

EDUCATION REPORTER

NUMBER 237

THE NEWSPAPER OF EDUCATION RIGHTS

OCTOBER 2005

The State of Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic *Literacy Remains a Big Hurdle*

Far too many U.S. students are not being taught to read, national test scores and analysts indicate. As a result, Americans are at a disadvantage in the global economy.

Toyota Motor Corp. made headlines in July when it announced plans to build a new plant in Canada instead of the Deep South, where it was offered far greater governmental subsidies. The principal reason offered by industry experts was that Ontarians are easier and cheaper to train.

'Pictorials' for illiterate workers

A low-skill and often illiterate workforce reportedly has posed problems for automotive manufacturers Nissan and Honda in Mississippi and Alabama plants in recent years. In Alabama, trainers had to use "pictorials" to teach some illiterate workers how to use high-tech plant equipment.

"The educational level and the skill level of the people down there is so much lower than it is in Ontario," said Gerry Fedchun, president of the Automotive Parts Manufacturers' Association. (The Canadian Press, 8-29-05)

College students who 'don't read'

Illiteracy is not confined to blue-collar workers in rural states or inner-city schools. It looms as a pressing issue even in some colleges. In a documentary aired on PBS in June, Western Kentucky University history professor Nathan Phelps lamented, "We have students who don't read, period. They don't read anything from newspapers to books, and they come here expecting to somehow get through their college course work without changing. It's a real problem." (*Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*)

U.S. 17- and 13-year-olds are reading as poorly as ever, according to the 2004 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) released in August. The silver lining is that 9-year-olds posted their best scores in more than three decades and the gap between white students and minorities narrowed. The Bush administration claims some credit for these gains, which occurred about a year after the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) went into effect.

Only half of ACT test-takers have adequate college-level skills in reading comprehension, the ACT testing service reported when releasing its 2005 scores in August. One reason given is that only 56% of the test takers took a college-prep curriculum, even fewer than five years ago.

"Hundreds of thousands are going to have a hard time because of the disconnect between their plans for college and the cold reality of their readiness for col-

lege," said Richard Ferguson, CEO. The ACT is the predominant college entrance exam in about half the states, mostly in the middle part of the country. (Associated Press, 8-17-05)

Fewer than half proficient

NCLB sets a deadline of 2014 for bringing all grade-school students to proficiency in reading. A report by the RAND Corp. last winter suggested "major concerns about the ability of states to meet the ambitious goal" set by NCLB. Examining data on state assessments and the NAEP, the researchers found "fewer than half the students meet the proficiency standards, and in no state do even half the students meet the NAEP national literacy standard of proficiency."

Thousands of high school students in Florida, for instance, still can't read. "High schools were never designed to teach reading," said Raymond Gaines, supervisor of secondary education for

(See *Reading*, page 4)



Political Correctness Corrupts Math

Even as numerous other countries outperform American students in math, trendy educators have begun incorporating theories of social justice and ethnic studies into math instruction. No longer content to disparage drills of math facts, the "critical theorists" now in the ascendency use math textbooks as a tool to advance a political agenda.

A new text, *Rethinking Mathematics: Teaching Social Justice by the Numbers*, covers such topics as "Sweatshop Accounting," "Chicanos Have Math in Their Blood," "The Transnational Capital Auction," "Multicultural Math," and "Home Buying While Brown or Black." Units of study include racial profiling, the war in Iraq, corporate control of the media, and environmental racism.

'Ethnomathematics'

As explained by New York University education historian Diane Ravitch,

"Social justice math relies on political and cultural relevance to guide math instruction. One of its precepts is 'ethnomathematics,' that is, the belief that different cultures have evolved different ways of using mathematics, and that students will learn best if taught in the ways

that relate to their ancestral culture. From this perspective, traditional mathematics . . . is the property of Western Civilization and is inexorably linked with the values of the oppressors and the conquerors." (*Wall Street*

Journal, 6-20-05)

"Ethnomathematics seems to have spawned directly from the minds of America's 'bash white males' contingent," writes African-American columnist Gregory Kane, quoting with approval Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s blunt comment, "Once you get into this multicultural crap, this bunk that some folks are teaching in our college campuses and in other places, you run into a problem." (*Baltimore Sun*, 6-2-05)

See *Education Reporter*, Feb. 2005 for coverage of the "anti-racist multicultural math" controversy in Newton, MA as well as international comparisons of math achievement.

