

## Study Finds High School Diploma Is Largely Meaningless

*Better Standards Needed to Prepare Students*

Employers today consider high school diplomas only as proof that 18-year-olds attended school, according to a study released February 9 by the American Diploma Project, a consortium of three education-reform groups.

The project's two-year review of education in five states found that more than half of high school graduates need remedial classes in college, and most who attend college never obtain a four-year degree. Employers rated high school graduates as "fair" or "poor" on basic abilities.

High school exit exams required by nearly half the states fail to measure what matters to colleges and employers, the study concludes. Such exams "generally assess 8<sup>th</sup>- or 9<sup>th</sup>-grade content."

The report, entitled "Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts," analyzed employment data and research involving college faculty, business managers and high school educa-

tors in Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas. Participants included former top education officials from the Reagan and Clinton administrations. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provided a \$2.4 million grant to fund the project, which is sponsored by Achieve Inc., the Education Trust, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

States should raise their education standards to require graduates to master more English and math, the report argues. Currently, every state but Iowa has academic standards for what high school students should learn, but the report contends that those standards are not geared to what is essential for success after high school.

In English, the project specifically calls for mastery of spelling and grammar, communications skills, writing, research and logic, as well as the ability to read and interpret documents with tech-



nical material, to view the media critically and to understand and analyze literature. In math, the report calls for mastery of numerical operations, algebra, geometry, data interpretation, statistics and probability.

Employers and postsecondary institutions "all but ignore the diploma, knowing that it often serves as little more than a certificate of attendance," the report charges. It recommends that the National Assessment of Educational Progress test given in 12<sup>th</sup> grade be realigned based on new, tougher standards.

The study found that while both employers and college professors emphasized English skills, they emphasized different mathematical skills. Employers stressed the importance of accounting, budgeting and data analysis, which were given less weight by college faculty members.

## Bush Seeks Double Funding for Abstinence Education

President Bush has called for increasing federal spending on abstinence education to \$273 million in the 2005 fiscal year. In his January 20 State of the Union address, the president said, "We will double federal funding for abstinence programs, so schools can teach this fact of life: Abstinence for young people is the only certain way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases."

His proposal would also move the programs into the same agency within the Health and Human Services Department that oversees religious-based programs and his proposal to promote marriage. The administration's 2005 budget proposal, released in February, followed up on the State of the Union promise.

The teenage birth rate has fallen by 30% in the past decade and is now at the lowest level ever recorded. Critics of the Bush proposal assert that both abstinence and contraception are responsible for that shift and that abstinence-only programs may not work.

### Newark gives it a try

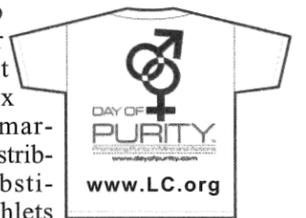
However, faced with a persistently high teen birth rate in Newark, public schools there decided it was time for a new approach and rolled out an abstinence-only sex-education program for 9<sup>th</sup> graders this year. The Choice Game urges students to sign a pledge of chastity until they marry.

The program, using interactive videos and hip-hop music, was created last year by Kathy DiFiore of Bergen County, N.J., who runs four homes for pregnant teenagers, and was first used in Catholic schools. A \$2.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded the program's launch in Newark public schools. Districts in Ohio and Chicago have signed on to use the program. (bergentowns.com, 10-6-03)

### National 'Day of Purity'

The day before Valentine's Day, thousands of high school students across the country wore white T-shirts to school to signal their commitment to avoid sex outside of marriage, and distributed pro-abstinence pamphlets to their peers. The "Day of Purity" was organized by the Orlando, FL-based Liberty Counsel and supported by Christian groups nationwide.

