

## New Diagnosis Guidelines to Change the Face of Autism

An upcoming revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (D.S.M.), the standard reference work used in research, treatment, and insurance decisions for mental health patients, is expected to change the way autism and related disorders are diagnosed. It's an important change given that tens of thousands of people rely on such diagnoses for access to financial, health, and educational assistance; the revisions are expected to significantly narrow the definition of autism. Not only will it become more difficult for new people to get access to such assistance in the future, but many of those who rely on it now will lose access if they do not meet the new criteria. It's also an important change for the many people for whom over-diagnosis and misdiagnosis have resulted in the loss of countless personal and professional opportunities.

Autism rates have skyrocketed in recent decades. In 1993, just 1 in 10,000 children was diagnosed with autism. Today that number is closer to 1 in 100, leading some autism research advocacy groups to call the disorder "the fastest-growing developmental disability in the United States."

The increased numbers are at least partially the result of changes in the definition of the condition and in the way it is diagnosed. Definitions have broadened in recent years in order to give more people access to taxpayer funded intervention programs. The new D.S.M. revisions will address those changes — and while it's not known yet how much the new guidelines will narrow the definition of autism, some believe the new D.S.M. will effectively end the surge in diagnoses.

At least a million people have already been diagnosed with autism and its related disorders, Asperger syndrome and "pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified" (P.D.D.-N.O.S.). The revised D.S.M. would consolidate all three diagnoses under the heading "autism spectrum disorder," and would significantly narrow the criteria for diagnosis. The American Psychiatric Association, the group tasked with drafting the changes to the D.S.M., explained in a January 2012 statement:

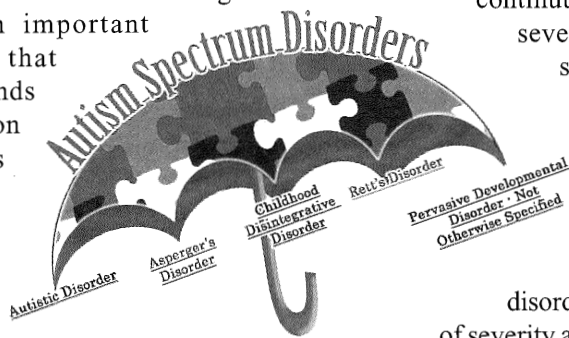
The proposal by the DSM-5 Neurodevelopmental Work Group recommends a new category called autism spectrum disorder which would incorporate several previously separate diagnoses, including

autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified.

The proposal asserts that symptoms of these four disorders represent a continuum from mild to severe, rather than a simple yes or no diagnosis to a specific disorder. The proposed diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder specify a range of severity as well as describe the individual's overall developmental status—in social communication and other relevant cognitive and motor behaviors.

"From a clinical standpoint, I feel as though the proposed change better matches the spectrum of symptoms that we see," said Dr. Annie Spell, a Lafayette clinical child psychologist and Autism Society of Acadiana board member. "In terms of the effects of the change —

(See *Autism Guidelines*, page 4)



## Civil Rights Office May Unwittingly Help End Affirmative Action

Just two months after the Department of Justice and Education issued new federal guidance documents promoting the consideration of race in school admissions, the Supreme Court is set to review a case that may end educational affirmative action once and for all.

*Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* will mark the first time the Supreme Court has revisited its rulings on affirmative action in public college admissions in nearly a decade. Lawyers for Abigail Noel Fisher, a Texas student who says she was denied admission to the University of Texas at Austin, say the University's admissions plan relies on an overly-extended interpretation of *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the 2003 case in which judges ruled that the University of Michigan Law School could use race as a factor in admissions in order to help the school achieve racial diversity. The University of Texas seeks to achieve diversity not only among each entering class of students, but also across the major fields of study and at the classroom level — an extension of the "Grutter principle" that some argue is unconstitutional.