Ethnomathematics appears to hold little appeal for Asian or Asian-American students, whose math test scores regularly outclass those of other ethnic groups. At Quincy High School in Massachusetts, the school population is 22% Asian while the math club is 94.4% Asian, many of whom arrived with no English-language skills. "Math is a universal language," notes math department head Evelyn Ryan. (*New York Times*, 5-18-05)

Latest test results

While ethnomathematics sounds like a bad joke, the lagging achievement of American students in math and science is no laughing matter as employers increasingly draw from a global workforce. In an AP-AOL News poll released in August, almost four in ten Americans surveyed said they hated math in school – double the number who hated any other subject. 2005 ACT scores indicated that only 41% of the test-takers (who aspire to go to college) are likely to succeed in a college math course.

On the bright side, the latest NAEP math test scores for 9-year-olds are the highest since the math test was first given in 1973, mirroring the results of the reading test (see reading article this page). Likewise with math scores for 13-year-olds, but 17-year-olds have made no progress in three decades.

(See *Arithmetic*, page 4)



Writing is New Focus of Instruction As Students Prepare for Essay Tests

Writing is a skill that is more difficult to assess by objective measures than reading or math. It seems safe to assume, however, that American students aren't writing any better than they are reading, and we know that too many aren't reading well. (See reading article this page.)

Some \$221 million of taxpayer money is spent every year teaching state government employees remedial writing because it is taught badly in the public schools. So says a report from the National Commission on Writing released in July. Corporations spend as much as \$3.1 billion annually on remedial writing for employees.

"Long ago, the schools stopped teaching how to plan before you write," charges educator Judi Kesselman-Turkel, author of the new book *Secrets to Writing Great Papers*. "The best professional writers know that writing is 80% knowing what you want to say and organizing how to say it precisely, concisely and in a sentence sequence that your reader will be able to follow."

Controversial SAT section

The addition of a 25-minute essay to the SAT I this year has given new urgency to teaching writing, both in schools and through private tutors and test-preparation firms. (See *Education Reporter*,

Apr. 2005.) The other major standardized college entrance exam, the ACT, has added an optional writing component. Despite the enormous cost of paying graders to score about 1.4 million essays every year, the College Board (which administers the SAT) is urging colleges not to use the SAT essay scores at all in determining admissions this year, and few colleges have asked to see the essays. (*Wall Street Journal*, 8-31-05)

The writing test represents part of the College Board's response to a threat by the University of California president in 2001 to drop the SAT I requirement in favor of the then-SAT II writing test and other SAT II achievement tests because he felt the SAT I was unfair to minorities and low-income students.

Hardly anyone now thinks that the revamped SAT I will boost minority or low-income students' scores. In fact, the Center for Fair & Open Testing asserts that so few colleges asked for the SAT II writing test "in part because it was a weak predictor of college grades, especially for blacks and Latinos." (*Washington Post*, 3-6-05) The Georgetown University dean of undergraduate admissions has said that the essay "will create more barriers to poor kids who are less well-prepared."

(See *Writing*, page 4)



EDUCATION BRIEFS

NYC expands successful ban on social promotion. Noting that his threat to hold back failing 3rd- and 5th-graders had spurred record increases in reading and math scores, New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg announced in July that he will extend the policy to 7th-graders.

High school class work is not very difficult, says a large majority of students in an online nationwide survey of teenagers conducted by the National Governors Association. Almost two-thirds say they would work harder if courses were more demanding or interesting, according to the survey results released in July.

64% of Americans believe creationism should be taught alongside evolution, according to a Pew Research Center poll released in August. The summer also saw President George W. Bush and Senate Majority leader Bill Frist (R-TN) indicate support for teaching "intelligent design" along with evolution. Austrian Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn wrote in the *New York Times* in July that Catholicism requires belief in "purpose and design in the natural world," not an "unguided" evolutionary process. A poll by the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Social and Religious Research found that 60% of physicians reject the Darwinian view that humans evolved without any supernatural involvement and 65% of physicians believe that "intelligent design" should be allowed or required to be taught along with evolution.

