

# EDUCATION REPORTER

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## 'Rubber Rooms' Gone, But Idle NY Teachers Still Getting Salaries

### Bad Publicity Spurs Agreement

In a much-ballyhooed announcement last April, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the city's teachers' union agreed to scrap "rubber rooms" full of teachers accused of misconduct or incompetence, and to accelerate disciplinary hearings that often dragged on for years. The rooms, officially called reassignment centers, had become a public relations nightmare for both Bloomberg and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), as reports proliferated of teachers playing cards, sleeping or running businesses out of the rooms, all while they continued to draw full salaries.

The city of New York was paying in excess of \$30 million a year to more than 700 teachers and administrators at the time of the deal. Under the agreement, teachers were to be assigned administrative or other non-classroom duties until their cases were resolved. The arrangement also set new deadlines to speed hearings, and increased the number of arbitrators from 23 to 39 to wipe out the backlog of cases by the end of 2010.

"This was an absurd and expensive abuse of tenure. We've been able to solve what was one of the most divisive issues in our school system," said Bloomberg at a self-congratulatory press conference.

### Success Overstated

Recent reports reveal, however, that the pronouncement of success may have been overstated. Though the number of teachers and administrators still in reassignment was down to 236 in mid-November, those with cases still pending were either doing menial make-work projects or remained idle.

"They told me to sit in a little chair in a corner and never get up and walk

around," said Hal Lanse, a teacher from Queens accused of sexual harassment. The \$100,000-a-year teacher was assigned to an administrative office but was charged with insubordination when he refused to get off the couch where he was dozing to "paper-clip some papers." At last report, Lanse was collecting his full salary from home with plans to retire in January 2011. "There are indeed still rubber rooms," he told the *New York Times*. "They just don't call them that."

Verona Gill, a \$100,000-a-year special education teacher the city is trying to fire, spent the first two weeks of the school year sitting around the Lower Manhattan education offices waiting for an assignment. Then she was sent to another office to hand out language exams that very few people came to pick up.

She spent the next few months in a cubicle in Downtown Brooklyn with a broken computer. "I have no projects to do, so I sit there until 2:50 p.m. — that's six hours and 50 minutes [the official length of the teacher workday]. And then I swipe out," she said.

### Real Problem Remains Unaddressed

While the agreement between Bloomberg and the union may have given both parties a temporary public relations boost, in reality it did little to change the lengthy and laborious process required to fire teachers, especially those charged with incompetence rather than malfeasance. The union actually conceded very little in the deal; a combination of state tenure laws and union rules ensure that administrators must still spend months or even years documenting poor performance or gathering witness testimonies

and other evidence of wrongdoing.

Dan Weisberg, a former labor chief for the Department of Education, was not impressed with the Bloomberg/UFT agreement. "The problem we should be trying to solve is that there are huge barriers that still exist to terminate chronically ineffective teachers. This agreement doesn't appear to address that at all," he said, speaking as the current vice president of the New Teacher Project, a group that wants better teacher evaluations and a simpler dismissal process.

Despite spending \$2 million to hire attorneys to help principals fire bad teachers, New York has managed to fire only three teachers for incompetence in the last two years. Misconduct is a little easier to prove; 45 teachers were let go for offenses including corporal punishment, sexual harassment or criminal behavior.

While they wait for their cases to be

(See *Rubber Rooms*, page 4)



## Mexican-American Studies Conflict Heats Up

### New Law Took Effect January 1

On his last day as superintendent of public instruction in Arizona, Tom Horne announced his finding that the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) is in violation of a new law that bans public school courses that promote resentment towards a race or class of people or encourage the overthrow of the United States government. The law also prohibits courses designed primarily for a particular ethnic group or that promote ethnic solidarity rather than treating people as individuals. Failure to eliminate the controversial Mexican-American Studies program within 60 days will cost TUSD 10% of its state aid, or about \$15 million annually.

The new law took effect on the first day of 2011, and no one was surprised at Horne's move to enforce the statute he

helped write and pushed hard for over his two terms as superintendent. In his ten-page statement detailing TUSD's violation of the new law, Horne approvingly noted that Arizona's curriculum requires students to learn about the contributions of different cultures, including that of Mexican-Americans. Nevertheless, he said, "Students should not be divided by race, with each race learning about only its own contribution."

