Classism," "Racism," "Jewish Oppression," "Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Oppression," "Oppression of the Disabled," and "Erroneous Beliefs."

A major new poll reports that more than 70% of black and white parents rate education as being more important than integration. The poll shows that parents of both races believe that, while integrated schools can help improve race relations, integration efforts sometimes cause teaching to suffer. A hefty 91% of black parents and 95% of white parents say they feel that mastery of the basics is "absolutely essential."

The concept of a "virtual, on-line university" is worrying professors in Washington state. Professors at the University of Washington sent an open letter to the Governor indicating their concern that his administration is too enthusiastic about computerized instruction via CD-ROM and the Internet. They noted that such courses are becoming a national trend, and cited a white paper issued by a financial services company that says computerized instruction "could easily substitute for campus-based instruction," and that software for as few as 25 courses could provide a core curriculum for about 80% of undergraduates.

Maryland is considering a plan to quadruple reading instruction requirements for elementary school teachers from three credit hours to 12. Middle and high school teachers would be required to take six credit hours. The state school board is expected to approve the plan despite formidable opposition from the NEA and higher education officials. Most teachers are applauding the proposed boost in standards and say they welcome the opportunity to increase their skills.

Education Reporter (ISSN 0887-0608) is published monthly by Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund with editorial offices at 7800 Bonhomme Ave., St. Louis, MO 63105, (314)721-1213. Editor: Sue Kunstmann. The views expressed in this newsletter are those of the persons quoted and should not be attributed to Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund. Annual subscription \$25. Back issues available @ \$2. Periodicals postage paid at Alton, Illinois. Web site: <http://www.eagleforum.org> E-mail: eagle@eagleforum.org

Lawsuit (Continued from Page 1)

(EPSDT) program for school children covers unclotted physical exams including genitals. "Schools are reimbursed by Medicaid for performing such services," says Smith, "and these types of initiatives precipitated the East Stroudsburg case."

She cautions that it's important for parents to understand the "expanded" meaning of many of the terms used in health and education program documents, including consent forms. "The importance of reading these forms carefully cannot be overstated," Smith warns. "Terms such as 'abuse,' 'prevention,' 'intervention,' and 'anticipatory guidance' should send up red flags as to their relationship to sex education, family planning services and supplies, or referrals for such services."

The genital exams given to the kindergartners in Aiken, SC, were funded by Title I and Medicaid programs. Documents show that the Aiken County School District signed a contract with the South

Carolina Dept. of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) to provide in-school health services to Title I schools.

"However," says Rebekah Sutherland, "non-Medicaid children also attend those schools and were given the exams, even though their parents pay for their medical care." She points out that parents are not aware of a difference between the public schools — that some are eligible for Title I funds while others are not — and that this distinction causes confusion and distrust.

In August, Sutherland and the South Carolina Council of Conservative Citizens held a protest march in Aiken to criticize the examinations of the 5- and 6-year-olds. A local pastor, the Rev. Dr. Bobby Eubanks, summed up the feelings of the marchers. "Taking our children's clothes off and examining their genitalia is not the responsibility of the schools. They are there to educate."

Phonics Popular, but not 'Explicit'

Some states have recently mandated the teaching of phonics, and many schools across the country are trying to incorporate it, but instruction methods typically do not involve explicit, systematic phonics.

"Implicit" phonics is the most widely used teaching method, and is synonymous with whole language. "Explicit" phonics is the scientifically proven reading instruction method. The reason for the confusion, according to author and teacher Delores Hiskes, is that explicit phonics has "not generally been included in graduate teaching curricula for over 50 years, and most of the classic old texts have long been out of print. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know."

Writing in the National Right to Read Foundation's *Right to Read Report*, Hiskes states: "Explicit phonics builds up from part to whole — implicit phonics breaks down from whole to part." The implicit phonics method teaches children to memorize approximately 300 words per year, encouraging guesswork and providing a recipe for failure. Children learn to identify words by their shape, their beginning and ending letters, and by the context in which they are used in sentences, often with the aid of pictures.

"Explicit" phonics teaches children to read by "blending and building." Instruction begins with individual letter sounds,

blending those sounds into syllables, then building syllables into words. According to Hiskes, "Initial reading practice using explicit phonics should consist only of highly decodable text (skills already taught) until the most common letter/sound correspondences have been learned." Children who learn to read with explicit phonics can master up to 30,000 words by the end of the 3rd grade, compared with only 900 words mastered by 3rd graders using whole language.