Gay activist groups were not amused. "The word 'purity' in this context is morally self-righteous," said Alice Leeds, spokeswoman for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. "It's redefining it in their context to conform to a frankly bigoted agenda." (lasvegassun.com, 2-13-04)



## Ohio Allows Questions to be Raised on Evolution

The Ohio State Board of Education in March approved a new optional science curriculum that encourages students to consider both supporting and "challenging" evidence for evolution. The board voted 13-5 in favor of the lesson plan after being persuaded by 22 Ohio scientists that it promotes academic freedom and that it is good for 10<sup>th</sup> graders to have an inquiring mind about evolution.

No teacher will be required to teach criticisms of evolution, and no students will be tested on the criticisms.

One of the scientists backing the lesson plan, University of Akron biologist Daniel Ely, explained that it involves a debate over issues within evolution, not intelligent design or religion. Board member James Turner said he couldn't ignore a letter signed by 300 scientists nationally criticizing part of Darwin's theory of evolution. (Associated Press, 3-10-04)

The lesson plan, entitled "Critical Analysis of Evolution," takes up 22 pages out of Ohio's 547-page science curriculum. It states that the fossil record supports evolution by showing an increasing complexity of living forms, but observes that "transitional fossils are rare in the fossil record" and "a growing number of scientists now question that ... transitional fossils really are transitional forms." It also notes that some changes in species occur quickly in the fossil record relative to longer stretches that manifest no change.

The plan debunks examples still used in textbooks on evolution, such as the explanation that black peppered moths survived because they rested on trees blackened by soot, while white moths were eaten by birds. In fact, "peppered moths do not actually rest on tree trunks" and "no new species emerged" as a result of the soot.



Evolutionary claims of common ancestry are reexamined in the lesson plan, which observes that different genes and development have created similar anatomical structures, suggesting different ancestries.

Critics charge that the lesson plan contains elements of "intelligent design" theory, and the American Civil Liberties Union is threatening a lawsuit on the constitutionality of the section. The opposition to the new lesson plan was led by an Ohio philosophy lecturer, Patricia Princehouse. Florida law professor Steven Gey flew in to attack the constitutionality of the plan. He also thinks that "moral relativism" is a "constitutional command" and that nude sunbathing should be given "constitutional protection."

The Board of Education's vice president, Richard Baker, called evolutionists unwilling to allow scientific questioning

(See Ohio, page 3)

## Colorado Bill on Sex Ed Opt-Out Moves Forward

The Colorado House is considering a bill requiring prior notice to parents of any sex education curriculum and allowing them to request that their children be excused from such classes.



Rep. Shawn Mitchell

Rep. Shawn Mitchell (R-Broomfield) introduced the measure in response to parental complaints centering on teaching about homosexuality in the Boulder Valley school district. Although the district already has a policy letting parents withdraw children from classes if they have religious or philosophical objections to the curricula, some parents complained that administrators harassed their children and refused to make opting out easier. Moreover, parents often don't find out about objectionable content until it has already been presented to pupils.

H.B. 04-1375 initially was drafted to restrict teaching about homosexuality in K-12 schools. It no longer addresses that issue specifically. Rep. Mitchell amended the bill twice in response to public comments: first to require parents to give prior written consent to placing their children in sex education classes, and then to eliminate the consent feature and require only prior written notice to parents of the contents of a planned curriculum concerning human sexuality and of the parents' ability to opt a student out of the applicable classes upon written request.

## EDUCATION BRIEFS

### Education Department proposes new single-sex education options.

The Bush administration proposed regulations in March giving public school districts new freedom to create single-sex classes and schools, as long as "substantially equal" opportunities are also provided for the other sex in either a single-sex or a coed setting. Educators would no longer have to demonstrate they were acting to remedy past discrimination. There are currently 24 single-sex public schools across the country, and at least 91 of 19,000 public schools offer some form of single-sex education. A legal challenge to the guidelines, which represent a reinterpretation of Title IX, is anticipated.

### One out of two sexually active youths can expect to contract an STD by age 25.

A study by the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, released in late February, found soaring rates of sexually transmitted diseases. New cases rose from 15 million a year in 1996 to 18.9 million a year in 2000. Human papillomavirus (HPV), trichomoniasis and chlamydia accounted for 88% of new infections. The report states that the best ways to avoid infection are to abstain from sex or remain in a monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner.