Abigail Fisher believes this overex-

tension is the reason she was denied admission to the University in 2008. Adam Liptak explained in the *New York Times*:

Ms. Fisher's argument is that Texas cannot have it both ways. Having implemented a race-neutral program to increase minority admissions, she says, Texas may not supplement it with a race-conscious one. Texas officials said the additional effort was needed to make sure that individual classrooms contained a "critical mass" of minority students.

Fisher's lawyers agree that it's time for the Court to "clarify or reconsider" *Grutter* "to restore the integrity of the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection." They also argued that the new federal

guidance documents outlining admissible racially-based admissions guidelines mean the Court needs to revisit its rulings. Ironically, then, the new guidelines may indirectly help to abolish the affirmative action policies

they were written to encourage.

This isn't the first time the University of Texas has played a role in the dispute over race-based college admissions. Minority enrollment in the University started dropping after the Fifth Circuit Court struck down the University's race-based policies in 1996. The Texas legislature responded in 1997 with the "Top Ten Percent Law," which required Texas state universities to automatically admit students who had finished in the top ten percent of the class at a Texas high school. This increased minority enrollment, and the policy is still in effect today.

Both opponents and supporters of affirmative action say the Court's decision to hear *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* may signal its desire to do away with higher education's habit of considering race in admissions decisions. "I think it's ominous," said Columbia University President Lee Bollinger. "It threatens to undo several decades of effort within higher education to build a more integrated and just and educationally enriched environment." Hans von Spakovsky, a legal fellow at the Heritage Foundation, welcomes the fall of affirmative action: "Any form of discrimination, whether it's for or against, is wrong."

The makeup of the Supreme Court has changed significantly since it last examined affirmative action in 2003, and many believe the new justices are unlikely to tolerate current admissions practices. Justice Alito, for example, has previously voted against the use of racial classification. Chief Justice Roberts has also argued against such practices before. In a 2007 decision limiting the use of race to achieve integration in school districts he wrote, "Racial balancing is not transformed from 'patently unconstitutional' to a compelling state interest simply by relabeling it 'racial diversity.'"



## States Line Up for NCLB Waivers

Twenty-six more states and the District of Columbia are applying for waivers to avoid penalties for failing to meet benchmarks required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Eleven states have already been granted waivers in exchange for adopting key reforms favored by the Obama administration, including tying teacher evaluations to student performance and taking aggressive steps to improve academic performance for English learners and various at-risk subgroups. The remaining states have until September 6th to apply for waivers.

Faced with penalties such as busing students to better-performing schools, offering tutoring, and replacing staff, many states jumped at President Obama's promise to offer them flexibility in exchange for high performance standards. Critics say the administration has simply substituted a long list of their own preferred prescriptive measures for those of NCLB.

Shortly after the first ten states were granted waivers, Rick Hess, an education policy analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, declared that "one only had to read Duncan's complicated, jargon-laden, finger-wagging letters to the ten approved states to see just how prescriptive the process is . . . Just for starters, it would appear that the waiver 'winners' just promised to adopt narrow, prescriptive teacher evaluation and school im-

provement policies that apply to charter schools as well as district schools."

Hess has also been among those who accused Education Secretary Arne Duncan of flouting the Constitution by imposing "wholly new requirements that exist nowhere in federal law" on states seeking NCLB waivers. So far, most states have meekly accepted this act of executive overreach, but others such as New Hampshire and Maine have said they need more time to determine whether the waiver requirements make sense for their rural states.

California is a notable exception. The state department of education has recommended state officials seek relief outside of the waiver process, and without the strings they regard as unrealistic and burdensome. California has already agreed to adopt the Common Core Standards and joined a consortium of states creating tests based on those standards. But officials believe overhauling the state's accountability system at the same time new standards and tests are in the works is too costly and makes no sense, according to state education department spokesman Paul Hefner.