British school allows up to five f-words per class. Parents were informed in August of the astonishing policy of Weavers School in Wellingborough, Northamptonshire. Once the limit is exceeded, "the class will be spoken to by the teacher at the end of the lesson." Some parents called the rule "ludicrous." "What next?" asked a member of Parliament. "Do we allow people to speed five times or burgle five times?" (dailymail.co.uk, 8-29-05)

U.S. schools now teach an estimated 9 million students who don't speak English, and the number is increasing by almost 1 million a year. (*Washington Times*, 6-19-05)

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, fax (314) 721-3373. Editor: Liza Forshaw. 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: education@eagleforum.org

College 'Gender Gaps': Why Worry?

Differences Between Sexes Are To Be Expected

Three kinds of gender gaps currently claim the attention of higher education officials: the trend of substantially higher enrollment of women in college relative to men; the "underrepresentation" of women in the ranks of upper-tier math and science faculty; and the lesser number of women interested in playing sports, which poses problems for colleges under the federal government's interpretation of Title IX.

In the reigning ideology of academe, differences in numerical representation of men and women are considered a pathology, something that cries out to be corrected. Yet there is no reason to think any of these three gender gaps represents a genuine social problem.

78 men per 100 women

By 2000 there were only 78 male registrants for every 100 female registrants in degree-granting institutions, a phenomenon dubbed "the disappearing male college student" or "the Lost Boys." In Maine, which has the lowest rate of men in higher education, there were 154 women in college per 100 men in 2003. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Utah, with 100 men for every 98 women. (*Bangor Daily News*, 4-1-05)

Some observers have blamed the declining male-female ratio on an anti-male culture on campuses, cuts in men's sports due to Title IX pressures (more on that later), and the predominantly female leadership of elementary and high schools. Boys are four times as likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and there is a well-documented gender gap in reading. (*See Education Reporter*, Apr. 2005.)

Male enrollment hasn't dropped

While all these observations contain a kernel of truth, closer scrutiny of the statistics reveals that male enrollment hasn't really fallen; instead, female enrollment in college has soared. Between 1967 and 2000, the proportion of men aged 18 to 24 who were enrolled in college remained essentially flat, barely declining from 33.1% to 32.6% according to Census figures. Meanwhile, the proportion of women doubled, from 19.2% to 38.4%. So women's overrepresentation on campus has not come at the expense of men.

The male-female disparity is especially pronounced among low-income students. Some 68% of college enrollees from low-income families are female, according to Jacqueline King, author of the study *Gender Equity in Higher Education: Are Male Students at a Disadvantage?* She explains that male students with a high school diploma can make a decent living doing manual labor, for example in the thriving construction industry.

Other possible explanations include the much higher participation by men in the armed forces, which accept large numbers of high school graduates, and the significant percentage of low-income men who are caught up in the criminal-justice system.

The gender gap in reading is not new, although it has increased in recent years. Evidence of such a gap dates back to the 19th century and is a transnational phenomenon. British education professor Stephen Gorard examined reading scores for 22 countries and discovered gender gaps in every one. (*Washington Post*, 3-15-05)

College not for everyone

Although educators should make every effort to interest boys in reading and to encourage higher education for those able and willing to undertake it, we should not kid ourselves that college makes sense for everyone. Building houses or defending the country in



combat — jobs men can do far more effectively than women — is at least as honorable an occupation as sitting at a desk. Men's average earning power and accession to positions of authority still far outpace women's.

As a Colorado commentator notes, "many college graduates of all races earn less than people who rewire their houses or weld heavy equipment." (*rockymountainnews.com*, 8-28-05)

In short, the current gender disparity in college enrollment is not evidence of a problem except for college women seeking dates. And dates are still easy to find in engineering schools, where men outnumber women about 4 to 1 despite affirmative action for female engineers. That brings us to the second issue — the underrepresentation of women in math and science faculty.

Flying of Larry Summers

Harvard President Larry Summers faced a firestorm for gently suggesting last January that there could be few top-tier female math and science professors in part because of differences in "intrinsic aptitude" between the sexes. Nothing in Summers' illustrious career as an economist, U.S. Treasury Secretary and feisty university president had prepared him for feminist professors' intolerance of his views.

Not only did he abjectly apologize, he committed \$50 million over the next decade to improve the climate for women on the Harvard campus. New diversity administrators and more affirmative action for women and minority faculty appear to be the chief solutions to the non-problem of women's underrepresentation on the Harvard faculty.