### New York City plans to eliminate most middle schools.

City officials want to recreate old-style K-8 grade schools and open new high schools for grades 6-12. About half the city's 218 middle schools have been designated by the federal government as "in need of improvement." Many other districts across the country have reinstated K-8 grade schools. Junior high school grades are considered the most difficult years of schooling because of puberty and social pressures.

### A video camera hangs in every classroom in Biloxi, MS schools.

The same cameras used in Wal-Marts



to catch thieves are now used to im-

(More Briefs on page 4)

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## Grading NCLB: States Resent Oversight, But Some Funding Gripes Don't Add Up

*Some Goals Seem Impractical, But Accountability Is Beneficial*

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has been a magnet for criticism since its enactment by large bipartisan majorities in Congress. What is the reality behind the rhetoric?

The right, along with many state officials, has complained of unfunded mandates and a large new intrusion by U.S. Department of Education into educational matters traditionally left to the states by our federal system. The Department of Education alone has grown by nearly 70% in the last two years, according to Cato Institute analysts.

The Republican-controlled Virginia House of Delegates on January 23 passed by a vote of 98-1 a resolution calling on Congress to exempt states like Virginia from the program's requirements. The resolution states that the federal law "represents the most sweeping intrusions into state and local control of education in the history of the United States" and will cost "literally millions of dollars that Virginia does not have." Virginia's main objection is that federal requirements conflict with Virginia's testing program, in place since 1998 and one of the toughest in the nation.

The Republican-controlled Utah House voted February 10 to prohibit the use of Utah money to comply with the federal law. Utah's superintendent of public instruction predicted the bill would become law. Vermont enacted a similar law last year. (nytimes.com, 2-11-04) Legislators in Connecticut, Maine, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio and elsewhere have threatened similar actions. Some school districts have rejected federal money rather than comply with the red tape. (nytimes.com, 1-2-04)

Yet federal spending on K-12 education went up sharply under NCLB and will top \$41 billion in 2004. Statistical reporting and identification of failing schools were already required by federal law before NCLB. The Department of Education reports that states are currently sitting on nearly \$6 billion in unspent federal education dollars acquired between 2000 and 2002. (Wall Street Journal, 2-12-04)

"The truth is, the federal government has been increasing education spending more quickly than the states can spend it," said Rep. John Boehner (R-OH), chairman of the House Education Committee. (Associated Press, 1-8-04) The General Accounting Office concluded last May that states are getting all the funding they need to implement NCLB's testing requirements. Federal dollars account for 7% to 11% of the \$400 billion spent on American schools each year.

Many Democrats have nevertheless angrily charged that funding hasn't risen to the levels authorized by NCLB. The National Education Association, claiming funding has fallen short by \$8 billion to \$9 billion a year, tried unsuccessfully last July to persuade Congress to suspend the NCLB's accountability requirements until the law is "fully funded."

(washingtontimes.com, 9-23-03)

The trouble with this argument is that "budget authority" is not a promise to spend, but a spending cap. The Clinton Administration did not spend up to authorized amounts on preexisting programs reauthorized by NCLB, either. (nationalreview.com, 10-16-03)

While the law clearly increased federal involvement in K-12 education, the federal government was already involved in spending — just without much accountability. NCLB imposes no national curriculum or measure of progress, but instead lets states devise their own plans. Schools need not meet a fixed federal standard; they must show improvement toward goals that the state sets. The testing required by the law must cover only basic skills in reading, math and science. The main objective of the act is to make all children proficient in language arts and math by 2014, which is not too much to ask of an educational system. States remain free to experiment widely with curricular content. And if they don't want to comply with NCLB, they can forgo federal funding, as some districts have done.