Hiskes advocates: (1) Direct instruction in phonemic awareness, (2) Direct instruction in letter/sound relationships, one at a time, in isolation, (3) Explicit instruction in blending, (4) Instruction in building sound spellings into words, using concrete examples, (5) Opportunities to practice reading using decodable text, to review and reinforce these skills until they become automatic.

Once their phonics skills are developed, children can focus on the meaning of the words they read, unlocking a whole new world of concepts and ideas. According to Hiskes, explicit phonics instruction "is a critical step leading to a truly balanced 'whole' language reading program. It provides the skills needed to unlock, decode and comprehend all of the wonderful classic stories in today's literature-rich reading programs."

Book of the Month



Choosing the Right College, The Whole Truth About America's 100 Top Schools, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Inc., 1998, \$25, 672 pps.

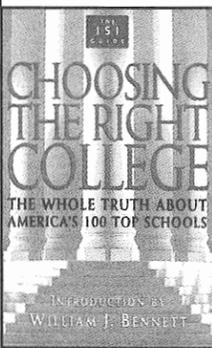
This 672-page guide features a half dozen pages of description of each of America's top 100 universities and colleges, private and public. Parents can learn useful information, gleaned from thousands of on-campus sources, about each school.

Reviews of the colleges are divided into four parts: (1) an overview of each school's history and current climate; (2) its fundamental requirements and how they compare to the liberal arts ideal, (3) the prevailing "political atmosphere," and (4) a discussion of extracurricular aspects of student life.

Though the colleges are listed in alphabetical order in the Table of Contents, an index would have been helpful.

- Here are a few excerpts:
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) "subjects all students to its harrowing basic curriculum." Humanities courses are "generally free of politicization, with science courses all but immune to such intrusions. It's difficult to teach 'Feminist Physics' or 'The Calculus of Oppression.'"
 - Michigan State University (MSU) "has avoided many of the problems that beset other enormous state schools," and has "an excellent curriculum in the liberal arts."
 - Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, "has a student body more focused on academics than activism, and is largely apathetic at both ends of the political spectrum."
 - Notre Dame suffers from "a growing moral vacuum," and has "a high degree of politicization for the nation's flagship Catholic university."
 - Pepperdine University in Malibu, CA, "offers a very strong liberal arts curriculum in a traditional atmosphere. The sun and the beach are extras."
 - Princeton University "has a prestigious name, but the curriculum is increasingly bedeviled by politicized courses." Academic life is dubbed "Poisoned Ivy."
 - Tulane University in New Orleans "has remained one of the south's premier private schools, despite financial and other problems."
 - Washington University in St. Louis "is increasingly known for the quality of its graduate and professional programs, but some of the school's best qualities do not apply to undergraduates."

Write ISI, P.O. Box 4431, Wilmington, DE 19807-9957, or call 1/800-526-7022, email isi@isi.org, web site www.isi.org.



THE EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION IN AMERICA



FOCUS: Outcome Based Education



*"The reports of my death
are greatly exaggerated."*

Mark Twain, 1897

An open letter to the Honorable Tom Ridge, Governor of Pennsylvania, by education researcher Virginia Miller.

Dear Governor Ridge:

Recently, you sounded the death knell of O.B.E. by announcing the introduction of new academic standards and assessments for all Pennsylvania students. I respectfully submit that the death of O.B.E. is greatly exaggerated. I will expound on a few of the reasons.

If, as you have stated, your education revolution has developed "objectively defined and objectively measured standards," why do we find throughout the Academic Standards for Mathematics such verbs as "apply," "demonstrate," "develop," "invent," "analyze," "describe," "discover," and "create"? These verbs clearly confirm that the standards are a document of educational *processes*, not content. Processes are not measurable knowledge or skills; therefore, they are neither objectively defined nor objectively measured. Just how is a student to be evaluated from year to year as to "analyzing," "applying," and "creating"?

The introduction to the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Standards clearly states that the language arts "are *processes* that students use to learn and make sense of their world [emphasis added]" and that the standards "define the skills and *strategies* employed by effective readers and writers [emphasis added]."

Because the standards explicitly state that they are processes and strategies, they cannot by definition be objectively measured, nor can they be rigorous as they are not objectively defined.

If, as you have stated, you are about to "lead our children away from the ill-defined, social engineering wilderness of O.B.E. and into a new education environment — *an environment based on the fundamentals...*" [emphasis added] then why do we not find fundamentals stressed in either the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Standards or the Mathematics Standards?