(*See Gender Gaps*, page 3)

Book of the Month



Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, J. K. Rowling, Arthur A. Levine Books, 2005, 652 pps., \$29.99.



The publication of the sixth Harry Potter novel presents an opportunity to reflect on the series' phenomenal success as well as its detractors. From the beginning, J. K. Rowling's books have taken arrows from some conservative Christian groups. The most common accusations are that the books promote witchcraft and that they do not clearly define good and evil.

The main characters in the Harry Potter series are indeed wizards and witches. Yes, spells are used; yes, the author probably researched occult materials to give her work more credibility.

But before condemning these aspects out of hand, critics would do well to recall why witchcraft is forbidden to Christians. The reason is that humans, who lack the natural ability to fly unaided or foretell the future or change into animals, would be able to do so only if they were assisted by evil spirits. If, however, the book takes as a premise the idea that some humans are gifted with supernatural powers, surely there is nothing intrinsically wrong with using those powers. If one argues that writers shouldn't attribute such powers to humans, then most other fairy tales and fantasy stories would have to be thrown out too. Nowhere in the series do we find invocations to evil spirits, and divination is treated as a fraud for the most part.

The argument that the books do not clearly define good and evil can only be made by people who have not actually read the books. The whole point of the story is that the innocent Harry Potter is pitted against the evil wizard Voldemort. The virtues of friendship, loyalty, courage and kindness are continually praised, while cruelty, pride and greed are condemned. It's true that Harry and his friends do some low-level schoolboy lying and cheating, but perfect heroes are rare in real life.

The sixth book continues the trend, beginning with the fourth book, of darker themes and more deaths. The quality of writing and the storytelling have consistently improved throughout the series, and the sixth installment is no exception. Its popularity is a well-deserved testament to the author's creative powers and dedication to her work amid the distractions of celebrity and fortune.

We all owe Rowling thanks for making a whole generation of children want to read long books. At a time when the California Assembly thinks school books should be limited to 200 pages (see p. 4), that is a real accomplishment.

FOCUS: Should Raunchy be the Fourth R?

Parents should keep a close eye on what fiction their teens are reading.

by Warren Throckmorton, Ph.D.



Warren Throckmorton

School is just around the corner. Awaiting anxious students are new schedules, new teachers, new challenges and in some school districts, old controversies about what books should be read in school. Wow, where did the summer go?

School districts have been facing challenges over what should be in the library as long as there have been libraries, but recent changes in the world of children's literature and our society have focused the debates on matters of teen sexuality. A recent MSNBC story regarding adolescent reading material describes growing parental concern over the explicit nature of books aimed at young teens.

Correspondent Janet Shamlian reports on some recent hot-selling teen titles: "In *Claiming Georgia Tate*, a father has sex with his daughter. In *Rainbow Party*, teens make plans for an oral sex party. And in *Teach Me*, out next week and seemingly ripped from the day's headlines, there's a student-teacher affair."

While I am not aware of challenges to any of these specific books, if they find their way into schools, there prob-

ably will be. Recent disputes over books in Lexington, MA, Pleasant Valley, IA and Columbus, OH have divided communities and led to legal action.

Perhaps the mother of all of these disputes over school reading material is in Fayetteville, AR. Laurie Taylor, mother of two school-age children, recently found numerous volumes of fiction that vividly described sexual acts of all sorts.

Doing It features teacher-pupil sex, *Rainbow Boys* describes adult-teen unprotected sex, and *Choke*, uncovering the world of sexaholics, was graphic enough to have portions excerpted in *Playboy*. Perhaps the worst find was *Push* by author Sapphire. Filled with graphic sex, perhaps the low point is the lead character's description of sex with an infant.

Taylor is formally challenging these and other fiction books with similar content. She is not asking that the school remove all of the books permanently from the shelves, she simply wants librarians to gain a parent's permission before allowing children to have them. She also wants the school to follow its own review policy while access is mediated by

parents. The Fayetteville schools have a policy that requires the school to review materials parents find objectionable.

For these reasonable requests, she has been pilloried in the local press as narrow-minded and bigoted. The school district has received a veiled threat of a lawsuit from national groups including the National Coalition Against Censorship.

Is Taylor overreacting? Should these books be in public school libraries? Before I throw in my view, let me jump back to the MSNBC story on racy teen novels. Reporter Shamlian writes: "Experts say books like these are gratuitous — even dangerous — and parents need to know that." She then quotes a specialist in adolescent psychiatry, Dr. John Sargent: "They buy it, thinking they're doing something nice for their kid, when, in fact, they have no clue what it is they're exposing their kid to."