One indication of how much latitude is still afforded to the states is *Education Week's* finding that "Many states have set the bar so low for children who are learning English that students in those states could leave high school without being taught to read or write the language, yet their schools would face no consequences under federal education law." (11-19-03)

Another bone of contention with educators is that NCLB imposes student achievement standards that are unrealistic. Schools that fail to show adequate yearly progress, as measured by test scores for all demographic subgroups, face a range of penalties, from paying for private tutoring, to paying transportation costs for children transferring out, to eventual firing of a school's entire staff and management. Thousands of schools were branded last fall as "needing improvement." (New York Times, 10-16-03)

There is no doubt that the requirement of yearly progress in all subgroups at a school — based on ethnicity, family income, disability, and limited English — can be difficult to satisfy, particularly in more racially and economically diverse districts. "If this law remains as it is, and the rules remain as they are, the vast majority of schools in the country will be identified as in need of improvement," complained Al Mance, executive director of the Tennessee Education Association. (knoxnews.com, 1-8-04)

However, the Education Department has shown flexibility in relaxing some of the rules. Federal officials announced in February that the test scores of recent immigrants who do not speak English will no longer be considered in determining whether a school is meeting annual targets for academic progress. In their first



(See NCLB, page 4)

## Book of the Month



**You Can't Say That! The Growing Threat to Civil Liberties from Anti-discrimination Laws,** David E. Bernstein, Cato Institute, 2003, 166 pps., \$20.00.

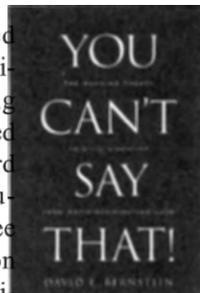
Laws intended to eradicate discrimination are being passed and enforced in blatant disregard of core constitutional rights to free speech, association and exercise of religion. George Mason University law professor David E. Bernstein amply proves this thesis in *You Can't Say That!*, which catalogs the numerous threats to liberty posed by federal, state and local laws aimed against discrimination on the basis of sex, race, disability, age, height, weight, marital status, even body piercing and motorcycle gang membership.

Of particular interest to the readers of the *Education Reporter* are the chapters dealing with campus speech codes and religious schools' employment practices. Title IX, as interpreted by the Department of Education, requires universities receiving federal money to ban speech that could create a "hostile environment" for protected classes including women, minorities and veterans, among others. Campus speech codes are the dreary consequence, and typically aim to protect still more classes, such as homosexuals, from offensive speech as well.

Students have been disciplined for "inappropriate laughter" at use of a homosexual epithet, for running an editorial cartoon in a student newspaper lampooning affirmative action, and for using a T-shirt to advertise a fraternity party with a Mexican theme. Meanwhile, college newspapers deemed offensive have been stolen or destroyed with impunity.

The examples amuse and astound the reader, but the author does more than compile a long list. He stitches the cases together with insightful legal analysis and a forceful argument in favor of reinvigorating the First Amendment as a defense to the ever-proliferating anti-discrimination laws. Not all his arguments will appeal to conservatives, but, consistent with the values of the publisher, the libertarian Cato Institute, he steadfastly takes the side of the Bill of Rights as against governmental interference. The ACLU comes in for some criticism for compromising its historical mission of protecting civil liberties in favor of its goal of social equality.

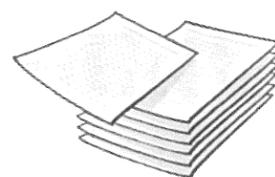
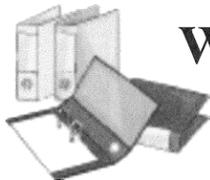
"Punishing speech because it creates offense has absurd and totalitarian implications," Bernstein reminds us. His anecdotes of how much farther other English-speaking countries have gone in trampling liberty should sound the alarm to Americans to stand up for their constitutional rights.



