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NEA Takes Heat as Feds Audit Spending, States Adopt Reforms

The National Education Association has come under fire for practices involving the collection and use of member dues and financial reporting of expenditures. Government officials at the federal and state levels are putting pressure on the nation's largest teachers union as well as seeking reforms to ensure greater respect for the rights of individual members of a broad range of unions.

In March the NEA confirmed that both the Labor Department and the Internal Revenue Service are investigating whether the tax-exempt union properly reported millions of dollars in political spending, almost all of which goes to support Democratic causes. The IRS audit is expected to take 18 months to two years. Complaints were filed with both agencies by the Landmark Legal Foundation, which obtained extensive internal NEA documents detailing political spending. (See *Education Reporter*, Oct. 2003.) Some political expenditures could be considered taxable by the IRS.

Last year Labor Secretary Elaine Chao expanded general union financial reporting requirements and won a lawsuit challenging the changes. She said the vague reports made under the "virtually meaningless" previous requirements enabled some officials of the Washington Teachers Union to get away with illegal use of member dues "for designer clothes, lavish vacations and political activity to the tune of \$5 million." (*Washington Times*, 3-5-04) (See *Education Reporter*, May 2004.)

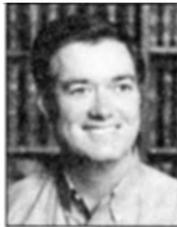
'Paycheck protection' advances

At least five states have adopted reforms designed to curtail unions' collection of dues for political action through mandatory payroll deduction. Washington state adopted a voter initiative in 1992 to end the automatic deduction of union political action committee (PAC) contributions from state employees' paychecks, resulting in a 95% drop in union PAC revenue. (*Labor Watch*, Mar. 2004) The NEA's Washington affiliate, however, has continued to use mandatory dues for politics, leading to two lawsuits filed by the state attorney general, one of which is on appeal to the state supreme court. (See *Focus* on p. 3 for details on Evergreen Freedom Foundation's fight in Washington state.)

Utah and Idaho passed laws in 2001 and 2003, respectively, requiring unions to establish a separate political action fund and prohibiting public agency employers from providing contributions to the fund. Transfers from general union coffers to the fund are also barred. The NEA's Idaho affiliate has joined other unions in filing

suit for an injunction against the Idaho law.

Colorado Governor Bill Owens, by executive order in 2001, ended state processing of state employee union dues payments along with a variety of other payroll deductions. As a result, 70% of the members left the Colorado Association of Public Employees. Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney used his line-item veto in 2003 to eliminate a state subsidy of the cost of processing union PAC payroll deductions from state employees' paychecks. (*Labor Watch*, Mar. 2004)



Gov. Bill Owens

Religious objectors redirect dues

Tens of thousands of NEA members have used the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act to protect against their dues' being used in a manner contrary to their religious beliefs, such as to promote abortion or homosexuality. Under rulings of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), a portion of the annual NEA dues assessment may be directed to a charity of the member's choice.

However, some state NEA affiliates "run religious objectors through the gantlet," according to Bruce N. Cameron, a lawyer for the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, who represents a woman whose request has been fought by the Michigan Education Association for two years. Moreover, "in non-right-to-work states, the NEA forces nonmembers to pay for collective bargaining, but refuses to allow them to have a voice or a vote on collective-bargaining decisions or any workplace conditions," Cameron told the *Washington Times* (4-27-04).

After an NEA affiliate in Ohio stonewalled a religious objector for eight years, the EEOC in 2003 ordered the NEA and all its state affiliates to stop using invasive bureaucratic requirements to force teachers and support personnel to justify their faith.

The NEA's co-sponsorship of the pro-abortion march in Washington, DC on April 25 offended thousands of pro-life teachers and school staff who are required to belong to the union. Abortion "is a political issue and not an educational issue," complained NEA member Connie Bancroft, executive director of Teachers Saving Children, a national group of pro-life educators. (*Washington Times*, 4-19-04) Members also object that the NEA's chief lobbyist, Randall J. Moody, serves

(See *NEA*, page 4)

Religious Teens Fare Better, Study Shows New Polls: Teens Are More Conservative

Young people who are religious are better off in significant ways than their secular peers, concluded a recent study by a Dartmouth Medical School commission that reviewed years of research on teens including brain-imaging.

