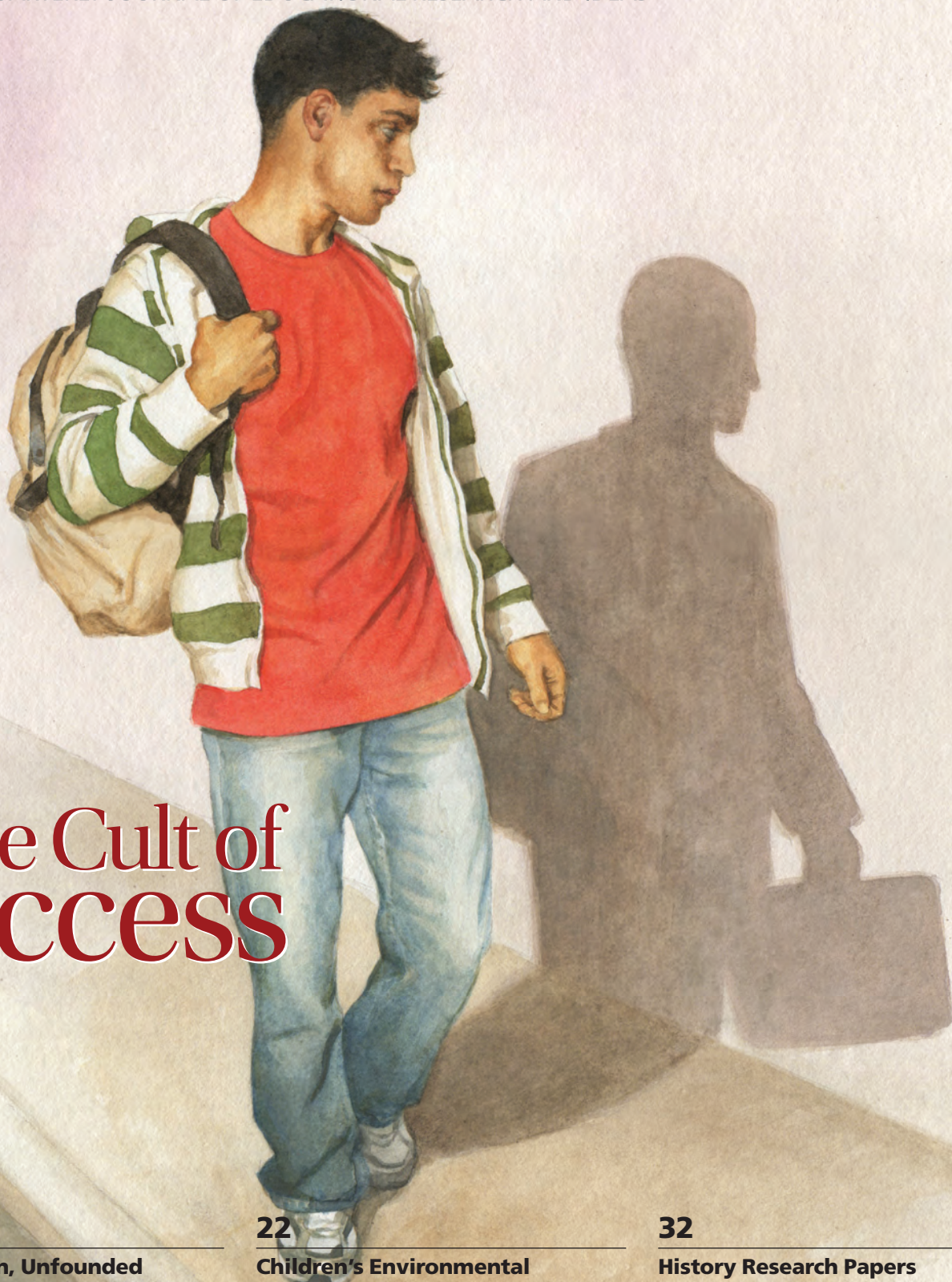




AMERICAN Educator

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND IDEAS



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The Power of Peer Assistance and Review

PEER REVIEW: Getting Serious about Teacher Support and Evaluation takes a detailed look at peer assistance and review (PAR) in two California school districts, revealing how and why it works far better than traditional approaches to professional development and teacher evaluation. PAR releases “consulting” teachers, who have



excelled in the classroom, from teaching duties so they can mentor new teachers and support struggling veteran teachers, as well as make recommendations to a district-union committee on whether the teachers they are working with are ready to work independently, need further assistance, or should not remain in the profession. This report focuses on three crucial elements of PAR: the role of consulting teachers, the inner workings of the joint district-union committees, and the collaboration required in this labor-management effort.

“In an era when policy-makers are calling for better teacher evaluation, our research shows that peer review is far superior to principals’ evaluations in terms of rigor and comprehensiveness,” the authors write. The report is based on interviews with district administrators, union leaders, and teachers; access to redacted files that outline consulting teachers’ work with participating teachers; and access to principals’ evaluations of participating teachers.

The consulting teachers were particularly impressive “because of their demonstrated knowledge of teaching, their ability to collect and analyze data on teachers’ practice, and their determination to improve teaching in their districts,” the authors write. “They know how to have difficult and sensitive conversations about a teacher’s job performance in ways that engender trust and acceptance while holding constant their commitment to students’ learning.” The report gives examples of such conversations by including logs of classroom observations and conferences by one consulting teacher. The notes show the consulting teacher’s focus on improving the participating teacher’s knowledge and skills, not on simply identifying problems.

Visit http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/PAR_PeerReviewReport_2011.pdf to download the full report. To learn more about PAR, see the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2008/Goldstein.pdf.



The Rise of Poverty

RECORD NUMBERS of Americans spent 2010 in deep poverty and without health insurance, according to an analysis of Census Bureau statistics conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. In 2010, 15.1 percent of Americans, and 22.0 percent of children, lived in poverty—rates that hadn’t been reached since 1993. Since 1965, the poverty rate has exceeded 15.1 percent only once: in 1983, it reached 15.2 percent. Meanwhile, the number of Americans earning incomes below the official poverty line (\$22,314 for a family of four) increased by 2.6 million to 46.2 million. Worse, the number of Americans in “deep poverty,” those with incomes below half of the poverty line, reached the highest level on record: 20.5 million people or 6.7 percent of the population.

Poverty rates are especially high among African Americans—at 27.4 percent—and Hispanics—at 26.6. By comparison, the poverty rate among non-Hispanic whites is 9.9 percent.

Also in 2010, the number of people without health insurance increased to a record high of 49.9 million, which the center attributes to a decline in employer-provided health coverage. On a more positive note, Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program actually covered a greater percentage of children in

2010 than in 2007 (before the recession began). The federal government expanded both programs, offsetting the decrease in employer coverage.

Citing government assistance in the form of unemployment insurance, the earned income tax credit, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food



stamps), among other programs in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the center calls for further government intervention. “These data, and the continuing weakness in the labor market in 2011, underscore the need to bolster both job creation and the safety net in order both to shore up the economy and to ease hardship.” The full report is available at www.cbpp.org/files/9-14-11pov.pdf.

The Cult of Success



BY DIANA SENECHAL

In November 2002, Grigory Perelman astounded the mathematical world by posting an outline of his proof of the Poincaré conjecture on the Internet. The following April, he presented his proof at the Massachusetts Institute of Tech-

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nology and, two weeks later, at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His audiences of students and mathematicians sat in suspense. They recognized that if the proof had no errors or gaps, it could help determine the shape of the universe. "The atmosphere was tense," writes Donal O'Shea. "Everyone knew how delicate and subtle the speaker's arguments were, and how easy it was to go astray. Everyone wanted them to hold." The Stony Brook audience also included a few reporters who, unlike the mathematicians, were mainly interested in the question of the million-dollar Millennium Prize to be awarded by the Clay Mathematics Institute. What was Perelman's attitude toward the prize? Would he accept it?¹

In March 2010, some newspapers reported, under sensationalist headlines, that Perelman had turned down the million-dollar prize: "World's Cleverest Man Turns Down \$1 Million Prize After Solving One of Mathematics' Greatest Puzzles"; "Strange Russian Genius Declines Million-Dollar Prize from U.S.A."; "Grigory Perel-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ENRIQUE MOREIRO

man, Reclusive Russian Math Genius, Refuses \$1 Million Prize”; and more. Readers argued about whether he was a fool or a sage. Some called him selfish (he could have accepted the money for his mother’s sake, after all); others called him noble. A reader, “Ana,” from El Salvador quoted from the film version of *Doctor Zhivago*: “the kind of man that the world pretends to look up to and in fact despises.” Few had anything to say about Perelman’s discovery. Whether they praised him for his higher values or derided him for his lack of common sense, their focus was on the prize, not what it stood for, and on his mental state, not his intellectual work.

The point is not that Perelman is just an ordinary man (he isn’t) or that his decisions make complete sense to outsiders (they needn’t). The point is that journalists and the public felt compelled to explain his actions. What would be wrong with simply leaving Perelman alone? Why so much chatter about his motives and mentality? What bothers people, it seems, is not Perelman, but rather his violation of the social codes of success.

Success has meant wealth, virtue, excellence, wisdom, personal contentment, or any combination of these, but its definition has flattened over time, particularly in the past few decades. A combination of economic anxiety, aggressive advertising, ubiquitous ratings, and verbal vagueness has led to an emphasis on the external aspects of success—money, status, and appearance. Ranking is especially important. A “successful school” (in education discussion and reporting) is one that has raised test scores; a “successful teacher” or “successful reform” has done likewise. A “successful student” has earned high grades, landed a job with a high salary, or both. In research studies, newspaper articles, and general education discussions, there is far more talk of achievement than of the actual stuff that gets achieved. What strikes the listener is how blithely the term “success” is used, as though there were nothing wrong with it and nothing missing. In a *New York Times* article titled “Is Going to an Elite College Worth the Cost?” Jacques Steinberg asks, “Do their graduates make more money? Get into better professional programs? Make better connections? And are they more satisfied with their lives, or at least with their work?” He ignores the possibility that education might have benefits other than prestige, connections, earnings, or even personal satisfaction. William Deresiewicz, who sat on the Yale College admissions committee, described the recently admitted students as “great kids who had been trained to be world-class hoop jumpers.”² Our society has come to worship the god of blatant accomplishments and overt results.