# FOCUS: The State of the Term Paper:

## Will Standards Framers' Neglect

### Be a Factor In Its Demise?



By Will Fitzhugh

It seems likely that the history research paper at the high school level is now an endangered species. A focus on creative writing, fear of plagiarism, fascination with PowerPoint presentations, and lack of time to meet with students to plan papers (and to read them carefully when they are turned in) are factors in its decline. They have been augmented by a notable absence of concern for term papers in virtually all the work on state standards. And the combination has produced a situation in which far too many high school students never get the chance to do the reading or the writing that a serious history paper requires. As a result, students enter college with no experience in writing papers, to the continual frustration of their professors. And the employers who hire them after college — the Ford Motor Co., for example — have had to institute writing classes to ensure that they can produce readable reports, memos, and the like.

A few years ago, a study of state English and social studies standards prepared by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation showed that term papers were included in none of the standards. The Pew Charitable Trusts' Standards for Success program, which is working on high school/college articulation of standards and expectations, also includes no term papers. And the American Diploma Project in Washington, now working to define academic expectations of high schools, colleges, and employers, has yet to find a place in its deliberations for history research papers.

One problem, of course, is that serious term papers cannot be assessed in a one-hour objective test. Yet their impact on students — and the consequences of never having done one — may be incalculable.

In the early 1980s, when I was teaching American history to high school sophomores in Concord, MA, each of my students had to write a biographical paper on one of the U.S. presidents. One student managed to get John F. Kennedy, and I lent him a copy of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *A Thousand Days*. The boy took a look at that rather large book and told me, "I can't read this." I said, "Yes, you can," and he did it. Five or six years later, I got an unexpected call from that boy. He was then a junior at Yale and wanted to thank me, he said, for "making him" read that book. It had been the first serious work of nonfiction he had ever read, and being able to get through it had done something for his confidence. Of course, he'd made himself read the book, but the anecdote points up one of the great advantages of the history term paper: Such an assignment often will be the first time a high school student finds out that he or she is capable of reading a book-length work on a topic of importance.

When I was an alumni interviewer for Harvard College, I once was asked to talk to a boy at a local suburban high school. I asked him, among other things, what he thought he might major in. History, he said. The boy knew nothing about me other than that I was an alum, I had said nothing about my own interest in history. But when he said this, I naturally asked what was his favorite history book. It soon became clear that while he had good grades, Advanced Placement scores, and other markers of success, this student had read nothing in history beyond his textbooks and no one had handed him a good work of history and encouraged him to read it. Neither had he ever been forced to do a serious history paper, no doubt, for if he had, he might have read at least a book or two in the field.

As Victor W. Henningsen, the head of the history department at Phillips Academy at Andover, said of such papers last year: "There's no substitute for the thrill that comes from choosing a topic of your own and wrestling with a mass of evidence to answer a question that you've posed, to craft your own narrative and your own analysis. We've been teaching kids to write research papers [at Andover] for a long time. Kids don't remember the Advanced Placement exam, but they do remember the papers that they've written, and so do I." (*Education Week*, 3-14-01)

Since 1987, I have been the editor of *The Concord Review*, a quarterly journal of history research papers written by high school students. We have published 528 papers (an average of 5,000 words, with endnotes and bibliography) by students from 42 states and 33 other countries. Out of some 22,000 public and private high schools in the United States, we are sent about 600 essays a year, from which we publish 11 in each of four quarterly issues. If you do the calculation, that means that perhaps 21,000 high schools or more across the country do not send even one history essay for consideration in a given year. This doesn't prove that good, long history essays are not being written at those schools (many may not know of *The Concord Review's* existence), but to me it's not an encouraging sign.

As to what teachers are expecting in their high school history classes in lieu of research papers, I have only anecdotal evidence. For example, I once asked the head of a history department at a public high school in New Jersey — a man very

active in the National Council for History Education — why he never sent papers from his best students to *The Concord Review*. His reply was that he didn't have his students do history research papers anymore; he had them do PowerPoint presentations and write historical fiction instead. When I asked the now-retired head of history at Scarsdale High School in New York why he had three subscriptions to *The Concord Review*, yet never sent any of his student papers to be considered, he too said he no longer assigned research papers. After the AP history exam, he said, he held what he called "the trial of James Buchanan for his part in the coming of the U.S. Civil War." He had his students write their responses to that instead.