Religious teens are less likely than non-believers to smoke or drink; more likely to eat healthfully; less likely to commit crimes; more likely to wear seat belts; less likely to be depressed; and more likely to be satisfied with their families and school, according to the study.

Religious congregations benefit teenagers by affirming who they are, expecting a lot from them and giving them opportunities to show what they can do. Adolescents, said the Dartmouth commission, are "hard-wired to connect" to people and to God.

The commission included professors and researchers at the medical schools of Harvard and UCLA, a University of Virginia sociologist, and childrearing experts T. Berry Brazelton, Robert Coles and Michael Resnick.

Meanwhile, three research organizations have independently concluded that teenagers have become more religious or conservative. In 2001, about 3 out of 5 teenagers said religion was "pretty important" or "very important" to them, a significant increase over a decade ago, according to the research organization Child Trends, which analyzed federal data. The sharpest increase occurred among students who anticipated finishing four years of college. (*Chicago Tribune*, 4-6-04)

Studies by the Gallup Organization and the University of California at Berkeley found that teens are more likely than adults to be in favor of prayer during official school activities and restrictions on abortion. The Berkeley study found that 69% of teens support prayer at school events versus 59% of adults aged 27 to 59. Furthermore, 44% of those aged 15 to 22 support government restrictions on abortion, versus 34% of respondents older than 26. (foxnews.com, 12-9-03)

(See *Teens*, page 4)



Refuel and Revolve — Christian magazines for teens.

Project Reality Illinois Group Rewards Teen Essayists on Abstinence

More than 300 Illinoisans gathered on April 29 at the Westin O'Hare Hotel in Rosemont to celebrate the winners of Project Reality's "Teens Speak Out" essay contest and to show their support for abstinence education. Among those present were representatives from more than a dozen Chicago and suburban schools, the Illinois Department of Human Services, several area health departments, and state legislative offices. Miss America 2003 Erika Harold delivered the keynote address and presented the contest prizes.

In mid-March, Project Reality launched a statewide essay contest asking teens to share their thoughts on the positive effects of abstinence. From the more than 150 entries submitted, first-, second- and third-place winners were selected, four students were recognized with honorable mentions and one student received the "most creative" award. Cash prizes ranging from \$50 to \$750 were given and all the winners shared their essays with the audience. The essays can be read online at www.projectreality.org.

"Abstinence can go much deeper than

just a method of birth control," wrote the first-place winner, Daniel Shallcross, 17, of McHenry, IL. "A self-controlled and mature human being decides not to take part in sex before marriage to illustrate how much love he or she has for one other person on this earth."

"It's so encouraging to see such a large group of young people so supportive of the message of abstinence," said Libby Gray, director of Project Reality. "These teens are excited about abstinence and are making healthy decisions that they are proud to share with others."

Project Reality, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, has been a pioneer in the national field of adolescent health education since 1985. Funded in part by a grant through the Illinois Department of Human Services, Project Reality specializes in the development, teaching and evaluation of abstinence programs in the public schools. Project Reality serves elementary, middle and high school students, youth groups and parents with their abstinence and character education programs such as *Game Plan*, *Navigator*, *I Can Do That!* and *Parent Power*.



Daniel Shallcross and Miss America 2003 Erika Harold

EDUCATION BRIEFS

The U.S. is losing its edge in science based on the number of Americans winning scientific prizes, publishing papers in major professional journals, and obtaining patents. Countries in Europe and Asia have been gaining on the U.S. as living standards have risen around the globe, fewer Americans pursue doctorates in science, and more foreign students studying here decide to return to their native countries. (*New York Times*, 5-3-04) However, the U.S. still spends far more on research and development than any other nation and Americans still win half the Nobel prizes in science. As fewer Americans seem interested in technical careers, observers such as the *New York Times* editorial page (5-7-04) see a need to reinvigorate science education in public schools.