Horne's replacement, John Huppenthal, has indicated he is serious

about keeping pressure on the district to comply with the new law. Huppenthal said



he agrees that the Mexican-American ethnic studies program violates the law if it is substantially the same as when he observed a class in 2009. "My firsthand, classroom en-

counter clearly revealed an unbalanced, politicized, and historically inaccurate view of American history being taught," said the former state legislator.

The law permits the district to appeal Horne's decision, but TUSD ethnic studies teachers did not wait for the law to take effect before fighting back. In October they filed a lawsuit in federal court challenging the new law on the grounds that it violates the first and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments of the Constitution, particularly the equal protection and due process clauses. The filing states that the teachers "believe that the act is the product of racial bias aimed specifically at Hispanics, is unlawful, [and] results in impermissible deprivations of rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution." The suit also contends that Horne doesn't have evidence to prove that the Mexican-American courses break the new law.

### Making a Case

Horne does offer evidence in his January determination letter, however — seven pages worth of teacher testimony, student testimony and damning examples from the written materials used in the classes. A former teacher familiar with

(See *Mexican-American*, page 4)

## Zero Tolerance Nonsense Continues

Recent disciplinary actions taken against students in three different states once again highlight disproportionate punishment for minor or unintended infractions under zero tolerance weapon policies in schools. Even when school policies permit leniency based on context, some officials insist on taking a hard line for petty violations.

### No Toy Guns Even on Sunday

In Kansas, fifth-grader Alyssa Cornish was suspended in mid-September for the remainder of the semester for playing with another child's toy gun on the playground of her school. Shawnee Mission school district officials said it did not matter that the incident occurred on a Sunday when school was not in session.

The school board declined to modify the suspension period for the straight-A student council member, saying that the rules against weapons of any kind on school grounds are ironclad.

The girl's mother, Tracey Cornish, expressed concern that the long-term suspension would make it difficult for Alyssa to catch up during the second half of the school year. "She's very bright," Cornish said, "but is she going to be able to walk back in after four months and be where the rest of those children are academically?"

### High-School Hunter Forgot Gun in Her Trunk

In Montana, teenage hunter Demari DeReu forgot to remove an unloaded

hunting rifle from her car before returning to her high school after the Thanksgiving break. The rifle was locked in a case in the trunk and there was no ammunition in the car.

The 16-year-old remembered the gun was still in her car when school officials announced a lockdown for a routine contraband search on December 1. DeReu told school officials about her predicament before the search began, expecting to be allowed to move her car off school



(See *Zero Tolerance*, page 4)

## EDUCATION BRIEFS

The Texas NAACP has asked the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to review the new social studies standards approved by the Texas State Board of Education. The NAACP wants to prevent the implementation of standards it considers "racially or ethnically offensive." The complaint also charges the state of Texas with a general "miseducation" of minority students and with administering discipline in a disparate manner to minorities. (*The Houston Chronicle*, 12-20-10)

Middle and high school students in Oregon may now use computer spell check on state writing tests. State Superintendent Susan Castillo said the program helps catch typos that should not affect the evaluation of student writing ability. The program won't automatically correct words, but will provide options for students to choose from. (*edweek.org*, 12-16-10)

Vallejo Unified School District officials insist parents cannot opt their children out of pro-homosexual "anti-bullying" movies to be shown to students from kindergarten through fifth-grade. Parents pointed out that California law says they can opt their children out of sex education classes. Public information officer Tish Busselle countered, "This is not sex education. It is education about respecting differences." The district agreed to the "mandatory diversity training" for faculty and students to avoid a lawsuit threatened by the ACLU on behalf of an openly gay student who said faculty and staff harassed her. (*wnd.com*, 12-3-10)

The Montana Supreme Court said a Butte High School valedictorian's constitutional rights of free speech and freedom of religion were violated when she was not allowed to mention God or Christ in her graduation speech. Writing for the 6-1 majority, Justice Patricia Cotter said the district was unreasonable to conclude that Renee Griffith's "cursory references to her personal religious beliefs" could be viewed as a religious endorsement by the school district. (*Associated Press*, 11-22-10)

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## Honors Class Flunks 'Diversity'

After weeks of debate, an Illinois school board voted unanimously to drop an elite freshman humanities class reserved for the highest-achieving incoming freshman because too few minorities took the class. The honors course was open to students who outscored 95% of their peers nationally on eighth-grade tests. The problem? Almost all qualifying students were white.