The class valedictorian at a high school on Long Island wrote me, after publication of her essay on the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in the *Review*, to say that she'd always felt weak in expository writing. She offered some possible reasons for that. Here are her words: "I attend a school where students are given few opportunities to develop their talents in this field (it is assumed students will learn how to write in college)."

I feel quite confident in saying that, on the college side, there is the expectation that students will learn at least the rudiments of a research paper while they are still in high school, and that college humanities professors are routinely surprised (slow learners) when they find that this has not happened for their students.

Creative writing rules at the high school level (and even earlier) in many cases. The director of the Expository Writing Program at Harvard College has said she thinks in fact that high school students don't get enough chances to write about their feelings, relationships, anxieties, hopes, and dreams, and that they really shouldn't be pushed to work on history research papers until college. The National Writing Project in Berkeley, CA, a program that reaches hundreds of teachers and thousands of students each year, teaches a postmodern approach to what it calls "literatures" (quotes are absolutely necessary) and never comes within a mile of considering that students could use some work on their research skills or their nonfiction expository writing.

I have actually seen what high school students can do, and it is more like the following excerpt from an essay published a few years back in the *Review* (more examples are at <http://www.tcr.org>). This passage concluded an essay by a high school junior who went on to major in civil engineering at Princeton, get a Ph.D. in earthquake engineering at Stanford, and is now an assistant professor of engineering at Cornell:

*As is usually the case in extended, deeply held disagreements, no one person or group was the cause of the split in the woman-suffrage movement. On both sides, a stubborn eagerness to enfranchise women hindered the effort to do so. Abolitionists and Republicans refused to unite equally with woman suffragists. Stanton and Anthony, blinded for a while by their desperation to succeed, turned to racism, pitting blacks and women against each other at a time when each needed the other's support most. The one thing that remains clear is that, while in some ways it helped women discover their own power, the division of forces weakened the overall strength of the movement. As a result of the disagreements within the woman-suffrage movement, the 1860s turned out to be a missed opportunity for woman suffragists, just as Stanton had predicted. After the passage of the 15th Amendment, they were forced to wait another 50 years for the fulfillment of their dream.*

As this excerpt suggests, high school students are fully capable of writing long, serious history papers. They also will get a lot out of doing it — not only will they read more nonfiction, but they'll also learn how to write it themselves. These days, too many of our students are not being given that chance.

Colleges will no doubt continue to do what they can to help them master the rudiments of expository writing after high school. But much of what these students have missed cannot be made up in remedial courses.

*Will Fitzhugh is the president of the National Writing Board and the founder and editor of The Concord Review, in Sudbury, MA. This article first appeared in Education Week (1-16-02) and is reprinted with permission.*

## Ohio (Continued. from page 1)

"a bunch of paranoid, egotistical scientists afraid of people finding out [they] don't know anything."

Georgia, New Mexico, Minnesota, West Virginia and Kansas have all wrestled with science standards and curricula on evolution in recent years. The Alabama Senate education committee in March approved the Academic Freedom Act, which states that no teacher in public schools or universities may be fired, denied tenure or otherwise discriminated against for presenting "alternative theories" to evolution. The bill would also prohibit any student from being penalized because he held "a particular position on biological or physical origins" so long as the student demonstrated "acceptable understanding of course materials," which include evolution.



# U.S. Math Gap Assailed by Fed Chief

## 'Fuzzy Math' Persists Despite Parental Protests

Critics of American math education picked up an unexpected ally when Alan Greenspan pointedly contrasted the math proficiency of U.S. students to that of their Asian rivals.

At an appearance before the Senate Banking Committee in early February, the U.S. Federal Reserve chairman said the real threat to the U.S. standard of living isn't from jobs leaving for cheaper Asian locations, but from declining U.S. educational standards.