I agree with Sargent. Of course such reading material can be counterproduc-

tive to a healthy view of sexuality. Some of these books normalize and even glamorize sexual behavior that most educators and parents would like to prevent. Surely there are other ways to provide an education on topics touched by these books. What should public schools do about such gratuitous material?

Where a review panel of parents and teachers cannot agree about the appropriateness of a contested book, then parental permission should be required in order to read it. If teachers want to use explicit portions of contested books, then parents should be notified. Schools should allow parents to have a clue what their kids are exposed to. Such a policy does no violence to free speech, nor is it censorship.

If some parents want "raunchy" to join readin', 'ritin' and 'rithmetic, they are free to buy their own children sexually explicit material for consumption at home.

Warren Throckmorton, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Psychology and Fellow for Psychology and Public Policy in the Center for Vision and Values at Grove City College in Pennsylvania.

Gender Gaps (Continued from page 2)

7:1 ratio for SAT math 800

Lost in the feminist demands for Summers' head were some hard facts about the gender gap in math test scores and enrollment in advanced math and science courses. Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve*, emerged from scholarly seclusion to point out that based on a large-scale sample of mathematically gifted youths, there appear to be about seven times as many boys as girls who score in the top percentile (800) on the SAT math test. (*Commentary* magazine, Sept. 2005)

The 2005 ACT test results show three times as many boys as girls in the 33-36 range for math (36 is the top score), and twice as many boys as girls in that high range for science. (Confirming the reading gender gap mentioned earlier, girls easily outnumbered boys in English and reading scores in the 33-36 range.)

Boys have long outperformed girls on average on math tests, but the difference at the high end is much more striking. The pool from which Harvard math and physics professors is drawn is probably a high subset of SAT 800s and ACT 36s.

Many more boys in AP math

Recent statistics from Massachusetts corroborate some enduring differences between boys and girls regarding math. Girls scored an average of 36 points lower on the SAT math test last year (which is scaled from 200 to 800), and Advanced Placement math classes in Massachusetts schools contain twice as many boys as

girls. (*Boston Globe*, 6-5-05)

So there is nothing surprising about the fact that fewer women than men are deemed qualified to teach math, science or engineering at Harvard, and Summers' \$50 million diversity initiative is money down the drain. It is about as futile as efforts to interest as many women as men in playing college sports.

Title IX futility

Colleges were required to make the male-female ratio in their sports programs equal to the ratio in their student bodies under a novel interpretation of Title IX of the Civil Rights Act by the Clinton administration in the 1990s. These rules have become even more onerous as female enrollment in college has risen as described above; the current nationwide ratio is about 56% female to 44% male.

All over the country, colleges failed to find enough women athletes and were forced to terminate men's teams. Such high-demand, successful programs as the men's swimming and diving teams at UCLA (which produced 22 Olympic medalists) and men's baseball at historically black Howard University bit the dust. Wrestling was a particular casualty of this policy, with 171 colleges dropping their wrestling teams despite wrestling's low cost relative to other sports.

In June the U.S. Supreme Court let stand a decision holding that the Department of Education's Title IX rules were not directly to blame for cuts to men's teams in various sports, chiefly wrestling, at colleges

since the 1980s. The appeals court for the District of Columbia circuit ruled that the coaches should take up their complaints with the colleges, not with the federal agency. The plaintiff organization vows to continue its fight. (*National Wrestling Coaches Association v. Department of Education*)

Even women's teams aren't safe

The Title IX rules have even resulted in the elimination of some women's teams. Some 100 women's gymnastics teams (which are small) have been axed in favor of large-squad sports such as rowing.

The Bush administration last spring relaxed the Title IX rules slightly by per-

mitting e-mail surveys of student interest in sports to establish compliance. (See *Education Reporter*, June 2005.) This is a start, but does not address the fundamental error of assuming that men and women should be equally represented in all human endeavors.

Sworn Statement of Ownership

The Education Reporter is published monthly at 7800 Bonhomme, St. Louis, MO 63105.

Publisher: Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund, 7800 Bonhomme, St. Louis, MO 63105. Known bondholders, mortgages, or other security holders: none. Information on circulation not required as no advertising is carried.