Vicodin, OxyContin and similar opiate painkillers are the second most popular category of recreational drug use after marijuana, according to the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. At the University of Arizona campus health center, it has become routine to prescribe Vicodin and other opiate painkillers for sore throats, back pain and other common ailments even though it is easy to become addicted to pain medication. A 2003 campus survey reported that 5% of the students there had used opiates within the past 30 days. (wildcat.arizona.edu, 3-5-04)

Head scarf controversy hits the U.S. Around the same time as internationally publicized reports of Muslim head scarf bans in French schools, an Oklahoma City-area school district suspended an 11-year-old Muslim girl last October for refusing to remove her head scarf, which violated a dress code prohibiting hats and other head coverings. Unlike the French government, however, the U.S. Justice Department filed a complaint against Muskogee Public School District alleging that it violated the equal protection clause of the Constitution by applying the dress code in an inconsistent and discriminatory manner. (Associated Press, 3-30-04)

(More Briefs on page 4)

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Ending 'Social Promotion': The Jury Is Still Out

The pros and cons of "social promotion" have been hotly debated in the New York City, Chicago and Houston school districts in recent months, as conflicting studies have emerged on the effectiveness of rules banning automatic promotion to the next grade in school.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg took flak in April for sticking with his determination that 3rd graders may not proceed to 4th grade without passing a test. The mayor fired three members of a special city panel for educational policy who opposed the plan, replacing them with more supportive appointees.

Critics of social promotion cite dozens of studies over the last two decades concluding that policies forcing students to repeat a grade are costly and counterproductive, resulting in no gains in student achievement and increases in dropout rates. New York City had such a policy in the 1980s which was quietly abandoned after a few years. (*New York Times*, 3-17-04)

More recently, two studies released April 6 concluded that Chicago's nine-year effort to end social promotion, which served as a model for Mayor Bloomberg's policy, has been enormously expensive while yielding few benefits. Anticipating those conclusions, the Chicago Board of Education voted in March to ease its promotion rules by eliminating math scores as a factor and limiting the number of years that a student would be forced to repeat. New York's plan relies on both reading and math scores and Mayor



Mayor Bloomberg

Bloomberg has vowed to retain the math requirement. (*New York Times*, 4-7-04)

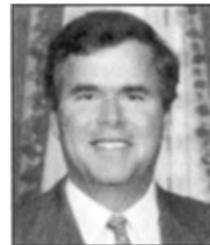
Chicago schools held back about 10,800 elementary-school pupils during the last school year. New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein said New York plans to implement programs to help pupils even before 3rd grade, which will make the plan more likely to succeed than Chicago's. (Associated Press, 4-7-04)

On the other hand, a year after Governor Jeb Bush ended social promotion in Florida, more Florida 3rd graders are reading at or above grade level than ever before. Most of the 3rd graders who were held back showed significant improvement. (*Wall Street Journal*, 4-23-04) Third grade is considered important because pupils who are not reading by then probably never will.

In addition, requiring underperforming students to attend summer school and possibly repeat a grade yields lasting improvements, especially for younger students, according to a recent study in the *Review of Economics and Statistics*. (See *Education Reporter*, May 2004.)

In Houston, after years of strengthening standards for promotion of 9th graders, the city school district reversed course in early April by restoring a former policy of promoting students based on the number of credits they have accumulated, even though they fail core subjects. The superintendent argued that holding children back in 9th grade served only to raise dropout rates. "It doesn't make sense to keep a child back until he is 17 or 18 years

(See *Promotion*, page 4)



Gov. Jeb Bush

Drugging Kids Poses Myriad Risks

Ritalin Slows Growth; Prozac Problems

The trend toward using drugs to solve children's emotional and disciplinary as well as medical problems is yielding new information on the downsides of Ritalin, antidepressants and the chickenpox vaccine.

Stimulants like Ritalin used for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may stunt children's growth, according to a new study of 540 youngsters aged 7 to 9. The children who took stimulants during the two-year study grew more than half an inch less and weighed more than 8 pounds less than those who were not medicated. It is not known whether the growth delays are temporary or permanent.