American students ranked 19<sup>th</sup> in a 1999 study of mathematical ability among 8<sup>th</sup> graders in 38 countries. Students from Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan made the top 5. China and India didn't participate.

"What will ultimately determine standard of living of this country is the skill of the people," Greenspan told the committee. "We do something wrong, which obviously people in Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea and Japan do far better."

In 1989, the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics published a set of provocative recommendations that transformed American math education. Starting in 1992, the "whole math" system that grew out of those standards (derided by critics as "fuzzy math" or "new-new math") was adopted in California and many other states. The role of the teacher was minimized, computation was left to calculators, and students were encouraged to think there are no right or wrong answers to mathematical problems. By 1997, math test scores had declined so much that the California Regents voted

unanimously to reject the reforms despite aggressive lobbying by the pro-fuzzy math National Science Foundation.

In 1999, after the U.S. Department of Education announced support for ten fuzzy math programs, some 200 scientists and mathematicians, including four Nobel Prize winners, published an open letter in the *Washington Times* urging withdrawal of the recommendations. The department refused.

In an indication that some educators now realize that newer U.S. math teaching methods don't work, at least 200 schools now use Singaporean math textbooks, according to a report last year in Singapore's *Straits Times*. (bloomberg.com, 2-17-04) Spurred by parental concerns about slipping math scores, a Detroit-area school board recently agreed to bring back an optional traditional math curriculum in secondary schools after about a decade of offering only an "integrated math" program combining arithmetic, algebra and geometry into one class. (*Detroit News*, 2-25-04)

Critics of fuzzy math still have their work cut out for them. In the Parkway school district in St. Louis County, MO, dozens of parents have complained of the failure to teach arithmetic skills in middle schools. "There's no reinforcement of basic math facts," an engineer and mother of three charged in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (2-18-04). "You can't teach problem solving and critical thinking until students have mastered the basics," noted

another mother who organized a group of parents concerned that elementary-school students in the district get too little practice in multiplication, division, decimals and fractions.

Nationwide, students' arithmetic skills have either declined or remained flat since 1990, according to Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution.

In Fairfax County, VA, a famously successful middle-school math teacher proudly rejects the anti-drill doctrines of the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics and refuses to use newer textbooks with colorful pictures. "When you start telling me that you have to print books with 10 different colors on every page, with charts and stories about the rainforest... I say, no, no," Vern Williams told the *Washington Post* (12-23-03). "I think we are doing our students a disservice."

Controversy dogs plans by Illinois to

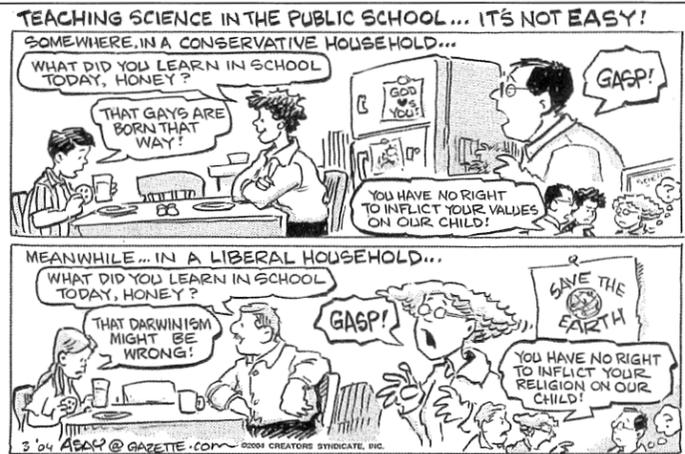


Alan Greenspan

focus more on basic skills in the design of its standardized tests. "It's not uniformly horrible, but the main thrust is back-to-basics — multiple-choice questions emphasizing routine tasks, rote memorization and computational skills," one math educator complained in the *Chicago Tribune* (1-4-04), apparently unaware that basic skills are precisely what many parents believe has been lacking in math education.