Duncan has warned that he will enforce NCLB penalties on states that do not obtain and comply with the terms of his department's waivers. (EdWeek.org, 2-10-12 and 2-29-12)



# EDUCATION BRIEFS

**A North Carolina school made headlines last month when a “lunchbox inspector” decided one mom’s menu didn’t meet U.S. Department of Agriculture standards.** A preschooler at West Hoke Elementary School was not permitted to eat the turkey and cheese sandwich, banana, potato chips, and apple juice her mother had packed for her; instead, she ate three chicken nuggets from the school cafeteria. The girl’s mother was upset to find she’d been billed for the chicken nugget meal.

**A Long Island, New York school district plans to join the list of schools that use electronic bracelets to monitor students’ heart rates, exercise habits, and sleep patterns in an effort to fight obesity.** It’s not known how — or whether — the district plans to protect student privacy. “When you get into monitoring people’s biological vital signs, that’s a pretty intrusive measurement,” said American Civil Liberties Union spokesman Jay Stanley. Similar programs already exist in New Jersey and Missouri.

**The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has strong ties to terrorist groups like Hamas — nevertheless, school officials say CAIR is welcome at Steinbrenner High School in Tampa, Florida.** Dozens of parents gathered last month to protest the fact that a CAIR representative had addressed students in a history class last fall. “We do not have a problem with Islamic groups speaking with students, but we do have an issue with a group that has ties to terrorism speaking,” said Randall McDaniels, head of the Jacksonville Chapter of ACT for America, a group seeking to stop CAIR members from speaking to students in public schools.

**While school officials the nation over push for increased technology spending, the men and women who create the latest gadgets don’t believe their kids should use them.** A private school in California has banned computers from the classroom, and discourages students from using them at home. Most of the students at the Waldorf School of the Peninsula have parents who work for high-tech companies like Google, Yahoo, Apple, and Hewlett-Packard.

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## Self-Esteem is Out, Hard Work is In

Conservatives have long argued that teachers who aimed to prop up student self-esteem were in dangerous territory. Despite these warnings, public school students have received a steady diet of unearned affirmations for decades, all in the name of good self-esteem. Now that the “self-esteem generation” is crowding the workforce, employers and educators are seeing the dark side of empty praise — and they are finally beginning to take note.

A growing body of research indicates that too much unearned praise gets in the way of learning. More and more teachers are being trained to drop easy, empty praise in favor of language that encourages hard work and persistence.

A number of schools have embraced a new approach to student affirmation that is based on psychological studies and brain imaging. Rather than being offered automatic verbal rewards for minimal effort, students are instead praised for hard work and persistence. Studies show that children who are rewarded for working

hard are more likely to enjoy challenges and to achieve success. It’s also been shown that children do better when they are taught that their intellect is something that grows and develops, not a predetermined birthright.

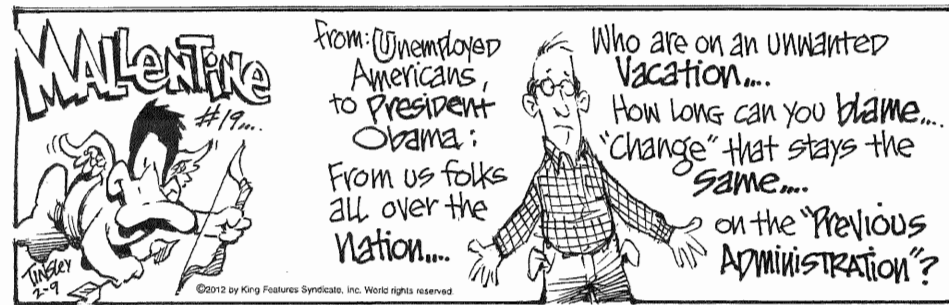
“We used to think we could hand children self-esteem on a platter,” commented Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck. “That has backfired.”

Dweck has also argued that praising children for being smart can be just as harmful as offering praise for its own sake. Numerous studies show that children who are rewarded for their intelligence become hesitant to take on difficult assignments.

Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, argues that praise should be connected to objective standards. “Winning or losing also matters in the real world,” he said. “You either beat the enemy or you don’t. You either get the gold medal or you get the silver.” Michelle Rhee, the former D.C. schools chancellor, agrees: “We’ve become so obsessed with making kids feel good about themselves that we’ve lost sight of building the skills they need to actually be good at things.”