The study, which appeared in the April issue of *Pediatrics*, was led by University of California-Berkeley researcher Stephen Hinshaw and funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. ADHD

is estimated to affect 4% to 12% of U.S. school-age children. (Associated Press, 4-5-04)

FDA acts on antidepressants

The Food and Drug Administration in March requested that the makers of 10 antidepressant drugs place more explicit warnings on the labels for their medicines, asking doctors, families and caregivers to watch closely for signs of increasing depression or suicidal thinking. The move came a month after an advisory committee urged the FDA to provide clearer warnings about the possible risk of suicidal tendencies in children and adolescents taking antidepressants. The FDA's latest action includes adults as well.

Versions of Prozac, Wellbutrin, Paxil, Effexor and Zoloft are affected by the FDA's request for voluntary relabeling. The agency plans to continue to gather data on the link to suicide risk, which has not been conclusively established.

(See *Drugging*, page 4)

Book of the Month

7 Myths of Working Mothers: Why Children and (Most) Careers Just Don't Mix, Suzanne Venker, Spence Publishing, 2004, 166 pp., \$24.95.



This book intrepidly tackles rationalizations used by mothers who pursue full-time careers while their children are young. Aimed at members of the thirtysomething author's generation, *7 Myths* blends personal anecdotes, folk wisdom, media soundbites and quotes from books on women's issues to make a case for young mothers to plan their lives around their children and not vice versa.

As a mother and a former middle-school teacher, Suzanne Venker brings her experience and common sense to bear on elusive goals like "having it all," "quality day care" and 50-50 sharing of household duties. She patiently explains that there really are differences between men and women, that a second income is not usually necessary for a happy life, and that you get out of childrearing what you put into it. She dispenses practical advice about the stresses of having babies as well as uplifting evocations of how parenthood makes one a better person.

The rewards of sacrifice for the sake of family life are a recurring theme. Feminist dogma that women should put their own identity and career success ahead of all other values is exposed as a recipe for failure as a wife and mother. Despite the media support for the idea of mothers employed outside the home, statistics show that most mothers aren't buying it. Venker cites 1997 census figures indicating that only 36.3% of mothers of children under age 6 were employed full-time and year-round, and only 39.8% of mothers of children under 18 were so employed. More recent figures show a trend reported by *Time* magazine in a March 22 cover story entitled "The Case for Staying Home": From 1997 to 2000, the percentage of women participating in the labor force (including part-time work) with children less than a year old fell sharply from 59% to 53%.

The blunt-spoken marriage guru Dr. Laura Schlessinger provided the foreword for the book, writing, "There are hundreds of books explaining why it is acceptable to leave our children in the care of strangers, but very few explaining why we would all be happier if we did not. I am grateful for this book."

As with Dr. Laura, Venker's strong opinions will raise hackles in some quarters. The book is intended for a popular audience of young women, not especially for academics or high-powered professionals.

Despite the title, Venker does not argue that mothers should never do paid work — only that it is very difficult to be effective at rearing children and pursuing a full-time career at the same time. Though *7 Myths* would have benefited from more careful editing, it would make a thought-provoking gift for a bride or expectant mother.

FOCUS: Challenging the NEA on Free Speech, Fair Elections, Quality Education

By Bob Williams

The National Education Association and its Washington state affiliates have a few pet names for us at the Evergreen Freedom Foundation (EFF). Among our favorites: "Evil band of zealots," "lying dirtbags," "extremist think tank with dumb ideas," and "trolls."

We love these sweet nothings. They're proof we're doing our job and doing it well.

One of our major projects here at EFF is the pursuit of union accountability in the areas of finance and electioneering. Our work in this area began several years ago when a group of teachers asked us to help them protect their voting rights and paychecks. They wanted union officials to stop taking money from their paychecks in violation of state law to promote controversial political causes. We joined the battle because we saw three important ideals at stake: free speech, fair elections, and excellent education.



Bob Williams

Free Speech

Most of us take free speech for granted. But what if someone was diverting money from our bank account into a political fund to promote ideas we found abhorrent? The NEA and its state affiliates deduct over \$1 billion a year from the paychecks of 2.5 million teachers around the nation, and use most of it to influence the outcome of elections.

The union does not limit its political activity to issues that affect teachers, or to issues about which teachers agree. At the NEA's recent annual conventions, union delegates have addressed issues ranging from the war in Iraq, slave reparations, and U.S.-Russia relations to developing a curriculum for students that promotes homosexuality.