Evanston Township High School (ETHS) is one of the most racially mixed schools in Illinois, with a student body that is 43% white, 32% black, and 17% Hispanic. The school has a mission of embracing diversity, promoting equity, and driving excellence for all students. Apparently the predominantly white honors class did not fit well with those first two priorities.

Starting next fall, high-achieving freshman will be combined with students who score at or above the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile on the national tests in a newly formatted class. Administrators insist the class will be taught at the honors level, and say all students will have an opportunity to earn honors credit based on their grades. The district will likely apply the same approach to freshman biology courses in 2012-2013.

The plan comes at a time when the high school is undergoing a major academic overhaul due to its repeated failure to meet federally mandated educational standards, despite spending more than \$20,000 per student annually.

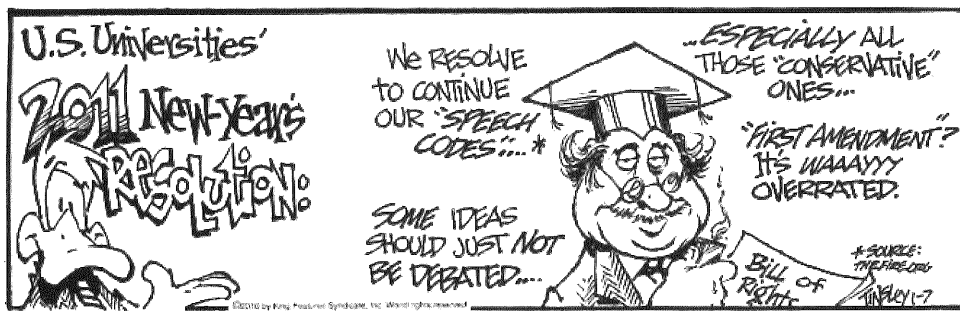
Some parents expressed skepticism. Mindy Wallis, parent of two honors students, presented the board with a petition signed by 442 people appealing to the board not to cut the elite class. She pointed out that the school already combines students of various academic levels in the required humanities course — except for those in the top 5%.

Another parent, Karen Young, agreed and suggested the board wait until the district completed its evaluation of changes made to the humanities course just two years ago.

Superintendent Eric Witherspoon urged the board to approve the measure, saying he looked forward to the end of racially segregated classes. He contended the plan would help meet the school board's stated commitment to "equity" while "eliminating the racial predictability of achievement." The board's published

(See *Diversity*, page 4)

## MALLARD FILLMORE / by Bruce Tinsley



## Head Start Frosts Santa Out

Head Start officials in St. Peter, Minnesota gave Santa the "heave-ho-ho-ho," according to the *Mankato Free Press*. Dennis Jackson said he was told "it was against some people's wishes" for him to don the red suit and visit with about three-dozen children enrolled in two Head Start classes this year. Jackson has distributed candy to children in the program at his own expense for the past four years.

"It kind of burnt me up," said Jackson, speculating that excessive cultural sensitivity to immigrant families who don't celebrate Christmas was behind the action. Chris Marben, coordinator for regional Head Start programs administered through the Minnesota Valley Action Council, confirmed his suspicions. "The simple truth is that southern Minnesota has become a much more culturally diverse society than it was a few decades ago. Part of our challenge in Head Start is providing an environment where young children from many different cultures can all feel comfortable," she said.

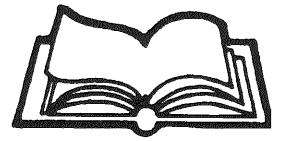
Marben specifically mentioned respecting the wishes of [Muslim] Somalis in the program, though she did not specify how many parents had objected. She indicated that if more than one family opposed the celebration, then that would be sufficient to cancel the event.

Jackson countered that children from other cultures had enjoyed his playing Santa with them in years past, and blamed their parents for being unreasonable. "They're not respecting the majority," he said. "My feeling is [objecting families] can take their kids out of class for half an hour and let the other kids enjoy it. They should sacrifice, not rule."

In the face of community backlash, two Somalian parents with kids in the program came forward to say they agree

(See *No Santa*, page 4)

## Book of the Month



**Debt-Free U**, Zac Bissonnette, Portfolio/Penguin 2010, 290 pages, \$16.

Personal finance writer and college senior Zac Bissonnette provides college-bound students with a smart and amusing guide to paying for college without loans, scholarships, or "mooching off" parents.