Dress Codes As Likely to Apply To Teachers as to Students

In a society where Northwestern University women's lacrosse team members feel free to wear flip-flops to meet the President in the White House, some schools find it necessary to impose dress codes on teachers, not just on students.

Austin, TX schools adopted a policy in 2004 prohibiting teachers from wearing tank tops, spaghetti straps, hats, flip-flops, slippers, shorts, spandex, leggings or anything that resembles an undergarment. Shirts designed to be tucked in must be tucked in, ties are encouraged, and belt loops require a belt. (*American-Statesman*, 7-2-04)

Short skirts, jeans, T-shirts or baseball caps are out in some districts. Clothing that exposes "cleavage, private parts, the midriff or undergarments" is verboten in District 11 in Colorado Springs, CO.

In Miller County, GA, skirts must reach the knee. Elsewhere in Georgia, hair curlers are forbidden in Harris County and male teachers in Talbot County must wear ties two or three times a week. Male teachers in Houston's Aldine Independent School District must keep their hair above the collar and avoid Fu Manchu mustaches.

"There's an impression that teachers are dressing more and more — well, the good term for it would be 'relaxed,'" said Bill Scharffe, an official with the Michigan Association of School Boards. "Another term for it would be 'sloppy.'" He once sent home a teacher whose belt buckle sported a marijuana leaf. (*Associated Press*, 7-3-05)



Schools are older hands with student clothing regulations. While such policies typically reflect common sense and community values, they face occasional legal challenges. In Belleville, IL, two high schools prevailed against a federal court challenge in August concerning a new policy mandating shirts in school colors and slacks or skirts in navy, khaki or black that cover the lower torso.

In denying a preliminary injunction, the district judge found that the school board did not violate parents' rights as claimed by the plaintiffs, who included a professor at Washington University in St. Louis. The district racked up an estimated \$33,000 in legal fees to defend the dress code, which the plaintiffs may be asked to pay.

Arithmetic (Continued from page 1)

Wanted: math/science grads

A national business coalition in late July announced a goal of doubling the number of American graduates in math, science, technology and engineering in the next decade. Headed by Business Roundtable, the group called the decline in the number of U.S. students pursuing higher education in those subjects "a national problem that demands national leadership."

Microsoft, Intel and IBM have established operations in China and India, each of which countries graduates many more engineers than the U.S. "There's no doubt that if we had easier hiring here in the U.S., we would be doing more in the U.S. and less outside the U.S.," insists Microsoft chairman Bill Gates. (*Wall Street Journal*, 5-5-04)

Better career paths needed?

However, if America really wants more engineers, maybe would-be employers need to develop better career paths for engineers. Stanford University scientist Christopher R. Moylan perceives no surplus of engineering jobs in Silicon Valley. In a letter to the editor to the *San Jose Mercury News*, he asked, "Why should my students major in a field where they will be stuck in a cubicle, only to be laid off every four years, while the folks from marketing are off playing golf with customers?" (4-4-05)

"Given the time and effort of becoming an engineer, who wants to be unemployed every few years?" asked engineer-

ing manager James Finkel in a letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal* (5-11-05). "Because engineering salaries barely keep track with inflation, why choose your lifetime salary the day you graduate from college? One college classmate of mine with a master's degree was featured in a *New York Times* article as making just \$45,000 after 20 years. By the way, he was being laid off."

Princeton University engineering dean

Maria Klawe told Gates in a July international faculty forum that most students she talks to fear computer science would doom them to isolating workdays fraught with boredom, doing nothing but writing reams of code. (*Associated Press*, 7-19-05)

U.S. creativity advantage

The U.S. continues to hold one advantage over Asian countries in math and science: creativity. When the Japanese Ministry of Education sent three visitors to the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut, the center's director asked why they had come when Japan has the highest scores in the world on international achievement comparisons.

Their reply: "We have no Nobel Prize winners. Your schools have produced a continuous flow of inventors, designers, entrepreneurs and innovative leaders. We can make anything you invent faster, cheaper and, in most cases, better. But we want to learn" about "creative productivity." (*Education Week*, 5-5-05)



Reading (Continued from page 1)

Seminole County schools. "But because we have a flood of kids who can't read, we are being forced to refocus." Officials there have embarked on a costly experiment to determine what reading method works best. (*Orlando Sentinel*, 1-1-05)

But evidence has been mounting for decades that phonics works best. Phonics experts such as G. Reid Lyon, director of reading research at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (part of the National Institutes of Health), and University of Oregon professors Doug Carnine, Siegfried Englemann and Ed Kame'enui have used that evidence to influence the Bush administration's push for "scientifically based" reading instruction.