Or is it a god of fantasy? The philosopher Luc Ferry argues that the contemporary world “incites us to daydreams at every turn” (by “daydreams,” *rêves éveillés*, Ferry means imitative fantasies). He writes, “Its impressive train of stars and spangles, its culture of servility in face of the powerful, and its immoderate love of money tend to present daydreams as a *model* for life.”³

Indeed, our view of success includes an element of make-believe—the conjured notion that we can succeed *as others do* and that we deserve it. It also involves devotion to metrics: the modern “science” of measuring everything we do, in order to increase our chances and our profits. School districts measure teachers and schools according to the students’ test score gains, regardless of what they mean. Amazon recommends books to purchasers on the basis of detected purchase patterns. Social networking sites announce how many friends or fans each person has and how many people liked the person’s post or comment; such ratings are supposed to guide the Internet user through the morass. Employers administer multiple-choice personality tests to determine whether potential employees have

the desired personal qualities. These measurements, disparate as they seem, all serve to rate performance, predict success, and prevent failure. Of course, these are decent aims, or can be, but the formulas rely on a false understanding of them. We don’t always want books that others like us have liked. The curmudgeonly employee may

Success has meant wealth, virtue, excellence, wisdom, personal contentment, or any combination of these, but its definition has flattened over time, particularly in the past few decades.



prove brilliant and industrious. The person with few online “friends” may be beloved and admired elsewhere.

Perhaps we are losing the words that separate themselves from success’s screech and glare. Television has slowly tipped our consciousness and sensibilities toward the visual display. For decades, anyone with a public profile has had to pay some attention to looks—or be rebellious in not doing so. The author interviewed on the talk show has to dress well, wear makeup, speak clearly, make good eye contact, and appear relaxed; the presidential candidate has to look both dynamic and confident. Slowly wrought arguments must contend with the jingles of commercials. Today this pressure extends to all. The Internet and accompanying technology—handheld digital video cameras, the World Wide

Web—make it even easier to craft a public persona, and with that ease comes obligation. College and job applicants bolster their applications with videos, photos, and animated slideshows. Colleges use videos to advertise themselves; in 2010, Yale University’s admissions office released a musical video, “That’s Why I Chose Yale,” which gives the impression that Yale students are outgoing, hard working, beautiful, and fun loving.⁴ Presenting yourself online has become an essential skill, not just for celebrities and institutions, but for job seekers, students, artists, freelancers, business owners, and scholars. Everyone can have a public self for the world to see. Even comments on blogs often come with an “avatar” (a cartoon figure or photo). It is common today to speak in terms of one’s “personal brand”—the particular way that one presents and markets oneself. Schools and universities, even school systems, have taken up self-advertising with fervor.

Colleges and universities, seeking to improve their image, recruit aggressively so that they can both attract a more diverse student body (or, rather, a less eccentric one) and turn more students down. According to the *New York Times*, the University of Chicago has sought to break away from the stereotype of “a place for nerds and social misfits who shun sunlight and conversation.” Whereas in the past, the university drew students who were attracted to its particular intellectual climate, in 2010 it received 19,347 applications, an increase of 43 percent over the 2009 total. It abandoned its unusual essay questions and joined the Common Application, which supposedly brings in more applicants. It hired the direct marketing firm Royall & Company to assist with its recruitment campaign. It put out a brochure showing University of Chicago students in a variety of group activities. When conducting outreach, admissions officers emphasized the university’s preprofessional and career preparation opportunities.⁵ As the University of Chicago joins a larger trend, it loses its identity as a university that stands outside of trends.

The trend toward advertising has affected K–12 education as well. There are essentially two kinds: advertising for political self-promotion, and advertising for survival (with overlap between the two). Beginning in the fall of 2008, the Fund for Public Schools purchased subway advertisements proclaiming the successes of the New York City Department of Education. One advertisement read, “Because finishing is the start of a better future, New York City public high schools have increased graduation rates by more than 20% since 2002.” Aaron Pallas, a professor of sociology and education at Columbia University’s Teachers College, noted that such advertisement was not common practice in cities and that the timing was strategic, given the upcoming vote on mayoral control and the mayoral election. It seemed likely, in other words, that these ads were intended to promote Mayor Michael Bloomberg himself. In any case, when the very Department of Education advertises itself, it sets the tone for schools, teachers, and students. It becomes difficult to escape the spin. Public schools find that they must advertise themselves in order to compete with charter

schools for students and stay afloat; principals have to spend time devising brochures, pitches, and recruitment plans.⁶

Of course, presenting oneself well in public is neither novel nor offensive; it is a necessity. The danger is that one can start to live in and for one’s public image; one can forget the value of the things one does not show. In his 1947 essay “The Catastrophe of Success,” written in response to the wildly enthusiastic reception of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams comments⁷ on the nature of the public image:

You know, then, that the public Somebody you are when you “have a name” is a fiction created with mirrors and that the only somebody worth being is the solitary and

unseen you that existed from your first breath and which is the sum of your actions and so is constantly in a state of becoming under your own volition—and knowing these things, you can even survive the catastrophe of Success!

If one takes Williams’s words to heart—if one grants that “the only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you”—then one is left wondering what

remains of that “somebody” today. To the degree that even our private lives have become public (through Facebook, ubiquitous video cameras, and so forth), we have little that is unseen by others and little room to tend to it. There is little room for the thoughts that course this way and that through our minds, the persistent questions, the recurring troubles and delights, the most difficult decisions, the phrases that change in meaning over time, the people who die, the stubborn fact that things often do not go the way we want.

If success consists of image and material acquisition, how does one attain it? It seems to require a combination of self-esteem and metrics: believing in oneself, on the one hand, and, on the other, measuring one’s achievements and doing what it takes to raise the numbers. The culture of self-esteem dates back to early 20th-century “New Thought,” a cultivated mental state that was supposed to lead to success. Practitioners referred to it as a science of the mind. In 1911, Frank Channing Haddock recommended⁸ reciting a daily affirmation that begins:

I, IN MY DYNAMIC POWER, AS A THINKER, COMMAND THAT PHASE OF MYSELF WHICH RESTS ON AND NEAREST THE INFINITE, AS THE LOTUS RESTS ON THE SURFACE OF THE NILE, TO DRAW FORTH FROM THE DEPTH AND VASTNESS OF LIFE, NEW POWER, NEW THOUGHT, NEW PLANS AND METHODS FOR MY BUSINESS AND MY SUCCESS.

The historian Richard Weiss notes a “tone of plaintiveness” in the mind-power writings of the time; despite their insistence on the power of the mind, they “lack the ring of full conviction, somewhat in the manner of an individual trying to believe in spite of

In research studies, newspaper articles, and general education discussions, there is far more talk of achievement than of the actual stuff that gets achieved.

himself.” Such insistence characterizes later success writings as well—for instance, Norman Vincent Peale’s formula “(1) PRAYERIZE, (2) PICTURIZE, (3) ACTUALIZE.”⁹ The very suffix *-IZE* leaves one suspicious, as it seems forced, unwieldy, and funnier than it was meant to be.

Besides the affective route to success, there are formulas, which often carry a tinge of magic. Economists have long worked on calculating the profitability of individuals and organizations, in business, medicine, transportation, and other fields. In education, this has taken the form of value-added assessment: algorithms that calculate teachers’ effectiveness, or added “value,” on the basis of their students’ test scores. Originally developed by the statistician William Sanders at the University of Tennessee, value-added assessments number among the key reforms promoted by think tanks and the federal government. While many scholars caution against the use of value-added assessment in high-stakes decisions, others insist that they should be used precisely in that manner. The economist Eric Hanushek states that if we could just replace the bottom 5 to 10 percent of teachers with average teachers, our schools’ performance could rise to a level near the top internationally. The *Los Angeles Times* caused a furor in August 2010 when it published the names and ratings of some 6,000 public school teachers; Secretary of Education Arne Duncan approved the action and urged other districts to follow suit.¹⁰

While it makes sense to look at students’ performance on tests when evaluating teachers, there is something strange about the idea that the sheer act of ranking and replacing teachers will cause *student* performance to soar. It is as though students had no say in their own performance—as though their very mental workings could be controlled by an outside force. There is something equally strange about placing so much trust in the test scores themselves, without regard for the nature of the subject, the material tested, the quality of the tests, the relation of the tests to the curriculum, the other things taught, and much more.

Attempts to reduce failure through formulas abound. Teach for America has been seeking to identify effective teachers before they even begin teaching, by finding correlations between personality traits and increased test scores. Their findings have been inconsistent and inconclusive; their most robust conclusion is that teachers who in college pursued measurable goals such as GPA and “leadership achievement” were likelier to bring about test score increases. Similarly, districts across the country administer the Haberman Educational Foundation’s Star Teacher Pre-Screener, a multiple-choice test intended to predict whether prospective teachers have the necessary qualities for raising student achievement.¹¹ Such formulas seem scientific but actually rest on faith that if we could only tweak things right, achievement would rise to desired levels. The problem—and not a trivial one—is that even if one could identify a “type” of teacher likely to bring up test scores, that type would not necessarily be the best kind of

teacher in all ways. Students need different kinds of role models—not only go-getters, but people who take deep interest in something, whether or not it carries status, high pay, or visible marks of achievement. By treating test scores as the main measure of a teacher’s worth, these initiatives could keep many fine teachers out of the field and narrow the very idea of education.

In a similar manner, psychologists have been trying to identify personality and behavior traits associated with student success. According to Paul R. Sackett, a professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, the greatest predictors of student success, as far as student behaviors go, are conscientiousness (e.g., work ethic, dependability, and perseverance), agreeableness (teamwork, emotional stability), various kinds of extroversion, and openness to new experiences. Roger P. Weissberg, an education and psychology professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is developing “common-core standards

for social-emotional learning,” while others are working on programs for the teaching and assessment of emotional skills.¹² As with the Teach for America formula and the Star Teacher Pre-Screener, this research seems biased in favor of a particular kind of success and the kinds of personalities likely to attain it. Many thoughtful and capable students dislike working on teams, enjoy

thinking on their own, and are not necessarily agreeable. If “common-core standards for social-emotional learning” do indeed catch on, they may cast eccentric, dreamy, and reclusive individuals as deficient.