### MALLARD FILLMORE / by Bruce Tinsley



## Some Head Start Providers May Lose Funding

For the first time ever, some Head Start contractors will have to compete with other potential providers in their communities to continue receiving funding administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Many public school systems, county and city agencies, and large community-based organizations that provide Head Start services have automatically qualified for funding for decades. Now new rules require each program to develop and use school-readiness goals, and to pass muster on other measures during occasional on-site reviews by federal monitors.

The federal Head Start office announced last December that 132 of the roughly 1,600 providers failed to meet the new standards and must compete for funding for the next fiscal year. Providers cited for “recompetition” include the two largest Head Start programs in the nation, administered by the Los Angeles County Office of Education and the New York City Administration for

Children’s Services.

Providers designated to re compete are concerned they are at a disadvantage, but Health and Human Services spokesman Kenneth J. Wolfe said the designation is not an “adverse action,” and that those organizations “are fully eligible” to compete for funds. The agency is expected to announce grant winners in late summer.

The \$7.6 billion Head Start program began in 1964 as part of the federal “war on poverty” and now enrolls almost one million infants, toddlers, and preschoolers from low-income families. Funding increases for the program continue unabated despite a 2010 government report that concluded enrollment in the program makes no significant difference in a child’s academic performance by the end of first grade. Worse still, during the same year a Government Accountability Office undercover operation found that eight of the fifteen Head Start centers investigated committed fraud.

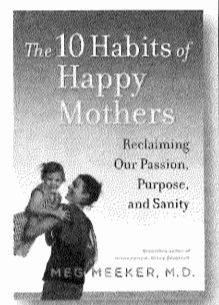
President Obama’s proposed 2013 budget increases program funding to \$8 billion. (Education Week, 11-16-11 and 2-22-12)



## Book of the Month



**The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers,** Meg Meeker, M.D., Ballantine Books, 2010, \$25.00.



Moms spend a lot of time trying to teach their children good habits. But when was the last time you spoke with a mother who was working on her own habits?

Meg Meeker’s book, *The 10 Habits of Happy Mothers: Reclaiming Our Passion, Purpose, and Sanity*, serves as a wake-up call to the many mothers who have let their responsibilities — or, in some cases, their vices — get in the way of their own spiritual, mental, and emotional health. Meeker advises mothers to step back and evaluate their habits, and then work on improving themselves in the following ways:

- Habit #1: Understand your value as a mother
- Habit #2: Maintain key friendships
- Habit #3: Value and practice faith
- Habit #4: Say no to competition
- Habit #5: Create a healthier relationship with money
- Habit #6: Make time for solitude
- Habit #7: Give and get love in healthy ways
- Habit #8: Find ways to live simply
- Habit #9: Let go of fear
- Habit #10: Hope is a decision — so make it!

Meeker looks at each of these habits in depth, explaining why each is necessary, offering practical tips for working on them, and illustrating her points with stories about women who have successfully navigated them.

Much of Meeker’s message can be distilled into one phrase: live simply. Inner contentment, she explains, is hard to achieve when one’s environment and schedule become too complicated. Fortunately, when you simplify your external world, your internal world will tend to follow suit. Similarly, when mothers take time to work on their own shortcomings, their entire family usually benefits. She suggests one especially useful exercise to help mothers become more whole:

First, let’s make a brutally honest (and private) list of what we expect from ourselves. We must have it all to ourselves on paper because we can never change what we don’t know exists. List what you expect of yourself and be very specific . . . Now keep that list and write an entirely new one. Write a list of the goals you have deep down for yourself . . . List them in order of priority from 1 to 10 . . . Review the first list a few times. Now tear it up . . . Take the second list and scratch everything but the top three items off . . . Commit to yourself that you will work only on these three things for six months or a year and let everything else go.