A case in point: the Introduction to the Mathematics Standards informs us that mathematics in Pennsylvania will be included in the studies of particular applications. "Although it is an interesting and enjoyable study for its own sake, mathematics is most appropriately used as a tool to help organize and understand information from other academic disciplines."

I disagree, as this is a false dichotomy. The study of mathematics for its own sake is worthy and appropriate. Successful math education should not be sidetracked into the studies of particular applications before students have been well grounded in the rudiments that will prepare them to succeed in areas in which mathematics is applied. But that is exactly what occurs in Pennsylvania's new Academic Standards for Mathematics.

For example, estimation is over em-

phasized throughout the standards. Though we often use estimation in our personal lives, it is not a highly regarded mathematical technique in professional settings. Introducing estimation in early elementary years will encourage habits detrimental to mathematics.

These standards do not address the matter of when children should master basic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division). Standard 2.2.3 does state that by the end of third grade students will "apply addition and subtraction situations using concrete objects," "demonstrate concept of multiplication as repeated addition and arrays," and even "explain addition and subtraction algorithms with regrouping." But will they *know* addition, subtraction, multiplication and division? The process of demonstration does not necessarily imply knowledge.

I ask you, will third graders know their multiplication tables for numbers between 1 and 10? Specific content standards would require this basic fundamental knowledge. Pennsylvania's new Mathematics Standards do not. Further, nowhere is decimal place value, foundational to mathematical understanding, mentioned let alone required.

There is no standard that requires students to "know" anything in either the language arts or mathematics standards. Granted, several standards require students to "solve," but the vagueness of the standard still leaves questions as to the specific content addressed and just what content a student must know to solve the problem. Even in the upper grades, students are not required to know the Pythagorean Theorem, just to use it. [2.10.8.A and 2.10.11.B].

I am not advocating the assimilation of facts at the expense of concept building. I advocate a balance where a conceptual understanding of a discipline requires a requisite mastery of basic skills.

A careful study of both the Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Standards and the Mathematics Standards will reveal that neither will result in the mastery of basic skills as they both lack specific focus on essential content.

If, as you have stated, "The 53 'outcomes' are gone, excised completely from the state code," then why is the language of the 53 outcomes still present in the new academic standards?

As originally proposed, the Chapter 5 Regulations of July 24, 1993 set forth the following outcome for Citizenship. "All students demonstrate an understanding of the history and *nature of prejudice ...*" [emphasis added]. This language was removed after much public outcry. Yet we find the same language present in the new



Virginia Miller

Chapter 4 regulations that are championed as the executioner of O.B.E. — "§4.12 Academic Standards (3) Social Studies (I) History: Study of the record of human experience including important events; interactions of culture, race and ideas; *the nature of prejudice ...*" [emphasis added].

§4.11. Purpose of public education of the new Chapter 4 regulations states that "public education provides opportunities for students to: ... (2) Develop integrity... (6) Collaborate with others... (7) Adapt to change." These mirror the Goals of Quality Education in the current Chapter 5 regulations — learning independently and collaboratively; adaptability to change; and ethical judgment.

Further, §4.31 Vocational-technical education (c) states, "Vocational-technical education programs shall consist of a series of planned academic and vocational-technical education courses that are articulated with one another so that knowledge, skills, *attitudes and behaviors* are taught in a systematic manner [emphasis added]."

Must the same battles be fought twice? Apparently so.

In truth, the new academic standards do not excise the 53 outcomes, they build upon and expand the outcomes previously set forth.

If, as you have stated, this new education environment is to be "based on the fundamentals and on parents' rights," why do the Chapter 4 regulations not take a strong stand for parental rights?

Schools are required to adopt policies to assure that parents have "access to information about curriculum, including academic standards to be achieved, instructional materials and assessment techniques." (§4.4 General policies. (d) (1)). Why just information about the curriculum, and not the curriculum itself? Why just information about instructional materials, and not the materials themselves? At face value, this policy may appease some parents, but it can be used to effectively bar all parents from inspecting the actual materials to which a student may be exposed.

The new Chapter 4 regulations also grant: "If upon inspection of State assessments parents find the assessments in conflict with their religious beliefs, and wish their student be excused from the assessment, the right of the parents will not be denied upon written request to the school entity superintendent." (§4.4 General policies (d)(4)). Aside from the obvious, that this "right" is restricted to religious beliefs and not broadened to include matters of conscience, it conflicts with the requirements for graduation.