While many classroom teachers are unaware of the union's political agenda (officials do not make a point of exposing their controversial goals), enough educators found out about the resolution on homosexuality that a sizeable protest was organized and union officials were forced to take the curriculum plan off the vote roster. NEA's former president Bob Chase made it clear, however, that the union would continue to pursue the issue even more aggressively than before.

In other words, union officials will do what they want with teachers' money, regardless of the convictions and opinions of those teachers. In Washington state, 91% of teachers refuse to give even \$1 per month to the union's political action committee. So officials simply dip into teachers' mandatory collective bargaining dues to get money for their political activities. The only other institution with that kind of power over Americans is the Internal Revenue Service.

In Washington state, using mandatory dues and fees for politics is illegal. Officials of the NEA's state affiliate (WEA) have continued the practice, resulting in two lawsuits filed against the union by the state attorney general. The most re-

cent lawsuit earned the WEA a \$400,000 fine (and a court order to return an additional \$200,000 to teachers) in July 2002 that set a record for the largest campaign finance fine in state history. (The union broke its own previous record of a \$330,000 fine levied in 1998.)

Unfortunately, a panel of judges in the state's Court of Appeals overturned the ruling with an outrageous decision in June 2003, which said that the "right" of unions to collect money for politics trumps the free speech rights of teachers and other citizens. The paradoxical ruling said the state law protecting the free speech rights of teachers violated the union's First Amendment rights.

Hundreds of Washington citizens wrote to the attorney general asking her to appeal this decision, which she did, and it will be heard by the state supreme court this summer.

Fair Elections

Teachers aren't the only ones affected by the union's political goals. We all live with the results of elections and public policy. That's why free and fair elections are so crucial to preserving our Republic and maintaining a government that reflects the will of the people.

While the NEA has every right to involve itself in the political arena on behalf of its members, ensuring true representation requires that the union use only voluntary funds. Instead, the NEA has taken millions of dollars deducted from the paychecks of teachers who are often unaware of or unwilling to support the union's political agenda.

Our organization has been deeper into the financial books of the NEA than any other in the nation. We've spent several years and millions of dollars on the project (and there's more to be done!). What we've uncovered thus far is astounding. In Washington state alone, the NEA has 72,406 members, each of whom pays an average of \$760 a year to the union's local, regional, state and national affiliates. That means in one year, from one state, the teachers union collects about \$55 million.

After reviewing more than 60,000 of the NEA's internal financial documents, EFF estimates only 20% of this amount is used for traditional union services like collective bargaining.

With the rest of the money, NEA exercises massive influence over the outcome of elections and has become the most powerful political force in the country, skewing the political process to reflect the often radical views of a small group of elitist union officials.

The NEA has operations most political parties would envy. Nationwide, the union's political activities include get-out-the-vote drives; detailed political assessments and reports; voter identification logs; direct mass mailings; email list-building; publications from local, state and

national union affiliates; contributions to candidates; contributions to ballot initiatives; paid political staff; funding to other political and ideological organizations; funding to state affiliates; coordinated campaigning with political parties; NEA delegations at party conventions (state and national); phone banking, television, newspaper and radio campaigns; research and development; polling; purchase and operation of equipment; etc.

After the 2000 elections, NEA officials bragged about their role in winning five out of five targeted Senate races, nine out of eleven gubernatorial races, and 16 of 27 Congressional races (for a net gain of eight Democratic seats in the House).

The union sent four full-time staffers to work on Al Gore's presidential campaign in Florida, and came up with an aggressive strategy to "move" 800,000 NEA members (one third of the union's total membership) to vote for Gore. By all indications, the "redistribution" project was a success funded with mandatory dues.

This year the union is targeting 16 states with the goal of "electing a new President." Those states are Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

The NEA's support of the Democratic Party (to the tune of 95% of the union's political contributions) is old news, but according to one of the NEA's own internal polls conducted a few years ago, less than half of its members identify themselves as Democrats (48%). The rest consider themselves Republicans (24%) or Independents (28%). That means the NEA is forcing more than 1.3 million teachers (citizens) across the nation to contribute their money to a political party with which they disagree.