# FOCUS: Do We Need the Department of Education?

By Charles Murray

*The following is adapted from a speech delivered in Atlanta, Georgia, on October 28, 2011, at a conference on "Markets, Government, and the Common Good," sponsored by Hillsdale College's Center for the Study of Monetary Systems and Free Enterprise, and is reprinted with permission.*

THE CASE FOR the Department of Education could rest on one or more of three legs: its constitutional appropriateness, the existence of serious problems in education that could be solved only at the federal level, and/or its track record since it came into being. Let us consider these in order.

## 1) Is the Department of Education constitutional?

At the time the Constitution was written, education was not even considered a function of local government, let alone the federal government. But the shakiness of the Department of Education's constitutionality goes beyond that. Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution enumerates the things over which Congress has the power to legislate. Not only does the list not include education, there is no plausible rationale for squeezing education in under the commerce clause. I'm sure the Supreme Court found a rationale, but it cannot have been plausible.

On a more philosophical level, the framers of America's limited government had a broad allegiance to what Catholics call the principle of subsidiarity. In the secular world, the principle of subsidiarity means that local government should do only those things that individuals cannot do for themselves, state government should do only those things that local governments cannot do, and the federal government should do only those things that the individual states cannot do. Education is something that individuals acting alone and cooperatively can do, let alone something local or state governments can do.

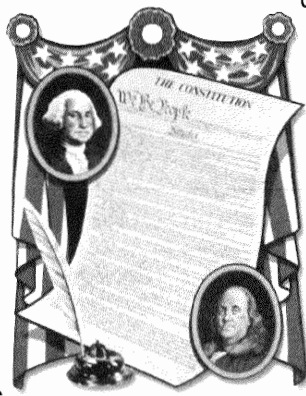
I should be explicit about my own animus in this regard. I don't think the Department of Education is constitutionally legitimate, let alone appropriate. I would favor abolishing it even if, on a pragmatic level, it had improved American education. But I am in a small minority on that point, so let's move on to the pragmatic questions.

## 2) Are there serious problems in education that can be solved only at the federal level?

The first major federal spending on education was triggered by the launch of the first space satellite, Sputnik, in the fall of 1957, which created a perception that the United States had fallen behind the

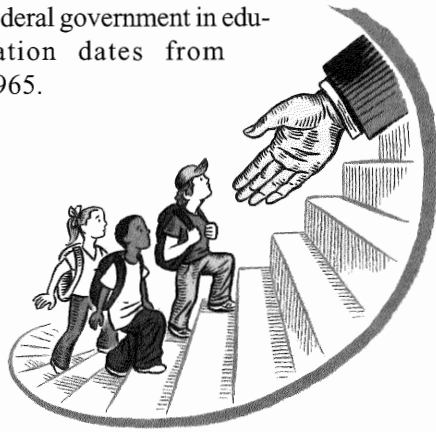
Soviet Union in science and technology. The legislation was specifically designed to encourage more students to go into math and science, and its motivation is indicated by its title: The National Defense Education Act of 1958. But what really ensnared the federal government in education in the 1960s had its origins elsewhere — in civil rights. The Supreme Court declared segregation of the schools unconstitutional in 1954, but — notwithstanding a few highly publicized episodes such as the integration of Central High School in Little Rock and James Meredith's admission to the University of Mississippi — the pace of change in the next decade was glacial.

Was it necessary for the federal government to act? There is a strong argument for "yes," especially in the case of K-12 education. Southern resistance to desegregation proved to be both stubborn and effective in the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*. Segregation of the schools had been declared unconstitutional, and constitutional rights were being violated on a massive scale. But the



question at hand is whether we need a Department of Education now, and we have seen a typical evolution of policy. What could have been justified as a one-time, forceful effort to end violations of constitutional rights, lasting until the constitutional wrongs had been righted, was transmuted into a permanent government establishment. Subsequently, this establishment became more and more deeply involved in American education for purposes that have nothing to do with constitutional rights, but instead with a broader goal of improving education.