This book upends the conventional wisdom about college at every turn with solid research and uncommon sense. For example, Bissonnette explains why the people most students turn to for advice on choosing a college — high-school guidance counselors, admissions officers, and financial aid officers — can't be trusted. The crux of the matter is that these folks get paid to look out for their employers, not for students and parents.

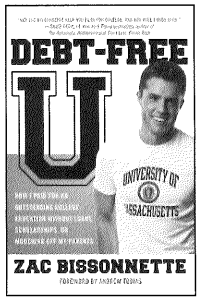
Readers will learn about the dangers of student loans and why college debt isn't the solid investment most people assume it is, especially now that wages are stagnant. Bissonnette has an especially pointed message for well-meaning parents who loot their own retirement savings for their kids: "You're insane. . . . One of the best gifts you can give your children is your own financial independence in your golden years." Actually, much of the book is aimed at parents.

Bissonnette asserts that college rankings are an effective tool to sell magazines and books, but not for selecting a school. The good news is that going to college somewhere is much more important than where. That means schools with lower price tags can propel career prospects just as well as pricey elite institutions.

To back up that claim, the author cites a study that tracked students who were accepted both to top-tier Yale and to lower-tier Rutgers. Twenty years into their careers, those who went to Rutgers (most likely for financial reasons) earned, on average, just as much as the Yale graduates. Need more evidence? Twelve of the top 20 CEOs in the U.S. went to public universities.

One of the biggest cost-saving moves is to attend a community college for the first two years and then transfer to another school. Despite what many people think, some of the most selective four-year colleges in the nation accept students transferring from community colleges; in fact they actively recruit those students.

So how can parents and students pay for college without debt? Ultimately Bissonnette suggests an old-fashioned approach: parents can contribute money they save by cutting back on nonessential luxuries. Students can work, both during the school year and more extensively during school breaks. Overall, great advice from a guy who has lived it himself.





# FOCUS: The War on Academic Achievement

By Robert Weissberg

Judged by all the billions of dollars now flowing into “education reform,” it appears that Washington, and especially the Obama administration, is obsessed with improving academic achievement. The billions are certainly real enough, but the intent is just the opposite. Rhetoric aside, the Obama administration, like Bush II’s before it, is *profoundly* opposed to brainpower. Our “commitment” to academic excellence is a cruel joke — we love stupidity and hate smart kids. Tellingly, not even “conservatives” who bemoan America’s educational decline will admit this awkward reality — they, too, are passengers on this reform gravy train heading to the bottom.

Consider a small item that appeared in a blog regarding the Jacob Javits Talented and Education Act, an Act whose title suggests helping young Einsteins and junior Keplers become America’s future scientists and engineers. The program has always been financially uncertain, even occasionally canceled, and the current plan was to roll its \$7.5-million annual appropriation into the Institute for Education Sciences, where no guarantee exists that the funds would go for high achievers.

Still, it might be argued that since super-smart kids are few in number and hardly require lavish facilities, even \$7.5 million would help. This is a truly embarrassing lie that sheds enormous light on

how Washington regards America’s brainpower.

First, compare the proposed \$7.5 million to the \$11.5 billion that the national government spent in fiscal 2010 for disabled school-aged children. Given this staggering ratio, a visiting Martian might conclude that American schools consisted of a huge mass of disabled youngsters and an infinitesimal handful of smart ones. If we include all the other multi-billion-dollar programs targeting the least able, e.g., Head Start (\$7.23 billion in 2010) and Title I (\$13 billion that is now part of No Child Left Behind), one would never guess that the intellectually gifted actually exist (by definition 5% of all students). Imagine if a private firm embraced this grossly upside-down investment strategy. Our overseas rivals are probably convulsing with laughter.

Second, the Javits program, title aside, is not targeting smart kids—just the reverse. It attempts to uncover gifted children among minorities conspicuously absent in traditional, test-driven gifted programs. This uplift-the-bottom mission is explicit:

The major emphasis of the program is on serving students traditionally underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, particularly economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient (LEP), and disabled students, to help reduce the serious gap in achievement among certain groups of students at the highest levels of achievement.