Quality Education

We all know a crisis exists in our public education system. Put bluntly, millions of American children are being deprived of the knowledge and skills they

need to lead successful, productive lives. We can't ignore the failing test scores, the increasing shortage of skilled and competent employees, or the fact that many of America's children do not know or value the principles that will ensure the preservation of personal and national liberty.

It wasn't too long ago that public education was doing a decent job. Students were learning how to read, write, do arithmetic, and think logically.

That was back when parents and local teachers had control over the curriculum and standards in the schools. It was before the system was monopolized by a small group of union officials who have their own radical ideas about how and what kids should learn, and who have the primary goal of keeping and expanding their power and control.

The NEA has funneled millions of dollars into state and national campaigns to defeat education reform initiatives of every stripe and color. The union fights performance pay for teachers and nonsense literacy standards. Regardless of their specific merits and demerits, most of these reforms have one thing in common: they will break the union monopoly.

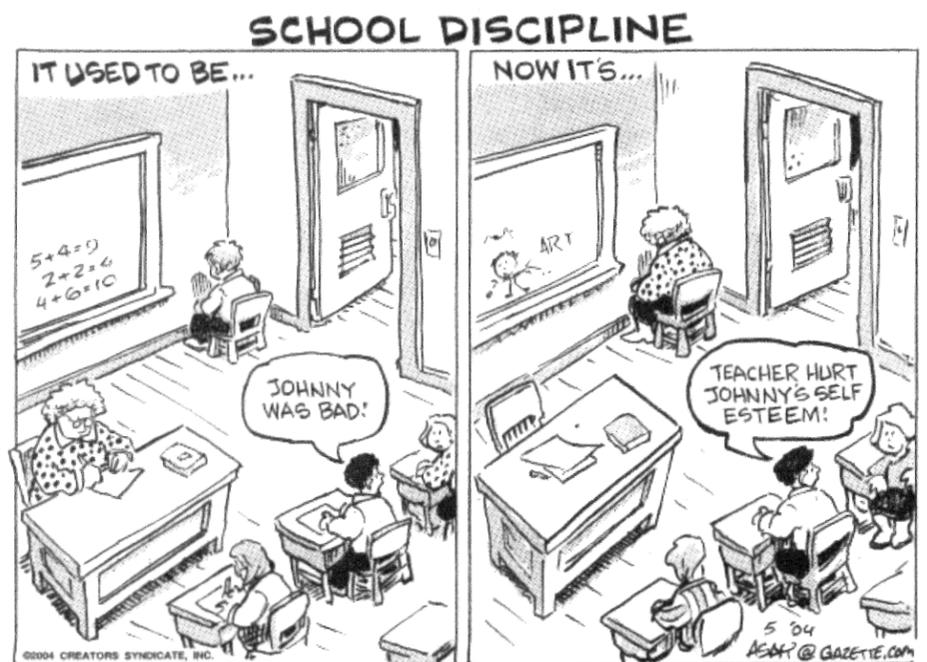
NEA officials are using children and teachers as political hostages to make sure they preserve their monopoly power and hide their real goals: more money, more members, and more power. As a result, our entire Republic is at risk.

Conclusion

True representation, free speech, fair elections, and quality education will not be restored until the union agrees to collect its political funds the old-fashioned way: by asking.

To find out about how your or your organization can help win the battle against the NEA, contact the Evergreen Freedom Foundation: PO Box 552, Olympia, WA 98507; (360)956-3482; or info@effwa.org

Bob Williams is president of the Washington state-based Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a free-market policy research organization dedicated to advancing individual liberty, free enterprise and limited government.



NEA (Continued from page 1)

on the Planned Parenthood Action Fund Federal Political Action Committee.

Frustration with the NEA is widespread among reform-minded public officials. U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige famously lashed out at the NEA as a "terrorist organization" on February 23, referring to its vituperative attacks on the No Child Left Behind Act. He later apologized but blasted the union's lobbyists for "obstructionist scare tactics."

California controversies

Days after the IRS announced its audit of the NEA last November, the NEA's California affiliate filed an initiative to raise property taxes to pay for higher teacher salaries. The measure, which collected enough signatures to appear on the November 2004 ballot, would have mandated spending \$3 billion more per year on K-12 education, of which 88% would go to teacher salaries — an \$8,800 yearly increase for every teacher in the state. It would also have forced teachers at charter schools and publicly funded preschools to join the California Teachers Association.