The reason this came about is also intimately related to the civil rights movement. Over the same years that school segregation became a national issue, the disparities between black and white educational attainment and test scores came to public attention. When the push for President Johnson's Great Society programs began in the mid-1960s, it was inevitable that the federal government would attempt to reduce black-white disparities, and it did so in 1965 with the passage of two landmark bills — the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Higher Education Act. The Department of Education didn't come into being until 1980, but large-scale involvement of the federal government in education dates from 1965.



## 3) So what is the federal government's track record in education?

The most obvious way to look at the track record is the long-term trend data of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Consider, for instance, the results for the math test for students in fourth, eighth and twelfth grades from 1978 through 2004.

The good news is that the scores for fourth graders showed significant improvement in both reading and math — although those gains diminished slightly as the children got older. The bad news is that the baseline year of 1978 represents the nadir of the test score decline from the mid-1960s through the 1970s. Probably we are today about where we were in math achievement in the 1960s. For reading, the story is even bleaker. The small gains among fourth graders diminish by eighth grade and vanish by the twelfth grade. And once again, the baseline tests in the 1970s represent a nadir.

From 1942 through the 1990s, the state of Iowa administered a consistent and comprehensive test to all of its public school students in grade school, middle school, and high school — making it, to my knowledge, the only state in the union to have good longitudinal data that go back that far. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills offers not a sample, but an entire state population of students. What can we learn from a single state? Not much, if we are mainly interested in the education of minorities — Iowa from 1942 through 1970 was 97 percent white, and even in the 2010 census was 91 percent white. But, paradoxically, that racial homogeneity is also an advantage, because it sidesteps all the complications associated with changing ethnic populations.

Since retention through high school has changed greatly over the last 70 years, I will consider here only the data for ninth graders. What the data show is that when the federal government decided to get involved on a large scale in K-12 education in 1965, Iowa's education had been improving substantially since the first test was administered in 1942. There is reason to think that the same thing had been happening throughout the country. As I documented in my book, *Real Education*, collateral data from other sources are not as detailed, nor do they go back to the 1940s, but they tell a consistent story. American education had been improving since World War II. Then, when the federal government began to get involved, it got worse.

I will not try to make the case that federal involvement caused the downturn. The effort that went into programs associated with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in the early years was not enough to have changed American education, and the more likely causes for the downturn are the spirit of the 1960s — do your own thing — and

the rise of progressive education to dominance over American public education. But this much can certainly be said: The overall data on the performance of American K-12 students give no reason to think that federal involvement, which took the form of the Department of Education after 1979, has been an engine of improvement.

What about the education of the disadvantaged, especially minorities? After all, this was arguably the main reason that the federal government began to get involved in education — to reduce the achievement gap separating poor children and rich children, and especially the gap separating poor black children and the rest of the country.

The most famous part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was Title I, initially authorizing more than a billion dollars annually (equivalent to more than \$7 billion today) to upgrade the schools attended by children from low-income families. The program has continued to grow ever since, disposing of about \$19 billion in 2010 (No Child Left Behind has also been part of Title I).

Supporters of Title I confidently expected to see progress, and so formal evaluation of Title I was built into the legislation from the beginning. Over the years, the evaluations became progressively more ambitious and more methodologically sophisticated. But while the evaluations have improved, the story they tell has not changed. Despite being conducted by people who wished the program well, no evaluation of Title I from the 1970s onward has found credible evidence of a significant positive impact on student achievement. If one steps back from the formal evaluations and looks at the NAEP test score gap between high-poverty schools (the ones that qualify for Title I support) and low-poverty schools, the implications are worse. A study by the Department of Education published in 2001 revealed that the gap grew rather than diminished from 1986 — the earliest year such comparisons have been made — through 1999.

That brings us to No Child Left Behind. Have you noticed that no one talks about No Child Left Behind any more? The explanation is that its one-time advocates are no longer willing to defend it. The nearly-flat NAEP trendlines since 2002 make that much-ballyhooed legislative mandate — a mandate to bring all children to proficiency in math and reading by 2014 — too embarrassing to mention.

In summary: the long, intrusive, expensive role of the federal government in K-12 education does not have any credible evidence for a positive effect on American education.