This needle-in-a-haystack commitment is taken seriously, though evidence of any successes is scarce or nonexistent. In 2006, for example, Page, Arizona received \$340,000 for “Buried Treasure,” a project that sought to uncover gifted children equally across the school district’s demography — *i.e.*, gifted quotas. Meanwhile, Denver, Colorado got \$123,000 for “Take Five,” which involves coordinating efforts among multiple government agencies and university faculty to increase the number of gifted children from low-income and/or minority groups. Iowa educators received \$319,000 to help the “twice exceptional child” — that is, the youngster who is both intellectually talented and learning disabled. Countless similar grants to uncover disadvantaged students who might be gifted have been awarded to schools in Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Texas, and Wyoming.

Third, not content to deprive smart kids of federal money, Washington, beginning with George W. Bush but continuing with Obama, is forcing states to starve their already puny gifted programs.

This is accomplished not by outright prohibitions on helping smart kids; that would be too obvious. Rather, Washington’s mega-billion-dollar bribes coerce states to uplift the bottom, including closing racial gaps, if they want to keep the money flowing, and since Washington provides no financial incentives to help brainy kids, gifted programs are cannibalized. So putting Young Einstein back into Math 1 is

perfectly rational for cash-starved school districts. The only losers are the poor (and probably white or Asian) parents of intellectually talented kids, a constituency with no heft in today’s political battles.

This carnage began with Bush’s No Child Left Behind and continues unabated. In 2002, Michigan aid for the gifted fell from \$4 million a year to \$250,000. In Illinois, funding collapsed from \$19 million per year to zero, while New York also dropped to zero from \$14 million. Oregon’s commitment likewise dropped to zero after years of funding. In Connecticut, one in four school districts abandoned gifted programs altogether. In Missouri, the state subsidy for gifted went from 75% to 58% of local outlays. By 2006, eight states offered nothing, while another six states spend less than \$500,000 — not even a pittance in today’s educational world.

Finally, the education establishment loathes programs for the gifted. These classes are uniformly attacked as elitist, exclusionary, racially segregated, and, oddly, subverting the education of less talented students — as if education were a zero-sum game, so if a smart student advances, a less able student necessarily falls behind. Many professional educators even dispute the very idea of some people being smarter than others.

Others flat-out lie. Carolyn Callahan, who heads up the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, claims that blacks and Hispanics are excluded from gifted programs since they lack adequate pre-schooling and decent nutrition (somebody should tell her about Head Start, food stamps, and subsidized school meals). Even erstwhile champions of gifted education embrace the egalitarian fantasy. Del Siegle, the president of the National Association for Gifted Children, called for modifying No Child

Left Behind at the group’s national convention so as to provide more help for minority gifted children. If we include ACLU lawsuits attacking gifted programs for their lack of diversity, it’s a miracle that any still exist.

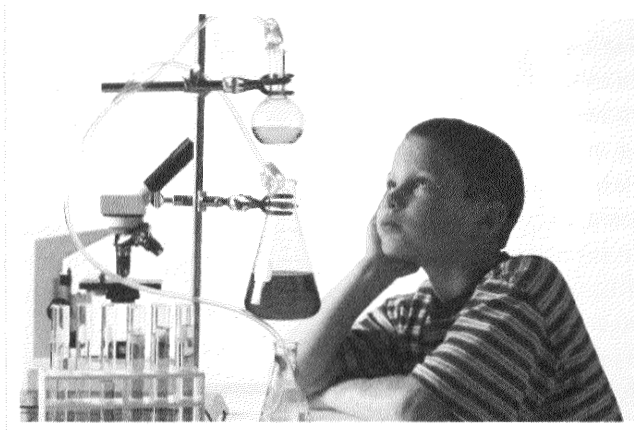
What permits the U.S. to maintain its current intellectual edge is that it imports brains almost as heavily as it imports oil. Visit any top research university (or Silicon Valley)

and you will observe that students in the hard sciences are disproportionately Asian, Russian, or Indian immigrants, or the children of those recently arrived. In 2006, 35% of all Ph.D.s went to foreign-born researchers, but non-citizens earned 43% of the doctorates in science and engineering and 70% of the Ph.D.s in electrical, civil, and industrial/mechanical engineering. In other engineering fields plus math, computer science, and physics, the figure was “only” 50%. Among university science and engineering faculty, 19% are born overseas; in engineering, this figure was a little more than a third. The Kauffman Foundation tracks this “foreign” contribution to American industry, and it is indisputable that we survive thanks to imported brains.