Following strong opposition by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and commercial property interests, the union decided in early April to withdraw the initiative.

The initiative "would pit the CTA against every other stakeholder in Cali-

fornia public education," commented Dr. Alan Bonsteel, president of California Parents for Educational Choice, last December. "Equally important is what this initiative says about an organization that claims to be nonpolitical and therefore deserving of tax-exempt status." (*Los Angeles Daily News*, 12-8-03)

Gov. Schwarzenegger also acted decisively to stop taxpayer funding of a particular form of union advocacy. He cut \$2 million from an allocation for the University of California's Institute for Labor and Employment, and in April he proposed to eliminate it entirely next year. The institute is a *bête noire* of industry groups, who call it "Union U" because of its aggressive advocacy of organized labor. (*Los Angeles Times*, 4-8-04)



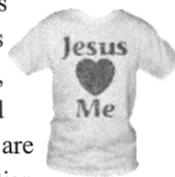
Schwarzenegger

A new book, *Battling Corruption in America's Public Schools* by Lydia G. Segal, exposes the "legal graft" endemic to the nation's three largest urban school districts (New York, Chicago and Los Angeles). The book makes it clear that unions are part of the problem. In New York, for instance, school custodians for many years put their wives on the payroll as no-show secretaries and used Jeeps purchased for "snow removal" as their personal property year-round. Union leaders confronted about such venality would respond: "It's in the contract."

Teens (Continued from page 1)

These data confirm a trend toward religion observed in secondary schools and higher education. The number of high school Bible clubs has surged to about 15,000 over the last decade, and Christian colleges are seeing enrollment increase at three times the rate of other degree-granting schools. (*Chicago Tribune*, 4-6-04) This newspaper previously reported on an annual survey of college freshmen indicating that the percentage of conservatives has risen to 21% and some 80% have recently attended a church service, up from a low of 69%. (See *Education Reporter*, Mar. 2004.)

Pop culture has picked up on the religious trend. T-shirts with slogans like "Jesus loves me," "Dead to Sin, Alive to Christ" and "Mary Is My Homegirl" are selling briskly, and Christian rock bands sell their music in malls. A teen-targeted "Biblezine" edition of the New Testament, which includes reviews of Christian bands and pop quizzes such as "Are you dating a Godly guy?" has sold more than 300,000 copies since last July. Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ" has sold more than \$360 million in tickets since its February opening. (*Wall Street Journal*, 4-5-04)



Promotion (Continued from page 2)

old because he passed all his subjects except one," Kaye Stripling said. Students must still pass core subjects before graduation. (*New York Times*, 4-9-04)

More than 4 in 10 of Houston's 9th graders are over age. In New York, 5,569 students are 17 or older — 5% of all 9th graders. The typical entering freshman is 14. (*nypost.com*, 3-19-04) Sitting 17-year-olds next to 14-year-olds probably exacerbates disciplinary problems.

With such conflicting information, it is hard to say whether ending social promotion is a good idea or not. The answer may depend on additional factors, such as whether the school district provides extra help to the underperforming students and the age at which the student may be forced to repeat a grade.

Underperformance is not the only source of overage students. Parents seeking an academic or athletic edge for their children often postpone entry into kindergarten so that their children are older than their peers. The percentage of first graders who were 7 or older was 22% in October 2002, up from 13% in 1970, according to the Census Bureau. During the same period, the number of 1st graders 5 or younger declined by 4.5 percentage points. Boys and whites are more likely to be held back. This trend creates problems of its own, including boredom, misbehavior and the challenges of teaching a more disparate group. (*New York Times*, 4-25-04)

Briefs (Continued from page 2)

The "outlandish" claim that Muslim explorers preceded Christopher Columbus to North America and became Algonquin chiefs has been removed from new copies of an Arab studies guide for U.S. teachers at the insistence of the Algonquin Indian tribe. The 540-page book has been promoted to school districts in 155 U.S. cities by the Middle East Policy Council in Washington, DC. Some 1,200 teachers have been given erroneous versions of the "Arab World Studies Notebook" in the last five years. (*Washington Times*, 4-16-04)

Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or ODD syndrome, is the latest medical label for children exhibiting defiance, provocative conduct and disobedience. First identified by the American Psychiatric Association in the 1980s, its appearance as a diagnosis has increased substantially recently. An estimated 6% of U.S. children have the disorder. (*telegraph.co.uk*, 4-11-04)

A phonics-based reading program is credited with transforming Rachel Carson Elementary into one of Chicago's best schools, along with the leadership of its principal, Kathleen Mayer, a caring school environment and strong parent-community ties to the school. In the decade since it opened with no books or furniture, Mayer has eliminated gangs and raised the attendance rate of the low-income student body to nearly 98%. Even though some classes contain 30 or more students, test scores are rising, and more than two-thirds of students meet or exceed the national average in reading and math. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 4-19-04)

Drugging (Continued from page 2)

The suicide issue was first raised last year by regulators in Britain, who declared non-Prozac antidepressants unsuitable for depressed youth. Last October, the FDA warned doctors to watch for suicidal thinking and suicide attempts among adolescents and children taking any of a number of antidepressants. (See *Education Reporter*, Feb. 2004.) Parents subsequently gave emotional testimony to an FDA advisory panel concerning cases such as a 13-year-old boy who hanged himself in his bedroom closet after taking his seventh Zoloft.

The drugs may cause agitation, anxiety and hostility in some young patients who may be unusually prone to rare side effects, the FDA concluded. Some doctors theorize that antidepressants relieve the lethargy of depression before they relieve the feeling of hopelessness, making the patient more likely to take drastic action.

The rate of diagnosis of depression in children and adolescents more than doubled from the early 1990s to 2001, and the rate of antidepressant prescriptions for them more than tripled, according to statistics presented to a recent American Psychiatric Association convention in New York. A resolution will be presented to the American Medical Association meeting in June calling for federal regulators to allow access to unpublished studies by pharmaceutical companies,

which could contain more negative information than has previously been made public. (*Wall Street Journal*, 5-5-04)

Children aged 5 and younger are the fastest-growing segment of the youth population using antidepressants today, according to a study published in *Psychiatric Services*. (See also *Education Reporter*, April 2004.) However, usage is far greater among teenagers. In 2002, nearly 6.4% of U.S. girls and 4.2% of boys aged 15 to 18 were taking antidepressants, the study found.

Australian researchers have concluded that pediatricians and family physicians should not prescribe antidepressants for depressed children and adolescents because the drugs barely work and their side effects are often significant. Five published trials of Prozac, Zoloft and Paxil found only a "very modest" benefit over placebos. The report appeared in the British medical journal *BMJ* on April 9. "What this shows is that, on balance, there is no good reason to prescribe these pills," said Dr. Joseph Glenmullen, author of *Prozac Backlash*. (*New York Times*, 4-9-04)

Second thoughts on vaccine?

The latest child-vaccine controversy concerns the chickenpox vaccine, which is now required by schools in many states and is usually administered in a shot at 12 months of age. It is

claimed that thousands of hospitalizations and nearly 100 lives per year are saved by the vaccine. However, about 10% of the vaccinated children are inadequately protected, and even among those who are well protected at first, the immunity tends to wear off over time. The March issue of *Pediatrics* reported a chickenpox outbreak in Portland, OR, where children who received the vaccine more than five years before the outbreak were nearly seven times as likely to contract the illness as those vaccinated in the previous five years.

"We are facing some of the quandaries that thoughtful opponents of this vaccine foresaw years ago," writes health columnist Jane Brody. Fading immunity could result in severe problems as the vaccinated population ages. Chickenpox symptoms tend to be far more severe in people older than 13, and women vaccinated as infants could contract chickenpox during pregnancy, possibly harming the fetus. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 4-5-04)

These potential serious consequences to vaccinated persons would not occur if they had instead acquired immunity by having the disease in childhood, because that immunity would generally not wear off. Having chickenpox is also believed to boost immunity to shingles, which tends to strike late in life. It is not yet known whether the vaccine offers the same benefit. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1-27-04)