School programs are filled with success stories and success talk, yet their conception of success is often limited. In Chicago, the organization Strategic Learning Initiatives brought its “turn-around” program to 10 struggling schools; much of the reform was aimed at preparing students specifically for the kind of questions they would encounter on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test. Every day, the students received “success time” devoted to the practice of skills. They learned to identify “clue words” in test questions so that they would know which skill to apply. Success came up as a theme as well; when the students learned about Wilbur and Orville Wright in history class, the teacher asked the students to identify the character traits that made the brothers successful. But are character traits the deciding factor here? In *How We Reason*, Princeton psychology professor Philip N. Johnson-Laird demonstrates that it was in fact their exceptional reasoning, not their perseverance or other qualities, that set the Wright brothers apart from their rivals.¹³ That is, they made sense of a succession of failures; they not only persisted through failure, but learned how to interpret it correctly. To understand how they made their discovery, one must look closely at their work all along the way. This is much more interesting and complex than platitudes about their character traits; sadly, the standardized tests are more likely to have a question about character traits than a question about the Wright brothers’ actual work.

There is something strange about placing so much trust in test scores, without regard for the nature of the subject, the material tested, the quality of the tests, their relation to the curriculum, and much more.



The quest for a success formula sometimes takes surprising turns. Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* posits that success is a matter both of intensive practice (amounting to some 10,000 hours, regardless of the field) and circumstance; it actually matters, in many cases, where one was born and in what year. Ability is not enough; even hard work is not enough, he demonstrates. One must also be in the right place at the right time, and one must seize this advantage. His argument is appealing and hard to dismiss. Yet he misses one of his own crucial points. When describing the success of attorney Joe Flom, he notes, "Think of how similar this is to the stories of Bill Joy and Bill Gates. Both of them toiled away in a relatively obscure field without any great hopes for worldly success. But then—boom!—the personal computer revolution happened, and they had their ten thousand hours in. They were ready."¹⁴ Gladwell observes that Joy and Gates were not thinking of worldly success, but he fails to acknowledge the importance of this. Their immersion in the work itself, without thoughts of great success, may have had a great deal to do with their accomplishments. Moreover, such immersion is often inherently rewarding; a person need not end up like Gates to deem the hours of work worthwhile. Gladwell's limited definition of success weakens his otherwise intriguing observations.

In this quest for a formula for success, we lose the gradation between the unseen and the seen, between the visible and the invisible. The armies of the visible and the invisible rage at each other, and the invisible loses. When we argue that some of the most important things in life cannot be seen or measured, we set ourselves up for defeat, because the invisible is just that: invisible. A stronger argument is that we need a mixture of the visible and the invisible, the measurable and the unmeasurable—and that the former sometimes gives us a glimpse of the latter. It is through contemplating imperfect geometric figures that we can imagine Plato's ideal forms; it is through making sense of a sonnet that we glean something beyond its overt logic and rhyme. Some believe

The mixture of the measurable and unmeasurable was at one point a central aspect of liberal education. Learning went far beyond the literal and immediately applicable.

with fervor that the most important things are the tangible, measurable ones; others believe with equal fervor in the unseen. But the mixture is essential to the understanding of both the seen and the unseen.

This grasp of the mixture of the visible and the invisible, the measurable and the unmeasurable, was at one point a central aspect of liberal education, part of every field of study and part of the spirit of study. In mathematics, one wrestled with abstract concepts that did not translate immediately into practical examples; in literature, one tried to grasp what made a passage particularly beautiful. Such efforts varied, of course, from school to school, teacher to teacher, and student to student, but learning went far beyond the literal and immediately applicable. Teachers and professors delighted in the students who pursued subjects out of

interest, not just for a grade. A lecturer could make artful use of a digression, and at least some students would listen for the connections and the meaning. Today, the teacher who digresses is frowned upon; everything in a lesson is supposed to move toward a specific measurable goal. Teachers are supposed to announce the objective at the start of the lesson, remind students of the objective throughout the lesson,

and demonstrate attainment of the objective at the end.

Such a utilitarian view of education has a long history, but in recent years it has overtaken education discourse. It can be attributed to the loss of a literary culture, the introduction of business language and models into education, and the resultant streamlining of language. Schools and industries have become less concerned with the possible meanings of words, their allusions and nuances, than with buzzwords that proclaim to funders and inspectors that the approved things are being done—goal setting, "targeted" professional development, identification of "best practices," and so forth. Thus, we lose the means to question and criticize the narrow conceptions of success that have so much power in our lives.

Just as we dream of attaining success, we dream of obliterating failure. In *Facing Up to the American Dream* (1995), Jennifer Hochschild writes, "Because success is so central to Americans' self-image, and because they expect as well as hope to achieve, Americans are not gracious about failure. Others' failure reminds them that the dream may be just that—a dream, to be distinguished from waking reality."¹⁵ Many believe that, in order to attain success, they must somehow distance themselves from failure. Some believe that if they forbid failure or erase it from the books, it will disappear. With enough slogans, chants, and pep talks, perhaps, just perhaps, they can drive it away.

Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, wrote in an op-ed in 2010: "Visitors to my public charter

school often ask how the students feel about the signs on the walls that say: 'Failure is not an option.' They are surprised to hear that the signs are really for the staff." But if failure were not an option, why would one bother saying so? What's hiding here is the acknowledgment that failure is an ever-present option, one that Canada and his staff fight every day. The Harlem Children's Zone aims at breaking the cycle of poverty for Harlem children through a combination of education and social services. Using a "conveyor belt" model, which takes children from infancy up to college, it strives to provide seamless supports so that no child falls through the cracks. Yet failure happens even in the Harlem Children's Zone. In March 2007, Canada announced that he was phasing out the Promise Academy middle school, which he originally had intended to expand into a high school. All the graduating eighth-graders would have to find a high school elsewhere, and there would be no incoming sixth grade. Why? The preliminary test scores weren't high enough, and Canada felt he had to change course.¹⁶ It was a wrenching decision for him, and the question remains: If failure is not an option, what does one do with it when it appears?

In many situations, the stakes demand that one try to prevent failure at all costs. This is the case in surgeries and wars, in high-poverty schools at testing time and earthquake rescue missions. Even in safer places such as concert halls, there is tension and expectation when the moment comes. Laxity in those cases will not do. But even there, failure happens, and one must have a way of reckoning with it. One must have a language for it, a kind of dignity around it. If all one hears about is success, then those who fail are left stumbling and bewildered, and the audience, equally confused, points fingers and makes noises of blame.

If we try to exclude failure, we deny much of existence: we disregard wars, famines, and other disasters; we wish away low test scores, college rejections, romantic rejections, divorce, pov-



The Practice of Solitude

There is only one practice of solitude: to make a choice and carry it out well. The particulars assemble around this simple principle. One may later regret the choice; one may end up reversing or abandoning it. The choice may consist of doing nothing or refraining from a decision until the time is right. But no matter what it entails, one must entrust oneself to it in order to see it clearly. In our hectic lives, we have difficulty making choices; we have even more trouble living them out, as the alternatives flash and jingle around us. Solitude allows for a gathering of the intentions.

The practice of solitude requires education and experience. None of the choices of solitude can be made without insight, if they are to be made well. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is filled with philosophical, religious, and historical references. These are not ornaments; they give dimension and urgency to his argument. They help explain why, in his view, nonviolent protest is the one viable response to the injustice of segregation. This simplicity of view is anything but simplistic; it draws on study and experience, wisdom and anger. One senses the years of thought in it.

On the whole, with variation and exceptions, everyday American culture tends to favor busyness, not action or contemplation. "Work hard. Be nice," goes the motto of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools; this is not

bad advice, but its value depends on the substance of the work. Similarly, many businesses embrace the slogan "work hard, play hard." Hard work is necessary for many endeavors, but we have turned it into an end. Students in school are supposed to be working constantly—that is, visibly doing something, whenever anyone enters or peers in the room. American adults work longer hours and with shorter vacations than many Europeans in similar positions. Our escapes, such as TV or the Internet, may be symptoms of working too much; the tired mind seizes them to relieve the burdens for a little while. This is the inverse of busywork and just as numbing; it prevents contemplation and quiet thought. Susan Jacoby notes that the video and audio media "demand that everyone take his or her place as a member of the audience"; and "the more time people spend before the computer screen or any screen, the less time and desire they have for two human activities critical to a fruitful and demanding intellectual life: reading and conversation."¹⁷ The loss of *desire* for reading and conversation is especially dangerous, for without desire, we do nothing to combat our excesses.

How can schools help students learn

to make choices—between contemplation and action, silence and speech, and more? Giving students many choices is not the answer; students may end up bewildered, as they do not understand the choices yet. Students need first to learn about the nature of these choices—by studying history and literature, discussing ethical questions, working out mathematics problems, learning languages, practicing instruments, and reading about the lives of others. In high school, students may start to take electives, but these should be in addition to a core set of studies, so that they may continue to build a foundation as they start to branch off. Even in college and graduate school, students need the structure of a syllabus; they need to know the field in order to stake out independently in it. There are exceptions: some students may find their interests early on and do substantial work on their own. Yet even the most precocious students need some guidance.

Some argue that students will not be motivated unless schools give them

erty, addiction, death, injustice, car accidents, lost jobs, misspelled words, stutters, misunderstandings, and our daily mistakes and slippages. Those who take on the slogan “failure is not an option” wittingly or unwittingly paint over their lives and the lives of others, and the result is not only false but flat. Such a paint job can’t render anything close to a human life. Hochschild observes that “the ideology of the American dream includes no provision for failure; a failed dream denies the loser not only success but even a safe harbor within which to hide the loss.”¹⁷ Failure happens, yet it isn’t supposed to be there. The contradiction is each person’s private secret; it has driven some to despair.

In rejecting failure, we reject a resource as well. Failure can be inconsequential, crushing, or anything in between, but we need it as much as we need success, and even when we don’t need it, it happens and must be taken into account. Our successes and failures, in combination, teach us about the world and ourselves; they push us beyond ourselves. They help us understand history, literature, science, and the arts; they show us who we are, what we do well, whom we love, what we desire, what our limits are and aren’t, and how our private and public lives meet and part.

When they have no explanation, they stand as stubborn reminders that not all of life bends to our will or understanding. Explained or unexplained, they are not always what they seem.

The narrator of Robert Browning’s poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864) suggests that failures may be successes in disguise and vice versa.¹⁸ The poem is solemn, exuberant, witty, soulful, and jagged—a vigorous call to repose. Its overall meaning is that old age is the mirror opposite of youth; where youth strives, old age rests and contemplates; where youth acts, old age trusts in the action of God. The ideas are somewhat cryptic until one grasps the underlying symmetry of youth and old age, and with it, the ambiguity of success and failure. Near the beginning, the narrator tells us:

For thence,—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks,—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i’ the scale.