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I have chosen to focus on K-12 because everyone agrees that K-12 education leaves much to be desired in this coun-

(See *Department of Education*, page 4)

**DePED?**  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

## Autism Guidelines *(Continued from page 1)*

the political and societal effects of the change — I can't yet say."

Not everyone is pleased with the proposed changes, however. "Our fear is that

we are going to take a big step backward," said Asperger Syndrome Education Network president Lori Shery. "If clinicians say, 'These kids don't fit the criteria for an autism spectrum diagnosis,' they are not going to get the supports and services they need, and they're going to experience failure." Mark Roithmayr, president of the advocacy group Autism Speaks, emphasized the need for caution: "We need to carefully monitor the impact of these diagnostic

changes on access to services and ensure that no one is being denied the services they need. Some treatments and services are driven solely by a person's diagnosis, while other services may depend on other criteria such as age, I.Q. level or medical history." "Narrowing the definition of autism is a bad idea," wrote pediatric neurologist Martha Herbert in a January letter to the *New York Times*. "As

### Asperger's Syndrome

#### Children and adults with Asperger syndrome might:

• Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings.

• Have a hard time understanding body language.

• Avoid eye contact.

• Want to be alone; or want to interact, but not know how.

• Have narrow, sometimes obsessive, interests.

• Talk only about themselves and their interests.

• Speak in unusual ways or with an odd tone of voice.

• Have a hard time making friends.

• Seem nervous in large social groups.

• Be clumsy or awkward.

• Have rituals that they refuse to change, such as a very rigid bedtime routine.

• Develop odd or repetitive movements.

• Have unusual sensory reactions.

Source: Centers for Disease Control

we learn that autism is not just from genes and brain but also from a child's response to a challenging environment, why make that environment even more challenging?"

"Changing the criteria to decrease the percentage seems dishonest and unethical", added social workers Heather Knickerbocker and Kathy Waehler in a similar letter.

It's true that early intervention efforts are vital in helping the truly autistic child learn and thrive, but it's also true that over-diagnosis has reached epidemic levels. Asperger syndrome, considered to be at the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum, has a particularly serious history of over-diagnosis. In 1992, a Department of Education directive exacerbated

the problem when it called for enhanced services for those on the autism spectrum. Diagnoses of Asperger syndrome went through the roof, except in California, where enhanced services were not offered.

High-functioning Asperger sufferers are not always easy to distinguish from those with social disabilities, which are

much less serious and ought to be treated differently from those who are really on the autism spectrum. Worse, some children are stuck with the Asperger label when in reality they are merely different from their peers. Benjamin Nugent, the director of creative writing at Southern New Hampshire University, wrote in the *New York Times* recently that, although he was diagnosed with Asperger as a young man, and even appeared in an educational film produced by two Asperger specialists, he outgrew the symptoms:

The thing is, after college I moved to New York City and became a writer and met some people who shared my obsessions . . . and then I wasn't that awkward or isolated anymore. According to the diagnostic manual, Asperger syndrome is "a continuous and lifelong disorder," but my symptoms had vanished. . . . Under the rules in place today, any nerd, any withdrawn, bookish kid, can have Asperger syndrome.

The definition should be narrowed. I don't want a kid with mild autism to go untreated. But I don't want a school psychologist to give a clumsy, lonely teenager a description of his mind that isn't true.

While some people do benefit from the extra help that is available to autism

patients, those who are misdiagnosed are done a serious disservice. Children with Asperger, or with social disorders that may resemble Asperger, are far too often grouped with truly autistic students in schools, even though they do not have

the serious language reception and expression difficulties that autistic children have. They don't do well in such environments. Many of these children go on to miss out of job opportunities later in life because of a

perceived disability that can make it harder for them to grow and compensate in the most effective way possible. Eventually, biological markers will help doctors differentiate between those with autism-related disorders from those with social disabilities — but for now, the over-diagnosis that has been so prevalent may well do more harm than good.