Like foreign oil, this cannot last. China and Japan now try to keep top scientific talent home, and our European rivals, Australia and New Zealand, are actively recruiting those who once automatically came to the U.S. In a decade or so, the homegrown talent may have to suffice, and all the wages of neglect will come due. Will today’s low achievers save us in 2030? Perhaps only a miracle, such as civil strife in China, will restore the flow of brains, much as German refugees in the late 1930s reinvigorated American science.

To invoke an old cliché, with friends of academic excellence like Bush II and Obama, who needs enemies?

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**Rubber Rooms** (Continued from page 1)

adjudicated, teachers typically enjoy full pay and benefits. Meanwhile, districts must employ substitute teachers, case investigators, and arbitrators in addition to paying the accused teachers. Costs can easily run from \$300,000-\$400,000 to fire one bad teacher when continued salaries and benefits are taken into account.

Astonishingly, even the most egregious cases don't always result in a firing. For example,

Roland Pierre was arrested on felony sex-abuse charges after allegedly molesting a sixth-grade girl in an empty classroom in 1997. According to the *New York Post*, Pierre has collected \$97,101 a year in salary and health, pension, and vacation benefits for a job he hasn't done for the past 13 years. Officials declined to provide details, but apparently the criminal charges against Pierre were dropped and an Education Department disciplinary case was thrown out "on a technicality." Hired in 1986, Pierre could have retired at age 62, the same year charges were filed against him, but he continues on the payroll even now at age 75 because the Department of Education has no mandatory retirement age.

In another egregious case, Queens teacher Francisco Olivares, 61, was accused of showing a 12-year-old porn, photographing her with her pants down, and rubbing up against another 12-year-old girl. His conviction was reversed on a technicality. Olivares collected his \$94,154 salary for seven years before retiring last year. He should have been fired two decades before he was finally sent to the "rubber room." The Education Department botched a case against him all the way back in 1978 when he impregnated a 16-year-old student; he avoided rape charges by marrying the girl and re-

mained in the classroom until he was caught molesting other young girls.

**Laid Off Teachers Get Full Pay Too**

Those accused of incompetence and wrongdoing aren't the only teachers collecting salaries for not working in New York. The state also continues to pay about 1,100 teachers who lost their jobs due to budget cuts or because their school was shut down for dismal performance. These teachers remain on the city's payroll at full salary as part of the Absent Teacher Reserve Pool, an arrangement that costs New York City taxpayers roughly \$100 million annually — more than three times the amount "rubber room" teachers were getting at the time the Bloomberg/UFT agreement was signed last April.

Former Schools Chancellor Joel Klein pressed for the power to regulate how long laid off teachers could collect their full salaries while waiting in the Absent Teacher Reserve Pool for a new job, but state legislators would not back him. Thus another policy of paying New York City teachers not to work remains in place.

Stephen Sawchuk, writing for *Education Week's* blog "Teacher Beat," summed up the Bloomberg/UFT agreement: "In agreeing to assign these teachers to other work, the United Federation of Teachers and the district essentially bypassed the larger philosophical question: Should teachers awaiting a dismissal hearing have their pay suspended pending an outcome?"

Sawchuk might also have asked: What is the point of laying off teachers to make up budget shortfalls or to close a failing school when they continue to receive full salaries indefinitely? (*New York Times*, 12-7-10, 4-15-10; *New York Post*, 12-26-10; blogs.edweek.org, 9-10-10)



Roland Pierre

**Mexican-American** (Continued from page 1)

the classes, John Ward, said, "TUSD uses taxpayer-funded programs to indoctrinate students, based primarily on ethnic divisions, in the belief that there is a war against Latino culture perpetrated by a white, racist, capitalist system." Ward also charged TUSD administrators with intimidating him and calling him a "racist" for questioning the program curriculum, despite his own Hispanic heritage.

The finding letter also relates the comments of a student who appeared before the Arizona Senate Judiciary Committee to testify how much she loved Mexican-American studies. When a senator asked the girl whether she could have learned the things she spoke about in other courses she replied, "No, before I took this course, I didn't realize that I was oppressed. Now that I took this course, I realize that I am oppressed."

Horne's memorandum also lists numerous examples from course textbooks and handouts. A major theme of the course materials is the assertion that the United States is wrongfully occupying former Mexican territory. The states of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Colorado are considered part of Aztlán, the Chicano homeland. Writing samples provided to the students include the sentence, "We are slowly taking back Aztlán as our numbers multiply."