Toward the end, he repeats the idea, but in stronger, more

opportunities to choose what to read, what to learn, and which topics to pursue. But students will not be motivated unless they know something about the subjects in the first place. Students may find excitement and possibility in specific assignments, as they open up new knowledge and associations. I remember the delight of memorizing the declension of the Latin demonstrative pronoun *hic, haec, hoc*. The sounds were enjoyable; they reminded me of “kuplink, kuplank, kuplunk” in Robert McCloskey’s *Blueberries for Sal*. Later, when taking poetics and linguistics courses, I became interested in the ablaut (the linguistic term for a vowel gradation that distinguishes closely related words, such as *sing, sang, and sung*). Besides awakening new interests, structured study allows students to look more closely at a problem than they might otherwise. Students do need some time for exploration, but much of this will spring from the specifics they learn in class. There is room for a degree of choice (of essay topic, for instance), but choices may be richer when they are fewer and more focused.

Students’ lack of motivation comes not from structured study, but from elsewhere. Many students are distracted by mild or severe despair, overt or concealed: a sense that their studies don’t really matter and are not as important as personal concerns, and that it will soon be over anyway (school or even life itself). Schools try to give students a sense of urgency, but their methods are often misguided. They may try to make the learning superficially relevant

to students’ lives, whip up their enthusiasm through chants and pep rallies, or impress upon them that their studies will help them toward their career or college goals. None of these approaches is sufficient. The “relevance” approach confirms for students that their personal preoccupations come first; the pep rally is off-putting to many; the “goal-oriented” approach ignores the questions: What happens when the goal is met? Does all of this lose its meaning? The

The student gets good grades, graduates, goes on to college or gets a job, and what then? What is the larger point?

student gets good grades, passes the courses for the year, goes on to the next grade, graduates, goes on to college or gets a job, and what then? What is the larger point?

Beyond giving students a foundation, schools must teach them what commitment means. Without apology, they should teach students to read, write, and practice without any distractions from the Internet, cell phone, or TV, and to make a daily habit of this. It doesn’t matter if they claim to know how to “multitask”; multitasking amounts to compromise, and they need to learn to offer more of themselves. Schools should make use of technology but should also teach students how to do without it.

Otherwise they will depend on text messages during class, musical practice, lectures, daydreams, and even rest. Over the long run, the setting aside of distractions will give students permission to take the work seriously. Many young people latch onto a casual attitude about their studies; they need to be helped out of this. Many secretly long to be pushed into greater seriousness.

Schools must assign homework that

goes beyond the trivial, that requires persistence and sustained concentration. When asked what he would recommend to readers who had trouble understanding his work after reading it three times, William Faulkner answered: “Read it four times.”² This advice could apply to many endeavors. Students should learn to read closely and carefully, bearing with things they do not immediately understand. Assignments should be designed to combine routine practice with difficult challenges. Teachers should not hesitate to correct students, as students need to strive for accuracy when working alone. Students should learn how to put their full mind into their work, sometimes heartily, sometimes grudgingly, but with regularity and determination.

The psychologist K. Anders Ericsson

resolved language, as he speaks no more of comfort, but of isolation and God:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through
language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God,
whose wheel the pitcher
shaped.

“All I could never be”—what does that mean? There is a sense that his failures are, in God’s eyes, part of his beauty, part of the shape of his life. Yes, the failures themselves—unrecognized, unmitigated, unrepaired.

Our failures may count among our greatest assets; they may show us the outlines of who we are. In her note to the second edition of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O’Connor writes, “Does one’s

integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be

asked to deepen.”¹⁹ By this she means that our impossibilities and incapacities end up defining what we *can and must* do. A person may try to be someone or something else, but will eventually hit upon an obstacle. That obstacle—which seems to make us fail—ultimately brings us back to ourselves.

This does not mean that failure is always illuminating or redemptive, or that we are always capable of seeing it that way. The shame of

failure drives people to suicide; the fear of failure can overpower the mind. The writer who feels she has passed her peak may not be able to put that thought away; each new work, even each sentence, seems to limp along while the earlier writings surged and sang and

Our successes and failures, in combination, show us who we are, whom we love, what our limits are and aren’t, and how our private and public lives meet and part.

refers to this kind of work as “deliberate practice”: sustained, analytical, regular, focused practice that makes the difference between an amateur and an expert, or a good expert and a top expert. Students engage in deliberate practice in between lessons; professionals engage in it on their own. According to Ericsson and colleagues, deliberate practice is not inherently enjoyable; individuals practice not because they like doing so, but because they know that such practice improves their performance. Upon conducting several studies of the practice habits of musicians, they found, among other things, that expert performers practice more than others over the years; practice alone, with full attention; practice regularly, for limited periods at a time; and get plenty of rest.³

This idea of deliberate practice is promising, if one recognizes a few caveats. First, practice can be inherently enjoyable. For many it is a private, precise dialogue between the self and instrument (or pen and paper, or other material). It is a time for close listening and watching, for tuning and tinkering. It can be dull or painful at times, but there are also times of insight and amazement. It is possible to conceive of a somewhat warmer version of deliberate practice, with all of the focus and structure but with love of the work as well. Second, there are many principles of practice, but it is still idiosyncratic. One might learn from the example of the Scottish virtuoso percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who as a child persuaded a teacher

(and later the Royal Academy of Music) to take her on even though she was deaf. She showed them that deafness in the ears did not impede her from hearing; she could hear with her body. What fueled and sustained her practice, it seems, was not just pursuit of a goal, not just the belief that she would get better over time, but

Teachers who practice their subjects—who think about them and work on them in their own time—can show students a way of life.

love of the sounds right then and there, and her own forays into them.⁴

Many practices of solitude can be conveyed only through example. Teachers who practice their subjects—who think about them and work on them in their own time—can show students a way of life. They need not “model” for the students in any canned way; their very conduct is a model. When a teacher reads a poem aloud or presents a mathematical proof, her tone conveys whether she has thought about it at length, played with it, argued about it, and more. Students will likewise learn from teachers’ handling of conflicts that arise in class and in school. Problems and dilemmas will arise, and teachers will be put to the test. How does a teacher respond when one student taunts another, when one student seems far more advanced (or less advanced) than the others, or when one of the

students objects to the tenor of discussion or the premises of the lesson? How does the teacher respond to events affecting the whole school—a new principal, a change in the rules, or an emergency? A teacher’s bearing in these situations is complex and influences students enormously. But teachers must also let themselves be

fallible; students will not be harmed by a teacher’s minor mistakes. And when a teacher handles a large mistake with grace, students learn that they, too, will survive mistakes.

There is some truth to the existentialist idea that we give things their meaning and importance. Practice allows for this; through honoring something regularly, we come to value it more.

Students find their way by knocking their heads against a subject, by struggling with ideas, by learning things by heart and then carrying them around. They find themselves on their own, through their wanderings, friendships, and thoughts, but this takes place alongside structured study. Sometimes, when working on an assigned essay, a student sees an unusual phrase wriggle

sparkled. The scientist who has spent decades trying to solve a problem may feel that all the effort went to nothing. The immigrant worker who spent long hours, day after day, year after year, cleaning homes, only to see her children drop out of school, may wonder what all that labor was for. The retired stockbroker who made him-

self a decent living but had longed to do something different all along may ask whether the money was worth it. In these cases, there may be nothing rewarding about the situation except for the questioning itself, which may or may not open the way to more understanding.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* can be regarded as a parable of the ambivalence of success and failure. The old man catches the marlin but loses the flesh; he comes home with the skeleton, proof of both his defeat and his victory. But the skeleton cannot tell the private part of the story: the conversations with a bird, with the fish, with himself. A tourist spots the skeleton tied to his skiff and asks a waiter what it is. He replies, "Tiburón.... Eshark," meaning that the sharks ate it. The tourist misunderstands him and replies that she didn't know sharks had "such handsome, beautifully formed tails."²⁰ Already the history has been lost, through broken telling and misunderstanding. The old man is alone with his experi-

though I hope less angular, will be just as odd if not odder than the nine chapters you have now. The question is: is Rinehart interested in publishing this kind of novel?

The "aloneness" of *Wise Blood* is part of its magnificence. O'Connor had the strength and wisdom not to give it up for the sake of a book contract. She would accept criticism, but only if it meshed with what she was doing. This is the practice of solitude: distinguishing what is essential from what is not, and standing firm on the former. It is difficult, if not impossible, to teach aloneness of this kind, but if students see it, if they read *Wise Blood* and take in the language, they may come to love its jagged clarity and understand why it should not be softened for anything in the world.

—D.S.

through, or stumbles on a source that lights up the topic and leads to more sources. That may be the first sign of an individual voice; it grows stronger as the student learns, listens, and writes more. Through such practice, students learn how to be alone; they learn that they will always have something to do in solitude, including nothing at all. For some, solitude becomes the only place where they can do what they truly want. For others, it remains difficult and unpleasant, but they make room for it in some way. The relationships with solitude vary widely, but students learn that it is essential to doing certain things well.

But there is more to the practice of solitude than simply doing something well or working toward good performance. The person who shapes something is also shaped. We think of "character building" as something that takes place outside, in the world, but much of it happens in private. Reading, playing an instrument, memorizing the elements, all of this makes a person just a little different from before. Seeing the world a little differently, he is slightly altered in turn. All he needs to do is

honor this new shape, not apologize for it, not slur its syllables. It is possible, even with abundant foibles, to live up to the way one sees the world. We learn, over time, what we will not and cannot do, what we will not and cannot give up. Sometimes the practice of solitude comes down to a simple "no." That "no" protects all sorts of other possibilities. It guards a life.

In February 1949, Flannery O'Connor wrote⁵ to editor John Selby at Rinehart in response to his comments on the manuscript of *Wise Blood*:

I can only hope that in the finished novel the direction will be clearer, but I can tell you that I would not like at all to work with you as do other writers on your list. I feel that whatever virtues the novel may have are very much connected with the limitations you mention. I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity or aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from....

In short, I am amenable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do; I will not be persuaded to do otherwise. The finished book,

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Republic of Noise

The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture

This book examines ways in which individuals, schools, and culture are pushing solitude aside. It looks at what solitude is, why we need it and avoid it, and what can happen when we drive it away.