In a letter to the Illinois board of education signed by 40 educators, the new test design was attacked as a "radical departure" from the current state math standards and an abandonment of the reasoning and problem-solving skills emphasized in classrooms over the past decade. A flashpoint for criticism is the allocation of 20% of the test questions to "naked math" — a dirty word to educators who believe math is meaningful to students only when placed in the context of real-world situations.

If "naked math" problems don't belong in elementary-school standardized tests, how can the students be expected to excel on the SAT and ACT tests in high school, which abound in such questions?



## Briefs (Continued from page 2)

prove discipline, assess blame for fights, catch students cheating, and record infractions by custodians. Parents have not complained. About 950 new public schools opened across the country in 2002, and an estimated three-fourths of them were equipped with surveillance cameras, usually in common areas and parking lots. (nytimes.com, 9-24-03)

**Preschoolers on Prozac?** About 3 in every 1,000 American preschoolers were on antidepressants in 1995, according to a study by Dr. Joan Luby of the Wash-

ington University School of Medicine. Prozac, Paxil and other antidepressant drugs are prescribed for young children with selective mutism, a debilitating

form of shyness that strikes children younger than 6. The United Kingdom has outlawed antidepressants other than Prozac for minors. In early February, an advisory board to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration called for better warnings on the safety of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for children. Scientists have not extensively studied the effects of drugs on young children.



## NCLB (Continued from page 2)

year at a U.S. school, students with limited English skills will be exempted from some tests. Education Department officials have determined that the list of sub-par schools could shrink by 20% to 25% in some states as a result of this change. (nytimes.com, 2-20-04) Second, students will be counted as part of the limited-English subgroup for two years after they exit their bilingual program.

These policy changes significantly ease pressure on schools with high Hispanic enrollment. A California report released in early February found that students who speak Spanish as their first language take an average of 6.7 years to master English, lagging behind most other immigrant children. Mandarin speakers take only 3.6 years. (latimes.com, 2-14-04)

Ultimately, the No Child Left Behind Act is about increasing accountability. The road to educational improvement may be bumpy, and the federal spending and bureaucracy may be skyrocketing, but the overall purpose of the law is to shine light on failing schools, incentivizing them to change or lose federal money. Poor students stand to gain the most of all from the law's requirement of "adequate yearly progress" in all subgroups, which exposes the large achievement gap that exists even in schools with respectable average test scores.

## Student Disinvited from School for Conservative Views

A California student was advised by his principal and a campus police officer to stay home from his high school for a few days, following threats by other students in connection with an article he wrote calling for a crackdown on illegal immigration.

Tim Bueler, 17, founder of San Francisco-area Rancho Cotate High School's new conservative club, says that teachers have refused to protect him even as Hispanic students openly threatened him. Groups of Hispanic students have allegedly surrounded him, blocked him in the hallway, talked of finding someone to beat him up, and called him "racist" and "white boy." (*Washington Times*, 12-30-03)

He said teachers have joined in the name-calling, using terms like "Nazi," "a bunch of bigots," and "neoconservative wing-nuts who call themselves Americans" to describe Bueler or his club. The school district has launched an investigation.

The 50-member club has hosted speakers from California Eagle Forum and the National Rifle Association and pub-

lished a newsletter in which the student's article appeared. After a presentation by Orlean Koehle of California Eagle Forum, a science teacher wrote a three-page rebuttal and circulated it to every teacher at the school. Besides attacking Eagle Forum, the rebuttal stated that the speaker had no facts and that the club is "reactionary" and gets its "mistruths" from Michael Savage and Rush Limbaugh, according to Koehle.

"Teachers, administrators, even our county superintendent are still trying to say that there is no liberal bias in our public schools," said Koehle. "I am actually thankful for [the rebuttal] for it is more evidence of the liberal bias that does exist in our public schools and gives more reason to believe in the need for a conservative club on every campus so another viewpoint can be expressed."

Stay home!