§4.24. High school graduation requirements (a) states, "...To graduate, students shall demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics on State assessments administered in grade 11 or 12 or comparable local assessment ..."

If a student is exempted from the State assessment under §4.4 (d)(4), how does that student qualify for graduation? They

cannot. The graduation requirement effectively negates the "right" to opt-out, undermines parental control and authority, and discriminates against the student due to religious convictions.

If, as you have stated, "No longer will the meddling and micro-managing of Harrisburg carry the day," then why do the new Chapter 4 regulations and standards undermine local control?

As stated previously, §4.24. High school graduation requirements (a) states, "... To graduate, students shall *demonstrate proficiency* in reading, writing and mathematics on state assessments administered in grade 11 or 12 or comparable local assessment ..." [emphasis added].

Since §4.51 (b)(4) states, "Levels of *proficiency* shall be advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic [emphasis added]," the question must be asked — What level of proficiency must be attained for a student to graduate? The answer is, we don't know; the level is not specified.

§4.24. High school graduation requirements says proficiency, not proficient. If a student must be proficient in reading, writing and mathematics, then the language would state such — *e.g.*, to graduate, students shall *attain a score at the proficient level or better* in reading, writing and mathematics on state assessments.

Without specifying any minimum level of proficiency required for graduation, the regulations ring hollow in their claim to raise expectations for all Pennsylvania students. Neither will they provide parents, through the State assessments, an accountability of school performance. The regulations do, however, ensure that all students will take the State assessments.

This being said, the purpose of the requirement of taking the state assessment as a condition of graduation is nothing more than ensuring that school districts align their curriculum to the standards. Local schools can do nothing less. As the State assessment is aligned with the state standards, local curricula content will be unduly influenced. State assessments become the tail that wags the curricular dog.

Despite your promise of "no mandated curriculum," the State academic standards and assessments will exert the necessary pressure to control curriculum from the State level.

These standards and regulations are wrong for our children and wrong for our schools. It will take great courage to admit such and great leadership to resist the pressures of modern education reform.

Pennsylvania will support leadership that respects and supports the rights of parents and that restores sound educational practices and principles to Pennsylvania's schools. May you have the courage to do so.

Sincerely yours,

Virginia Miller

Paycheck (Continued from page 1)

expected to attract as much national private sector union money. (Oregon's major union political activity is in the public sector.) Because Measure 59 is one of many initiatives on Oregon's November ballot, the unions may have more difficulty singling it out and creating confusion about it among voters. Furthermore, the fact that the vote will come in a general election is expected to dilute the unions' efforts to affect turnout.

Following the defeat of Proposition 226 last June, Washington-based Americans for Tax Reform (ATR) President Grover Norquist stated that publicity surrounding the campaign brought the issue of paycheck protection into the national limelight.

"The unions ran a \$27 million campaign of confusion and deceit, spending their own members' money without permission," Norquist said. "Labor union bosses narrowly won a single initiative election, one time in one state, while the supporters of workers' rights and paycheck protection won an educational campaign with the public in the entire nation. Polling data indicate that Americans now favor paycheck protection to the tune of 70% to 80%."

Besides Michigan, the states of Washington, Idaho and Wyoming currently have paycheck protection laws on the books. Washington voters approved an initiative in 1992, and the Idaho and Wyoming legislatures passed similar bills in 1997 and 1998 respectively.

Last year, the Washington Education Association (WEA), state affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA), was caught spending union members' mandatory deductions on politics in vio-

lation of the 1992 law (See *Education Reporter*, December 1997). State Attorney General Christine Gregoire responded by filing suit against the WEA, and later settled out of court. The Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a Washington-based public policy institute, initiated a second suit against the WEA and the NEA. That case is still pending.

Primarily due to the California initiative, awareness of the paycheck protection issue has come a long way. ATR's Norquist states that, a year ago, most Americans did not realize that labor union leaders are able to withhold funds from union members' paychecks without the workers' permission. "It amounts to a lot of money — 16 million union members nationwide pay an average of \$500 in dues, which brings in \$8 billion annually — much of it spent on politics."

The paycheck protection movement has been prompted by the failure of the Clinton Administration's National Labor Relations Board and the U.S. Dept. of Labor to enforce the 1988 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Communication Workers of America v. Beck*. That decision gave workers the right to retain any portion of their mandatory union dues that is not spent on collective bargaining, but until recently, 78% of union workers were unaware of this right. In 1992, then-President George Bush issued an executive order requiring government contractors to post notices informing employees about the Beck decision. One of Bill Clinton's first acts as President was to repeal Bush's order.