At the outset, I take on the notion of “we.” It is one of the trickiest words in the book. When I use “we” to describe a cultural tendency, I recognize that there are many outliers. Personal observations, psychological and sociological studies, and historical and literary works help define this “we”—but how can I claim to be part of this group when, by virtue of writing about it, I stand outside it? I answer that I am part of this “we” even as I view it from the outside. I am more deeply affected by the current culture than I would like. The concept of “we” is complex, and I return to it over the course of the book. I wish there were a more fitting pronoun, something between “we” and “I.” There is “one,” of course, but one can only use “one” so often before one starts sounding awkward. For now, “we” refers to a general societal tendency with many variations and exceptions. On the whole, in schools, work, and life, we are driving solitude to the edges, even as we become lonelier and more isolated in some ways.

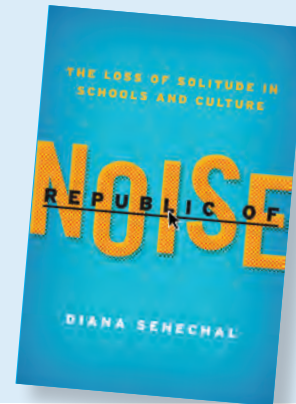
Our public schools, which should encourage students to see beyond the claims of the moment, have instead caved in to the immediate demands of the larger culture and economy. Convinced that the outside world calls for collaboration, school leaders and policymakers expect teachers to incorporate group work in their lessons, the more of it the better. They do not pay enough attention to the ingredients of good collaboration: independent thought, careful pondering of a topic, knowledge of the subject, and attentive listening.

One oft-touted practice in elementary school is the “turn and talk” activity, where a teacher pauses in a story she is reading aloud, asks a question, and has the students talk to their partners about it. When they are done, they join hands and raise them in the air. Instead of losing themselves in the story, they must immediately contend with the reactions of their peers. Many districts require small-group activities, throughout the grades, because such activities presumably allow all students to talk in a given lesson. Those who set

and enforce such policies do not consider the drawbacks of so much talk. Talk needs a counterbalance of thought; without thought, it turns into chatter.

Outside of school, young people and adults surround themselves with “friends” they have never met or have met but do not know personally: strangers who “friend” them on Facebook or connect with them on some other network. Not only have the meanings of “friend” and “like” become trivial, but people judge themselves, at least somewhat, by the number and status of friends and followers they can amass. Those who use online dating services may rely on “friends’” recommendations or votes. Those who keep a personal blog may take pride or

shame in the number of hits or “visits” they receive every day, though they have no



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ence; be it success or failure, it is unknown to anyone but himself, and perhaps not even to himself. His explanation to himself is that he went out too far; perhaps this means that he has no explanation or that he went out to a place where there were no answers. Perhaps this is the nature of a serious endeavor: if we go very far, we reach a point of private conversation, where nothing is clear and where success and failure are no longer opposites.

What, then, might success be, if our current understanding is too narrow? It is not simply personal fulfillment; fulfillment in itself can be empty. One can take Prozac and feel fulfilled for a while, or at least less unfulfilled; does that make one successful? One can join a group of like-minded people and shut out conflicts; is that success? One can be electronically matched to the things one likes, and only those things, but what happens, then, to ruggedness and adventure? Why not take a rougher route? Success may have to do with wending our way through swamps and clambering over logs. It may have something to do with living ourselves out, as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche suggested—becoming strongly and purely ourselves. But there is more. Success has to do with a certain empty-handedness, a willingness to do something out of love or dedication or curiosity, without predictable reward. That

includes spending time with a partner, child, or close friend; it includes playing an instrument and hearing the tones grow fuller and clearer. Maybe there is grace in it too. Ferry writes, “What is the use of growing old? ... To enlarge one’s view: to love the singular and once in a while to experience the abolition of time that the presence of the singular permits us.”²¹ We are not used to thinking in these terms, but perhaps true success is something we may achieve when false success falls away.

The preoccupation with outward success (money, image, power, and success itself) deceives us out of a harder success. Failure, our twin, becomes the exiled leper, so we come to loathe ourselves even as we buff and propagate our image. Whatever seems awkward, unformed, or tentative gets pushed aside. Confidence trumps competence; we hesitate to do things that we do not already do well. But in ridding ourselves of all unsuccessful things, we make a bleak utopia, an empty dome. Our internal misfits may be things in motion: ideas in formation, projects in progress, difficult challenges. They may be private thoughts or things for which we do not yet have words. They may be concerns and hopes for another person. They may be part of the human rumble: suffering, confusion, unexpected joy. They may not always shape themselves for job applications, promotions, or million-dollar prizes, but we do not live by such shapes alone. □

idea in what spirit those visits occurred—whether someone landed on their blog by chance, visited it out of boredom, or came to read it out of genuine interest. As a result, a person winds up with a lot of virtual “stuff”—data, personal connections, votes—but little sense of the value of these things.

There are many problems intertwined here, but most can be traced to our weakened capacity for being alone and our dwindling sense of any life beyond the immediate scramble.

How to respond to the incessant polls, updates, ringtones, throbbing lights? Leaving society and taking up residence in the woods is one option, but most of us need others and wish to be involved in lives beyond our own. Even the so-called recluses throughout history had close relationships; Emily Dickinson had passionate friendships. Henry David Thoreau had guests in his hut and loved to go into town and strike up conversations. We should not have to choose between nagging buzz and lake-like stillness. There are flies buzzing on any lake, and lakes below every buzz.

It is not the isolation, but the consciousness that we need: the knowledge that an hour listening to a piano piece might give us more than a month of Internet-filled evenings. Besides consciousness, we need the strength to do what we find most rewarding. The strength takes time to build. Mark Bauerlein writes that today’s

“screen intelligence,” while good for certain kinds of mental agility, “conditions minds against quiet, concerted study, against imagination unassisted by visuals, against linear, sequential analysis of texts, against an idle afternoon with a detective story and nothing else.” Nicholas Carr puts it eerily: “What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation.”*

Technology can be a boon if it serves rather than dominates us. I marvel at the 16th-century books that I can download. I envy those studying foreign languages today, especially Russian; there are many ways to read and listen to the language online. The Internet also lets us track down long-lost friends and acquaintances who might otherwise be hard to locate. In some ways, it can offer us quiet; instead of having the phone ringing constantly, we can put thought into an e-mail at our own convenience. The web can connect us with others who have similar interests; it provides community for those who live in isolation. Yet we give up much in return for these services. We become so accustomed to quick answers that we lose the habit of slow browsing and reading. We

*Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Their Future* (New York: Tarcher, 2008), 95; and Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,” *The Atlantic*, July–August 2008, 57.

give information about ourselves, often unwittingly, and put up with animated advertisements and other intrusions. We are just starting to tackle the privacy issues and other complications of recent technology. We may come to grips with them, over time, if we stand back and consider what we are doing.

Standing alone is not easy or always enjoyable, but we would flail without some room for solitude. We cannot have meaningful relationships with others unless we know how to stand apart. We cannot learn unless we make room for learning in our minds. We cannot make sound decisions unless we are able to examine the options on our own, in quiet, along with any advice or information at hand. We cannot distinguish fads from sound ideas if we have never questioned social pressures and fashions. We cannot participate in a democracy without deep understanding of the issues at stake. We cannot accomplish anything of beauty unless we are willing to spend many hours working on it alone. We cannot endure disappointment, rejection, bereavement, or distress unless we have a place to go in ourselves. Without solitude, our very thoughts tend toward one-liners. Without solitude, we set ourselves up for half-hearted pursuits. The catch is that solitude, by its nature, cannot be a movement. Each person must find it alone.

–D.S.

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Bipartisan, But Unfounded

The Assault on Teachers' Unions



BY RICHARD D. KAHLBERG

Teachers' unions are under unprecedented bipartisan attack. The drumbeat is relentless, from governors in Wisconsin and Ohio to the film directors of *Waiting for "Superman"* and *The Lottery*; from new lobbying groups like Michelle Rhee's StudentsFirst and Wall Street's Democrats for Education Reform to political columnists such as Jonathan Alter and George Will; from new books like political scientist Terry Moe's *Special Interest* and entrepreneurial writer Steven Brill's *Class Warfare* to even, at times, members of the Obama administration. The consistent message is that teachers' unions are the

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central impediment to educational progress in the United States.

Part of the assault is unsurprising given its partisan origins. Republicans have long been critical, going back to at least 1996, when presidential candidate Bob Dole scolded teachers' unions: "If education were a war, you would be losing it. If it were a business, you would be driving it into bankruptcy. If it were a patient, it would be dying." If you're a Republican who wants to win elections, going after teachers' unions makes parochial sense. According to Terry Moe, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) gave 95 percent of their contributions to Democrats in federal elections between 1989 and 2010.¹ The nakedly partisan nature of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's attack on public sector collective bargaining was exposed when he exempted from his legislation two unions that supported him politically: one representing police officers and the other representing firefighters.

What's new and particularly disturbing is that partisan Republicans are now joined by many liberals and Democrats in attacking teachers' unions. Davis Guggenheim, an avowed liberal who

directed Al Gore's anti-global warming documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and Barack Obama's convention biopic, was behind *Waiting for "Superman."* Normally liberal *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof regularly attacks teachers' unions, as does Steven Brill, who contributed to the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, yet compares teachers' union leaders to Saddam Hussein loyalists and South African apartheid officials. A string of current and former Democratic school superintendents (including New York City's Joel Klein and San Diego's Alan Bersin) have blamed unions for education's woes. Even President Obama strongly supports nonunionized charter schools and famously applauded the firing of every single teacher in Central Falls, Rhode Island.

The litany of complaints about teachers' unions is familiar. They make it "virtually impossible to get bad teachers out of the classroom," says Moe.² Critics claim they oppose school choice, oppose merit pay, and oppose efforts to have excellent teachers "assigned" to high-poverty schools where they are needed most.

Growing Democratic support of these criticisms has emboldened conservatives to go even further and call for the complete abolition of collective bargaining for teachers a half-century after it started.* Conservative education professor Jay Greene pines for a "return to the pre-collective bargaining era."³ Teachers' unions "are at the heart" of our education problems, Moe says.⁴ "As long as the teachers' unions remain powerful," he writes, the "basic requirements" of educational success "cannot be met."⁵ The idea that policymakers can work with "reform" union leaders is, in his view, "completely wrong-headed,"⁶ "fanciful and misguided."⁷

Critics suggest that collective bargaining for teachers is stacked, even undemocratic. Unlike the case of the private sector, where management and labor go head-to-head with clearly distinct interests, they say, in the case of teachers, powerful unions are actively involved in electing school board members, essentially helping pick the management team. Moreover, when collective bargaining covers education policy areas—such as class size or discipline codes—the public is shut out from the negotiations, they assert. Along the way, the interests of adults in the system are served, but not the interests of children, these critics suggest.