It's not easy to know just what effect the new guidelines will have on the long-term treatment of autism spectrum patients, in part because the changes make it difficult for researchers whose work relies on tracking trends over time. "I am sure this was not done without a lot of forethought, but I'm not so sure they thought about the fallout," said Jennifer Pinto-Martin, director of the Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities at the University of Pennsylvania.



## Department of Education *(Continued from page 3)*

try and that it is reasonable to hold the government's feet to the fire when there is no evidence that K-12 education has improved. When we turn to post-secondary education, there is much less agreement on first principles.

The bachelor of arts degree as it has evolved over the last half-century has become the work of the devil. It is now a substantively meaningless piece of paper — genuinely meaningless, if you don't know where the degree was obtained and what courses were taken. It is expensive, too, as documented by the College Board: Public four-year colleges average about \$7,000 per year in tuition, not including transportation, housing, and food. Tuition at the average private four-year college is more than \$27,000 per year. And yet the B.A. has become the minimum requirement for getting a job interview for millions of jobs, a cost-free way for employers to screen for a certain amount of IQ and perseverance. Employers seldom even bother to check grades or courses, being able to tell enough about a graduate just by knowing the institution that he or she got into as an 18-year-old.

So what happens when a paper credential is essential for securing a job interview, but that credential can be obtained by taking the easiest courses and doing the minimum amount of work? The result is hundreds of thousands of college students who go to college not to get an education, but to get a piece of paper. When the dean of one East Coast college is asked how many students are in his

institution, he likes to answer, "Oh, maybe six or seven." The situation at his college is not unusual. The degradation of American college education is not a matter of a few parents horrified at stories of silly courses, trivial study requirements, and campus binge drinking. It has been documented in detail, affects a large proportion of the students in colleges, and is a disgrace.

The Department of Education, with decades of student loans and scholarships for university education, has not just been complicit in this evolution of the B.A. It has been its enabler. The size of these programs is immense. In 2010, the federal government issued new loans totaling \$125 billion. It handed out more than eight million Pell Grants totaling more than \$32 billion dollars. Absent this level of intervention, the last three decades would have seen a much healthier evolution of post-secondary education that focused on concrete job credentials and courses of studies not constricted by the traditional model of the four-year residential college. The absence of this artificial subsidy would also have let market forces hold down costs. Defenders of the Department of Education can unquestionably make the case that its policies have increased the number of people going to four-year residential colleges. But I view that as part of the Department of Education's indictment, not its defense.

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What other case might be made for

federal involvement in education? Its contributions to good educational practice? Think of the good things that have happened to education in the last 30 years — the growth of homeschooling and the invention and spread of charter schools. The Department of Education had nothing to do with either development. Both happened because of the initiatives taken by parents who were disgusted with standard public education and took matters into their own hands. To watch the process by which charter schools are created, against the resistance of school boards and administrators, is to watch the best of American traditions in operation. Government has had nothing to do with it, except as a drag on what citizens are trying to do for their children.

Think of the best books on educational practice, such as Howard Gardner's many innovative writings and E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Curriculum, developed after his landmark book, *Cultural Literacy*, was published in 1987. None of this came out of the Department of Education. The Department of Education spends about \$200 million a year on research intended to improve educational practice. No evidence exists that these expenditures have done any significant good.

As far as I can determine, the Department of Education has no track record of positive accomplishment — nothing in the national numbers on educational achievement, nothing in the improvement of educational outcomes for the disad-

vantaged, nothing in the advancement of educational practice. It just spends a lot of money. This brings us to the practical question: If the Department of Education disappeared from next year's budget, would anyone notice? The only reason that anyone would notice is the money. The nation's public schools have developed a dependence on the federal infusion of funds. As a practical matter, actually doing away with the Department of Education would involve creating block grants so that school district budgets throughout the nation wouldn't crater.

Sadly, even that isn't practical. The education lobby will prevent any serious inroads on the Department of Education for the foreseeable future. But the answer to the question posed in the title of this talk — "Do we need the Department of Education?" — is to me unambiguous: No.

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