Teach phonics, not 'context guessing'

Remedial reading educator Linda Schrock Taylor notes that "once a new or delayed reader develops a firm basis in handling the code in which English is written, limits to reading at ever higher levels are removed." Eschewing politically correct textbooks, she reports, "I do not choose reading selections with any illustrations or photographs since I believe that my job is to teach reading, not globalization, art appreciation or context guessing." (*LewRockwell.com*, 12-13-04)

Yet education-college habits favoring discredited whole-language reading methods die hard. In one recent case, a phonics program introduced to the Lewis Lemon public school in Rockford, IL in 2001 worked wonders on the overwhelmingly low-income and minority students' test scores. The 3rd-graders ranked second of all 35 Rockford elementary schools and higher than the state average in 2003.

In 2004, a new superintendent and curriculum director inexplicably demanded a switch to a whole-language reading program — which is not endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education because the department endorses only programs supported by research — and the

successful principal was transferred and demoted. Members of the school's Parent-Teacher Organization executive board have protested to the school board. (*School Reform News*, Mar. 2005)

Other countries' experience

The United Kingdom education secretary in June ordered British schools to try phonics a month after a damning report from members of Parliament stated that illiteracy was "unacceptably high." Amid concern that one in five 11-year-old Britons are unable to read or write properly, Secretary Ruth Kelly said, "The debate now centers not on whether to teach phonics, but how." (*thesun.co.uk*, 6-3-05)

The phenomenal success of Indian immigrant families in U.S. spelling bees has been partly attributed to differences in educational styles between the U.S. and India, including reading methods. "Unlike many American children who are schooled in sometimes amorphous whole-language approaches to reading and writing, Indians are comfortable with the rote-learning methods of their homeland," wrote Joseph Berger in the *New York Times* (5-5-05).

CA solution: shorter books?

A decidedly non-Indian way to tackle the problem of illiteracy is to ban long books. That was the goal of the California assemblymen who voted in May to outlaw school purchases of textbooks and other instructional materials longer than 200 pages — which would rule out, for instance, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. AB 756 passed the house by a vote of 42-28, with most Republicans opposing it.

Sponsor Jackie Goldberg (D-Los Angeles), who chairs the assembly education committee, explained none too persuasively: "We're talking about a dynamic education system that brings young people into being a part of the learning process." (*Sacramento Bee*, 5-27-05) The measure has not passed the state senate.

Writing (Continued from page 1)

(*USA Today*, 2-23-05)

Several colleges threw up their hands and joined the more than 700 institutions that don't require standardized tests for admission. (*New York Times*, 5-15-05)

Grammar to make a comeback

Still, the College Board predicts that the new essay requirement will spur greater attention to writing, and many educators welcome the change. College Board surveys found a 13% decline in teaching formal grammar in high school in the past decade. (*Boston Globe*, 4-3-05) In addition to the essay, the new SAT I includes multiple-choice grammar questions that account for 75% of the writing score.

"Many members of the college community feel that student writing skills have been declining, that students do not have basic, essential skills," Long Island University official Gary Bergman told *Newsday* (2-8-05). The writing test will give secondary schools "an opportunity to strengthen the curriculum to help students do better in critical writing."

The National Council of Teachers of

English (NCTE) disagrees. In a May report, a task force charged that the "short, impromptu, holistically scored essay" is a poor predictor of college performance, and sample essays on the College Board web site are "focused on conventional truisms and platitudes about life."

The director of undergraduate writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluded that the scoring approach used by the College Board consistently rewards length and avoids penalizing students for stating incorrect facts. (*New York Times*, 5-4-05)

Essay-grading software?

A subjectively graded essay is inherently problematic for nationwide standardized testing. It could be worse, though: Computer software is now being used to grade essays for high school English teachers and the GMAT business school admissions test. (*Associated Press*, 5-10-05)

In any case, a return to grammar instruction — repudiated by the NCTE in 1985, to the detriment of untold millions of students — is bound to help the cause of good writing.