Criticisms Abound, Evidence Does Not

The critics' contentions, which I'll sum up as collective bargaining and teachers' unions being undemocratic and bad for schoolchildren, have no real empirical support. Democratic societies throughout the world recognize the basic right of employees to band together to pursue their interests and secure a decent standard of living, whether in the private or public sector. Article 23 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides not only that workers should be shielded from discrimination but also that "everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests."⁸

Collective bargaining is important in a democracy, not only to advance individual interests, but to give unions the power to serve as a countervailing force against big business and big government. Citing the struggle of Polish workers against the Communist regime, Ronald Reagan declared in a Labor Day speech in 1980:

"Where free unions and collective bargaining are forbidden, freedom is lost."⁹

In the United States, 35 states and the District of Columbia have collective bargaining by statute or by state constitution for public school teachers; the rest explicitly prohibit it, are silent on the matter, or allow the decision to be made at the local level.¹⁰ It is no accident that the states that either prohibit collective bargaining for teachers, or by tradition have never had it, are mostly in the Deep South, the region of the country historically most hostile to extending democratic citizenship to all Americans.

The argument that collective bargaining is undemocratic fails to recognize that in a democracy, school boards are ultimately accountable to all voters—not just teachers, who often live and vote outside the district in which they teach, and who in any event represent a small share of total voters. Union endorsements matter in school board elections, but so do the interests of general taxpayers, parents, and every-one else who makes up the community. If



school board members toe a teachers' union line that is unpopular with voters, those officials can be thrown out in the next election.

The title of Moe's most recent book, *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools*, invokes a term historically applied to wealthy and powerful entities such as oil companies, tobacco interests, and gun manufacturers, whose narrow interests are recognized as often colliding with the more general public interest in such matters as clean water, good health, and public safety. Do rank-and-file teachers, who educate American schoolchildren and earn about \$54,000 on average, really fall into the same category?

Former AFT President Albert Shanker long ago demonstrated that it was possible to be a strong union supporter and an education reformer, a tradition carried on today by President Randi Weingarten. Local unions are sometimes resistant to necessary change, but the picture painted by critics of unions is sorely outdated. Unions today support school choice within the public school system, but oppose private school vouchers that might further Balkanize the nation's students. Unions in New York City, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere favor teacher merit pay so long as it includes school-wide gains to reward effort while also encouraging cooperation among teachers. While unions disfavor plans to allow administrators to "allocate" teachers to high-poverty schools against their will (a policy that is reminiscent of forced student assignment for racial balance during the days of busing),

*Ironically, a half-century ago, Wisconsin became the first state in the nation to pass legislation allowing collective bargaining for public employees, including educators.

both the NEA and the AFT favor paying teachers bonuses to attract them to high-poverty schools.

On the issue that arouses the most controversy, getting rid of bad educators, many teachers' unions today also favor weeding out those who are not up to the job, *not* based strictly on test scores or the subjective judgment of principals, but through multiple measures of performance, including "peer review" plans. In peer review, expert teachers come into a school and work with struggling educators; many of those educators improve, but when the expert teachers do not see sufficient improvement, they recommend termination (and the final decision rests with the superintendent and/or school board). The average fifth-grade teacher has a powerful self-interest in getting rid of an incompetent fourth-grade colleague, which is part of why peer review programs in places like Toledo, Ohio, and Montgomery County, Maryland,

suffers from lots of other impediments to high achievement, such as higher levels of poverty, a history of segregation, and lower levels of school spending. Well, yes, but this response begs a question: If factors like poverty and segregation matter a great deal more to student achievement than the existence of collective bargaining, why not focus on those issues instead of claiming that the ability of teachers to band together and pursue their interests is the central problem in American education? Moreover, a 2002 review of 17 studies by researcher Robert Carini finds that when demographic factors *are* carefully controlled for, "unionism leads to modestly higher standardized achievement test scores."¹³

Critics of unions point out that teacher interests "*are not the same* as the interests of children."¹⁴ That's certainly true, but who are the selfless adults who think only about kids? For-profit charter school operators whose allegiance is to shareholders? Principals who send troublemakers back into the classroom because they don't want school suspension numbers to look bad? Superintendents who sometimes junk promising reforms instituted by predecessors because they cannot personally take credit? Mayors

who must balance the need to invest in kids against the strong desire of many voters to hold down taxes?

Do the hedge fund billionaires who bankroll charter schools have only the interests of children at heart? Might not it be in the self-interest of very wealthy individuals to suggest that expensive efforts at reducing poverty aren't necessary, and that a nonunion teaching environment will do the trick? When hedge fund managers argue that their income should be taxed at a 15 percent mar-

ginal rate, they limit government revenue and squeeze funds for a number of public pursuits, including schools. Is that putting the interests of kids ahead of adults, as the reformers suggest we should always do? Moreover, is the bias of Wall Street—that deregulation is good and unions distort markets—really beneficial for low-income children? Why aren't union critics more skeptical of deregulation in education, given that the deregulation of banking, also supported by Wall Street, wreaked havoc on the economy? And is the antipathy of hedge fund managers toward organized labor generally in the interests of poor and working-class students, whose parents can't make ends meet in part because organized labor has been eviscerated in the United States over the past half-century?

On many of the big educational issues—including levels of investment in education—the interests of educators who are in the classroom day in and day out do align nicely with the interests of the children they teach. Unlike the banks that want government money to cover for their reckless lending, teachers want money for school supplies and to reduce overcrowded classes. Yes, teachers have an interest in being well compensated, but presumably kids benefit too when higher salaries attract more talented educators than might otherwise apply.

Overall, as journalist Jonathan Chait has noted, politicians, who

If collective bargaining were really a terrible practice for education, we would see stellar results in the grand experiments without it: the American South and the charter school arena.



have resulted in increases in teacher terminations compared with previous systems in which administrators were in charge. In Montgomery County, for example, administrators dismissed just one teacher due to performance issues between 1994 and 1999, but during the first four years of the district's peer review program, 177 teachers were dismissed, were not renewed, or resigned.¹¹

Moreover, there is no strong evidence that unions reduce overall educational outcomes or are, as Moe and other critics suggest, at "the heart" of our education problems. If collective bargaining were really a terrible practice for education, we would see stellar results in the grand experiments without it: the American South and the charter school arena. Why aren't the states that have long forbidden collective bargaining for teachers—Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia—at the top of the educational heap? Why did the nation's most comprehensive study of charter schools (88 percent of which are non-union), conducted by Stanford University researchers and sponsored by pro-charter foundations, conclude that charters outperformed regular public schools only 17 percent of the time, and actually did significantly worse 37 percent of the time?¹² Why, instead, do we see states like Massachusetts, and countries like Finland, both with strong teachers' unions, leading the pack?

Union critics like Moe reply, reasonably enough, that the South

have short-term horizons, are prone to underinvesting in education, and teachers' unions "provide a natural bulwark" against that tendency.¹⁵ Because most voters don't have kids in the public school system, parents with children in public schools need political allies. The fact that teachers have, by joining together, achieved some power in the political process surely helps explain why the United States does a better job of investing in education than preventing poverty. The child poverty rate in the United States is 21.6 percent, the fifth highest among 40 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations. Only Turkey, Romania, Mexico, and Israel have higher child poverty rates. Put differently, we're in the bottom eighth in preventing child poverty.¹⁶ By contrast, when the interests of children are directly connected with the interests of teachers—as they are on the question of public education spending—the United States ranks close to the top third.

On many of the big educational issues—including levels of investment in education—the interests of educators in the classroom do align nicely with the interests of the children they teach.



Among 39 OECD nations, the United States ranks 15th in spending on primary and secondary education as a percentage of gross domestic product.¹⁷

Moreover, the United States would probably rank even worse on the poverty score were it not for the influence of teachers' unions and the American labor movement generally. Education reformers like Michelle Rhee have adopted the mantra that poverty is just an "excuse" for low performance, blithely dismissing decades of evidence finding that socioeconomic status is by far the biggest predictor of academic achievement. If we could just get the unions to agree to stop protecting bad teachers and allow great teachers to be paid more, Rhee says, we could make all the difference in education. The narrative is attractive because it indeed would be wonderful if student poverty and economic school segregation didn't matter, and if heroic teachers could consistently overcome the odds for students. But educators like Albert Shanker, the head of the AFT from 1974–1997, knew better. He believed strongly that teachers' unions should be affiliated with the AFL-CIO, in part because teachers could do a much better job of educating students if educators were part of a coalition that fought to reduce income inequality and to improve housing and health care for children. Teachers know they will be more effective if children have full stomachs and proper eyeglasses, which is a central reason why the AFT remains an active part of the broader labor movement in trying to help rebuild the middle class.

While many divide the world between teachers' unions and reformers, the truth is that unions have long advocated a number of genuine reforms—inside and outside the classroom—that can have a sustained impact on reducing the achievement gap. They back early childhood education programs that blunt the impact of poverty and have been shown to have long-lasting effects on student outcomes. They back common academic standards of the type used by many of our successful international competitors. And in places like La Crosse, Wisconsin, Louisville, Kentucky, and Raleigh, North Carolina, teachers have backed public school choice policies that reduce concentrations of school poverty, thereby placing more low-income students in middle-class schools and increasing their chances of success.

Moreover, by democratizing education and giving teachers voice, unions can strengthen schools by tapping into the promising ideas teachers have for reform. At the same time, giving teachers greater voice reduces frustration and turnover. It is well documented that while teacher turnover is high in regular public schools, it is even higher in the largely nonunionized charter sector. As researchers David Stuit and

Thomas M. Smith have found: "The odds of a charter school teacher leaving the profession versus staying in the same school were 130 percent greater than those of a traditional public school teacher. Similarly, the odds of a charter school teacher moving to another school were 76 percent greater."¹⁸ Some charter advocates have tried to spin the higher turnover rates as a virtue, but

according to researcher Gary Miron, "attrition from the removal of ineffective teachers—a potential plus of charters—explains only a small portion of the annual exodus."¹⁹

Critics of unions also fail to understand that the union leaders benefit immeasurably from the insights of their members. In a much-discussed twist in his book *Class Warfare*, Steven Brill suggests that Randi Weingarten be appointed chancellor of New York City's public schools: once liberated from her obligation to represent teachers, she could use her savvy and smarts to improve education. But this suggestion misses the crucial point that much of a union leader's strength comes from the fact that she or he constantly interacts with teachers and learns from them how education reform theories actually work in practice.