Paycheck protection legislation is expected to move through the legislatures of 26 states in 1999.

"PRIMARYLY
DUE TO THE
CALIFORNIA
INITIATIVE,
AWARENESS
OF PAYCHECK
PROTECTION
HAS COME A
LONG WAY."

Teen Novels Depict Dark Side of Life

Teenagers seeking to avoid the grimmer aspects of life in 1990s America will be disappointed in popular young-adult fiction. Today's teen novels seem to be mostly about murder, rape, incest, drug and alcohol addiction, and running away from home. Where are Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and the Black Stallion adventures when kids need them?

The new crop of young-adult novels has become known as "Bleak Books." They focus on "the realities of life" rather than on chasing the bad guys, solving mysteries, exploring friendships, and taming wild horses. Writing in the *New York Times Magazine* of August 2, 1998, editor Sara Mosle describes a few of the story lines: "... a 13-year-old inexplicably walks into a liquor store and fatally shoots its Korean owner with his father's gun ... a teen-age boy attempts suicide and accidentally kills a girl instead ... a boy and girl run away from their respective homes and descend into heroin addiction ... an aging history teacher keeps his students captive at gunpoint."

Mosle compares this new fiction with the young-adult novels of the 1970s and '80s, noting that the earlier stories focused on "working things out: The teenage

drunk finds AA, the runaway leaves her career in child prostitution and comes home." Bleak Books stories, on the other hand, fail to offer readers any optimism.

According to Mosle, the most troubling aspect of these novels is their "depiction of adults as almost unrelievedly materialistic, self-absorbed, irresponsible, distrustful, physically or verbally abusive or uninterested or incapable of communicating with

their children — despite literal cries for attention." Some of the stories portray the teen hero or heroine as the adult figure, such as a teenage girl who accepts responsibility for her baby brother and is disgusted when her single mother becomes pregnant again.

At a time when young people are indoctrinated in the classroom about "attitudes" and "feelings," and forced to confront issues such as suicide, they are finding no relief in their fiction. Mosle observes: "What we're really worrying about with 'Bleak Books' is the readiness of teenagers to face life's darkest corners." Why does teen fiction force them to do this?



Heritage Foundation Critical of Federal Regional Education Labs

WASHINGTON, DC — The "Great Society" of President Lyndon Johnson launched a network of regional education research laboratories in 1966 for the purpose of studying education reforms and developing innovative curricula. These laboratories are now under attack for spending more than \$750 million in federal funds over 32 years, while having had little or no impact on education in America's classrooms.

The labs are part of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), which is charged with developing quality teaching methods and promoting them to school districts throughout the country. The labs' original mission was to pursue these goals on the basis of scientific inquiry, without political bias.

In July 1998, the Heritage Foundation published a white paper characterizing the OERI's activities as "especially disappointing, in light of the agency's potential to contribute significantly to the quality of education." The paper calls on Congress to "overhaul" the regional labs.

The Heritage Foundation describes the labs as "producing work that has been largely irrelevant to the classroom." It points to the mismanagement of funds that the Dept. of Education's own inspector-general uncovered, along with the labs' insufficient emphasis on quality, their promotion of "fads," and their lack of objectivity and responsible scientific method-

ology in conducting research. The white paper quotes former OERI assistant secretaries Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn as saying that the regional labs are "nothing more than a collection of ten smallish non-profit organizations that undertake a mishmash of research, dissemination, and technical assistance activities, aimed mostly at state and local education agencies ... The program as a whole has outlived whatever justification it once had ... The money actually goes to well-paid professionals functioning as middlemen, sitting in comfortable offices distant from the classroom, and devoting much of their energy to ensuring that their federal gravy train does not halt on the tracks."

Criticism of the labs has come from educators. In the Sept. 16 edition of *Education Week*, University of Michigan history professor Maris A. Vinovskis said: "The labs that exist today don't produce consistently good work, yet they enjoy the security of five-year federal contracts." Vinovskis suggests that the labs should be forced to bid on projects one-at-a-time, as do other education contractors.

Education Week also quoted Finn and Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, as having called the regional labs "the greediest vultures of the school establishment."

Reauthorization of funding for the OERI's regional labs is expected to come before Congress next year.