A study unit called "Conquest and Colonización" states: "We will see how

Chicanos became a colonized people. In the process of being colonized, we were robbed of land and other resources." Another class resource titled "A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in School" blatantly promotes resentment based on race. "We often hear people referred to as being privileged, which usually is a comment pertaining to the individual's financial or economic status," it reads. "In Courageous Conversation, however, privilege takes on a different meaning:

it refers to the amount of melanin in a person's skin, hair and eyes." Reading materials also urge students to reject "White ways" and not to buy into the myth that educational and personal gains can be attributed to individual effort and accomplishment.

**Compliance Requires Elimination**

Horne believes that the violations delineated in the new law are so "deeply rooted" in the long-standing Mexican-American studies courses that they cannot be rectified. His finding letter made it clear that "partial adjustments will not constitute compliance. Only the elimination of the program will constitute compliance."

Horne also noted that he had received complaints only about the Mexican-American program; therefore, the African-American and Native Indian ethnic study programs could continue. (*Education Week*, 1-3-11 and 1-4-11)



Tom Horne

**Diversity** (Continued from page 2)

"Equity Statement" also expresses commitment to ensuring all staff members "examine and eliminate institutional beliefs, policies, practices, and teaching that perpetuate racial disparities in achievement."

Research findings on combining students at different academic levels vary. Some studies say mixed-level initiatives have increased minority performance, but others find average

and high-achieving students are harmed. A 2008 study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago noted that average and high-ability students missed more class days after Chicago Public Schools eliminated remedial classes and required all students to take college-preparatory courses in 1997. (*Chicago Tribune*, 12-14-10 and 11-23-10)

**Zero-Tolerance** (Continued from page 1)

grounds or take the gun home, as a teacher had previously told her would be permitted under such a circumstance. Instead, she was escorted from her classroom and informed that she would be suspended.

School District 6 policy, which is based on the federal Gun-Free Schools Act and state law, requires a minimum one-year expulsion for bringing a firearm to school, but the board of trustees has latitude to modify the punishment. In this instance, board members unanimously ruled to allow DeReu to return to class and to expunge her record at the end of the school year.

Near the end of the hearing, some board members tried to reassure DeReu, an honor roll student and student council member, that her college career would not be affected by the incident. An emotional DeReu explained the suspension had al-

ready harmed her academic record. "At this point I don't have any teachers, I'm teaching myself. It's not fair for me to hear this isn't going to affect my college education when I already have two Fs," she said in tears.

**Lunch Bag Mix-Up**

Senior Ashley Smithwick of Sanford, North Carolina found herself expelled and charged with a misdemeanor possession of a weapon on school grounds when her principal found a small paring knife in her lunchbox. Smithwick said she accidentally grabbed her father's lunchbox instead of her own that day, and her father corroborated her account. "It's just an honest mistake," said Joe Smithwick. "That was supposed to be my lunch because it was a whole apple." (Father and daughter have matching lunchboxes.)

Lee County Superintendent Jeff Moss

stood by the suspension meted out by Smithwick's principal, who had leeway to consider the situation and determine appropriate discipline according to school policy. When a reporter pressed Moss about an exception in the policy for utensils used solely for food preparation, he responded with his own question. "If you look at everything in your kitchen drawer, would you classify that as OK to take to school?" asked Moss.

Smithwick is being permitted to complete her coursework online and graduate with her class, but is worried the episode will affect her college prospects. "When you have a criminal record, no school's going to look at you," she said. She had hoped to play college soccer as well. "I'm good at playing soccer and that talent is just wasted now," she lamented. (nbc17.com, 1-5-11; wnd.com, 12-7-10; wral.com, 12-28-10; flatheadbeacon.com, 12-14-10)

**No Santa** (Cont. from page 2)

with Jackson, and claimed that Head Start officials have unfairly made their ethnic group scapegoats. Fanah Adam said respect for varied beliefs and customs is a two-way street, and that children with objecting parents should simply not participate. "Santa and the families [were] not the decision-makers; Head Start administrators are who sent Santa away," Adam said.

The other parent who came forward, Lul Ahmed, called St. Peter a "lovely community where we live together," and said Somalis there did not want to be seen as negative. Both Adam and Ahmed want program administrators to acknowledge their error in canceling the event. "They need to make an apology. They need to correct this mess," said Ahmed. (Mankatofreepress.com, 12-14-10 and 12-22-10)