Other union critics also try, unfairly, to drive a wedge between teachers and their elected union leaders. Columnist Jonathan Alter, for example, claims: "It's very, very important to hold two contradictory ideas in your head at the same time. Teachers are great, a national treasure. Teachers' unions are, generally speaking, a menace and an impediment to reform."²⁰ Interestingly, Moe, citing extensive polling data, concludes that his fellow critics like Alter are wrong on this matter. Moe finds that among teachers, "virtually all union members, whether Democrat or Republican, see their membership in the local as entirely voluntary and are highly satisfied with what they are getting."²¹ In a 2009 survey, 80 percent of teachers agreed that "without collective bargaining,

the working conditions and salaries of teachers would be much worse,” and 82 percent agreed that “without a union, teachers would be vulnerable to school politics or administrators who abuse their power.”²²

Finally, teachers’ unions, more than any other organizations, preserve the American system of public schools against privatization proposals. Other groups also oppose private school vouchers—including those advocating on behalf of civil liberties and civil rights, school boards associations, and the like. But only teachers’ unions have the political muscle and sophistication to stop widespread privatization. Today, vouchers and similar schemes serve one-third of 1 percent of the American school population. This fact infuriates union critics, including those who see large profit potential in priva-

direction opposite from the one advocated by Michelle Rhee, Governor Scott Walker, and other Democratic and Republican union critics.

As Shanker noted years ago, restricting bargaining to the issue of wages (as many states are now trying to do) is a clever trap in which critics can suggest that teachers care only about money. Collective bargaining should be broadened, not constrained, to give teachers a voice on a range of important educational questions, from merit pay to curriculum. This could help improve the battered image of teachers’ unions. But, more important, it could help students. □

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Restricting bargaining to wages is a clever trap in which critics can suggest that teachers care only about money. Collective bargaining should be broadened to give teachers a voice on a range of educational questions.



tization, and delights a majority of the American public.

Most of the public also supports collective bargaining for teachers and other public employees. A *USA Today*/Gallup survey found that by 61 to 33 percent, Americans oppose ending collective bargaining for public sector employees.²³ An NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll found that while most Americans want public employees to pay more for retirement benefits and health care, 77 percent said unionized state and municipal employees should have the same rights as union members who work in the private sector.²⁴ In November, Ohio voters overwhelmingly supported the collective bargaining rights of public employees, voting to repeal an antibargaining law by a margin of 61 to 39 percent.

The public is right on this question. Teachers should not have to go back to the pre-collective bargaining era, when they engaged in what Shanker called “collective begging.”²⁵ Educators were very poorly compensated; in New York City, they were paid less than those washing cars for a living. Teachers were subject to the whims of often autocratic principals and could be fired for joining a union.

Many states are facing dire budget crises, and unions need to be smart about advocating strategies that keep fiscal concerns in mind. That means moving beyond traditional efforts to pour more money into high-poverty schools. Magnet schools, which give low-income students a chance to be educated in a middle-class environment, are an especially promising investment. But this kind of engagement in education policy involves moving in a

Invisible Wars

Iraq, Afghanistan, and Teaching Insurgencies in Public Schools



BY CHRISTOPHER L. DOYLE

“We don’t think about them because they’ve been going on since we were little. It’s like background noise.” One of my students is answering my question. She is 17, upper-middle class, taking my Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History class. I had asked about the low level of understanding and high degree of apathy among her peers as we studied America’s two current wars.

Neither is necessarily their fault. Few of my students know anyone serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. In the suburb where they live, hardly anyone joins the military right out of high school, and there is no Fort Carson or Fort Bragg nearby to remind people

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there is a war or two going on. Unlikely to read newspaper coverage of the wars, this generation prefers the Internet. And our school’s curriculum has changed since early 2002 when the No Child Left Behind law went into effect just a few months after American soldiers entered Afghanistan. Contemporary issues classes no longer have currency, as standardized test results are the litmus test for education. In my school, and hundreds like it, students are isolated from firsthand accounts and formal study of events that textbooks will one day proclaim as defining experiences of their generation.

My own teaching about the wars improvises and flies under the radar. Moments of opportunity arise in AP U.S. History, after the national exam in early May, and in Humanities, a rare, endangered elective with a flexible curriculum detached from standardized testing. I begin by gauging my students’ hearts and minds. Asking what they know about the subject, I hear some fascinating stuff: “Osama bin Laden was the dictator of Afghanistan until we overthrew him.” “Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruc-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROB JOHNSON

tion that he was giving to al-Qaeda.” “We invaded Iraq because that’s where bin Laden was, and then he went to Afghanistan, so we invaded there.” I have my work cut out for me.

I define a reading list and use each work on it selectively. U.S. history students tackle Bob Woodward’s *Plan of Attack* (on tension between Colin Powell and Dick Cheney in the Bush White House), Dexter Filkins’s *The Forever War* (describing how long-term war has coarsened and degraded Afghan culture), Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (revealing the unprecedented extent to which war has been privatized in the Bush era), Rory Stewart’s *The Prince of the Marshes* (explaining factional divisions in Iraq), Russ Hoyle’s *Going to War* (showing the failure of weapons inspectors to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq), Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (on how neoconservative ideology drove decision making in Baghdad’s Green Zone), Colby Buzzell’s *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (a memoir), and the *New York Times* on U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan. I worry these sources might seem daunting, but I don’t have much time, and there is no single work that does justice to the topics I need to teach.

My fears are partially realized. Some students have trouble making sense of what they read. I intervene with impromptu lectures and discussions on the histories of Iraq and Afghanistan, who held what post in George Bush’s cabinet, and the status of women under Taliban rule. A few kids, insisting there were illicit weapons in Iraq, complain that the sources have a “liberal bias,” and they tell author Russ Hoyle just that when he comes into my classes to speak with them. (Hoyle responds that they can check his footnotes, read *The 9/11 Commission Report* online, and form their own conclusions.) I am probably trying to do too much, too quickly, and some kids are losing detail and nuance.

Not all of them engage successfully as historians of the wars, but my students are affected emotionally when they hear from people who have seen conflict firsthand. Humanities students, with whom I take a different approach by focusing on the psychological effects of combat, read chunks of Buzzell’s memoir and are thrilled when he returns an e-mail to answer questions about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They also warm up to the PBS *Frontline* series on PTSD; it elicits a long discussion about what a nation owes veterans when they come back from war. Kids usually prefer individual stories to big-picture complexity.

When two vets speak in Humanities class, the room is packed and you could hear a pin drop. One, a retired major, confirms that society seems largely indifferent to the emotional distress suffered by troops in battle. He had PTSD, and describes his sense of let-down upon returning from a war zone.

Students cry when a navy medic describes how his marine platoon killed an Iraqi couple for running a roadblock and then

discovered a 5-year-old child, unhurt, in the back seat of the pair’s bullet-riddled car. The medic himself almost breaks down telling about the time he had to clean up a vehicle in which two of his friends had been killed by a mortar shell.

My class is speechless when the medic, asked if he would go back to Iraq, says, “I’ve done my turn. Now it’s someone else’s.” Does he support a draft? “Yes. It’s not fair that we have to do so many tours.” The implications of this comment leave the kids uneasily silent.

Together, the speakers, books, television series, and newspaper stories raise troubling questions about individual and historical perspective, morality, the limits of our democracy, obligations of citizenship, and the traps that come with superpower status. I

remind my kids how an earlier generation of students, also somewhat privileged and sheltered, reacted to these questions. In history class, we had read Tom Hayden’s Port Huron Statement from 1962. Hayden complained, then, about college being disconnected from world-shaping events like the Cold War and civil rights struggles. He criticized higher education for playing too readily to the military-industrial complex. He and like-minded baby boomers formed an organization as a reaction, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

My students know that 2011 is not the 1960s. They need not fear a draft and have little incentive, except conscience and, lately, deficits, to care about wars thousands of miles from home. College has become so expensive, and seemingly so much rides on it, that my students view political activism as a luxury few can afford. Many want only to get into an elite school, graduate, get a job, pay back their student loans, and make money. Secondary education has also become narrower, more test driven, and less open to classroom inquiry that does not offer “measurable outcomes.” The news media has fragmented and is not generating the same public outrage it did when reporting on Vietnam. Maybe the media has become polarized and has lost persuasive force—as suggested by my students’ comments about “liberal bias.” It sounds quixotic to invoke the SDS to kids today.

I have little nostalgia for the upheaval of the ’60s, but I remain convinced that public education must engage the most pressing and troubling issues of our time. Because these two wars do not yet conform to any historical cliché, such as World War II being a “good war,” they force students to form their own interpretive meanings—just the kind of thinking we say we want them to do. I watched my students come to life when listening to those veterans talk, something that rarely happens when we study events from the distant past. There is nothing like a combat vet telling well-to-do high school kids that he favors a military draft to get them thinking about civic participation.

The 10th anniversary of September 11 suggested a related dif-

In my school, and hundreds like it, students are isolated from firsthand accounts and formal study of events that textbooks will one day proclaim as defining experiences of their generation.

faculty for educators. Many felt compelled to say something to students about the date, but their priorities seemed confused. The vast majority opted to stress solemnity, reverence for the dead, and national unity. In doing so, teachers and scripted 9/11 lessons too often fell back on stock phrases and images: planes hitting buildings, firefighters raising a flag, statements about American resolve being tested, and explanations for the ensuing wars as efforts to promote freedom globally. This may be appropriate as commemoration, but as history it falls short, especially 10 years out.

It falls short because historians ascribe meaning. The British philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood once asserted that “nothing capable of being memorized is history,” a remark I use with students to illustrate the historian’s job as meaning maker. (Many of my students are not pleased to hear this; it confuses them.) The process of definition requires historians to move beyond sound bites and clichés, and it necessitates argument. Intrinsic to history, argument does not play well given current levels of discord in politics and society; this is especially true about a subject as sensitive as 9/11.

Alan Bennett’s play *The History Boys* illustrates the problem of making historical arguments about the recent past, while pointing out an imperative to try. Set in an English secondary school in the early 1980s, in one scene two teachers and their students debate the meaning of the Holocaust. Some in the class take the position that the enormity of the event makes it unspeakable: “Nothing is appropriate” except silence. But this is not satisfactory, and a young teacher gets the last word:

No. But this is history. Distance yourselves. Our perspective on the past alters. Looking back, immediately in front of us is dead ground. We don’t see it and because we don’t see it this means there is no period so remote as the recent past and one of the historian’s jobs is to anticipate what our perspective of that period will be ... even on the Holocaust.

And even about September 11 and the wars, as I tell my students when we read that passage from the play. They, too, must distance themselves by trying to detach emotionally from their own moment in history. They have to articulate meanings using evidence and reason. Arguing over meaning, larger truths will emerge. That is a premise of historical scholarship and, I think, of democracy.

My classes’ amnesia and misinformation about the “war on terrorism” reflects a larger phenomenon: contemporary history too often goes missing from school. Education journalist Michael Winerip ran a story about my teaching of the wars in the *New York*

Times on May 23, 2011; he, too, found newsworthy the curricular void that ignores important contemporary issues. The responses I got to the *Times* story suggest that it resonated elsewhere. Schools tend not to teach many, perhaps most, headline-making problems: climate change, debt crises, the national and international polarization of wealth, revolutions in the Middle East, and oil dependence. No wonder we commemorate 9/11 without teaching it as historical cause and effect. Students can graduate from many, perhaps most, high schools today and remain tragically naive about the public history of their own times.

Thus I feel a bit like an insurgent, slipping my lessons into our school culture covertly so they will not raise accusations about me deviating from the official curricular script. As an insurgent might, I fight for the attention of an audience subject to

ignorance, distraction, and apathy. Ultimately, though, my goal differs; it is not to propagandize but to educate. I want to inform my students and get them to care about their nation’s involvement in these conflicts. As compelling as those veterans’ stories are, I cannot rely solely on their emotion to convey larger truths about the wars. I need sources that invoke higher meanings, use dispassionate analysis, and embrace complexity. I have to let students mull over the issues and to answer their questions. I have to deal with their confusion and even their occasional hostility. Doing so takes time, and it necessitates a legitimate place in the classroom.

But with our national fixation on standards and test scores, massive teacher layoffs, and a growing preference for merit pay based on test results, teaching about today’s wars demands furtiveness.

My experience reveals disjointedness in public education of the sort that John Dewey criticized a century ago. School must reflect the history-making events of modern times. If it does not, it offers poor training for democratic citizenship and the life of the mind. I am enthusiastic about teaching the wars again. I believe I can do it better next time. Yet I suspect the only way Afghanistan or Iraq will find their way into my school’s official curriculum is if someone makes these conflicts into a question on a standardized test.

The only other option is public pressure. One need not have a political bias to insist that schools restore current events to their curricula. Congress has not made it a priority, but the No Child Left Behind law is overdue for revision, and we can insist that when Congress acts, it takes a broader view than mere bottom-line number crunching. It would be a mistake to reduce education merely to test success, job training, or the pursuit of high-status college admission. Schools must connect with life beyond the classroom, and public education properly done has to prepare students for citizenship in a democratic society. □



First, Do No Harm

Children's Environmental Health in Schools



BY KEVIN M. CHATHAM-STEPHENS,
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In the past century, the threats to our children's health have shifted radically. Life-threatening infectious diseases—smallpox, polio, and cholera—have been largely conquered. Babies born in the United States today are expected to live

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two decades longer than their ancestors did 100 years ago.

But our children are growing up in a world in which environmental toxins are ubiquitous. Measurable levels of hundreds of man-made chemicals are routinely found in the bodies of all Americans, including newborns. Infants are exposed to polychlorinated biphenyls, lead, and mercury in the womb and through breast milk. Baby bottles and toys have been found to contain phthalates, bisphenol A, and lead, all toxins that have been linked to reproductive and developmental disorders.

As harmful elements detected in everyday household items increase, rates of chronic disease have also risen sharply—and these conditions are now the leading causes of childhood illness and death. Air pollution and cigarette smoke contribute to asthma, the most common chronic disease of childhood, which has increased 160 percent in the past 15 years for children under age 5. Chemicals called endocrine disruptors—found in pesti-

At school and at home, in playgrounds and public parks, children (and adults) are constantly exposed to environmental toxins, including vehicle emissions, peeling lead paint, and pesticides, as the photos above show.

cides, herbicides, some plastics, and air and water—can interfere with the body’s hormone signaling system, potentially causing reproductive disorders, neurologic impairments, and immune dysfunction. Cancer, which kills more children under age 15 than any other disease, is linked to solvents and pesticides. Early exposure to lead, mercury, and certain pesticides are suspected to contribute to autism, ADHD, and other developmental conditions, which affect 5 to 10 percent of babies born each year.

A contaminated environment takes an economic toll, costing \$76 billion in medical treatment and lost productivity each year. Efforts to improve the health of our population can be successful only if they are tied to strong environmental policies.¹

Historically, this has paid off. In the 1970s, landmark studies on childhood lead poisoning resulted in the removal of lead from paint and gasoline, producing a 90 percent decline in lead poisoning. Children’s average intelligence subsequently rose by five to six IQ points. And in the 1990s, two major pesticides were banned after being shown to have detrimental effects on childhood development.

As harmful elements detected in everyday items increase, rates of chronic disease have also risen sharply—and these conditions are now the leading causes of childhood illness and death.

Responsibility for developing strong environmental policies does not rest with government alone. Other organizations—including schools—also should have carefully developed policies to ensure that they provide clean and safe environments. School-age children can spend anywhere from 35 to 50 hours per week in and around school facilities. As a result, the physical environment of the school plays an important role in children’s (and employees’) health. The design and maintenance of the school environment should take into consideration that children are not “little adults.” Compared with adults, they breathe at a faster rate, their metabolic rates are higher, and they consume more food and water per pound of body weight. Since school-age children are still growing and developing, chemicals in their environment can affect them differently than adults.² Because of their unique interaction with their surrounding environment, it is vital to ensure a safe school environment for all children. Teachers and administrators can serve as advocates for children by identifying and addressing environmental hazards in schools. This article highlights common environmental problems in the school setting—lead, pesticides, mercury, arsenic, outdoor and indoor air pollution, mold, asbestos, radon, bisphenol A/phthalates, and polychlorinated biphenyls—and identifies steps teachers and administrators can take to prevent or minimize exposure to these problems.



Lead

Lead is a heavy metal long recognized as toxic to humans. Although it is used for many industrial purposes, there is no level of lead in the blood considered to be safe for humans. Children are at particularly high risk for lead toxicity because their brains are developing at a rapid pace, and younger children are more likely to ingest lead in dust via hand-to-mouth behavior, such as crawling or playing on the ground and then eating.³ The adverse health effects of lead on the developing brain are of particular relevance to the school environment, since lead can cause deficits in attention and IQ, as well as behavioral problems, even at low levels of exposure.⁴ Children with low levels of lead poisoning will likely not display any acute symptoms, although higher levels of lead can result in constipation, anemia, seizures, and even death. Other populations at elevated risk within the school population include pregnant women, whose fetuses’ brains are especially vulnerable to the toxic effects of lead, and children with developmental delays who may have

Deteriorating classrooms are not only unsightly, they are unhealthy. Water damage can cause mold, and peeling paint may contain lead.

particularly susceptible brains and may exhibit more hand-to-mouth behavior.

Sources of Lead in the School Environment

The potential exposure pathways for lead most relevant for schools include deteriorating lead-based paint, lead-contaminated dust and soil, lead-containing art supplies, and lead-lined water pipes and water coolers.⁵ Although lead-based paint was banned in the United States in 1977, older school buildings may still contain lead-based paint, which poses a risk particularly if the paint is in poor condition and may flake onto the floor, accumulating as dust that could be inhaled or ingested. Particular caution should be taken in kindergarten and prekindergarten because children in these age groups are more likely to engage in hand-to-mouth behavior. Lead also can be present in dust from vehicle emissions, although the sale of lead-based gasoline for on-road vehicles was

Pesticides

Pesticides, such as insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, and disinfectants, are used in schools to maintain hygienic conditions and control rodents and insects. While they play a role in protecting the food supply and controlling disease, there is increasing scientific evidence that pesticides can be harmful to humans, especially children. Children are particularly vulnerable because they have less-developed detoxification pathways as well as a longer life expectancy, thereby permitting a greater time in which to develop diseases with long dormancy periods.

Pesticide exposure can cause both acute and chronic health effects. The acute health effects are cough, shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, eye irritation, and headaches. There is also increasing evidence of an association between pesticide use and health problems such as cancer, as well as neurologic and reproductive health problems. Pesticide exposure at schools has been linked to illnesses among employees and students, albeit rarely. Higher rates of illness occur in school staff than in students because staff members more commonly handle pesticides.⁷

Sources of Pesticides in the School Environment

Children and adults are exposed to pesticides through inhalation, ingestion, and dermal contact. Children can be exposed to pesticides that have been applied in school buildings and on playgrounds. Pesticides can be inhaled during or after application, and children may absorb pesticide residues through their skin by touching surfaces that have been treated. Pesticides also can accumulate in the soil around the school and be ingested when a child plays in this soil (especially through the hand-to-mouth activity common among younger children). In addition, pesticide residues may be found on fruits and vegetables, highlighting the importance of thoroughly washing fruits and vegetables to decrease pesticide exposure. There is also a risk of a child swallowing pesticides that are stored in their environment.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Pesticides

Implementation of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) programs can reduce exposure to pesticides among children and school staff. IPM is a technique that controls pests by preventing their access to food, water, and shelter. IPM programs can be more cost-efficient than, and as effective as, traditional pest-control techniques using pesticides.

The first step of initiating an IPM project is to create a team to develop written policy and procedure guidelines for school pest management. These guidelines should include appointing a pest manager, monitoring and identifying the nature of the pest problems, and eliminating the source of the problems without pesticides (e.g., repairing cracks or crevices, sealing doors, moving trash receptacles away from the building, and ensuring sanitary conditions). As part of the program, the school community should be educated about pesticides and IPM. If nontoxic methods fail or are impractical to control pests, the least-toxic pesticides may be used (pesticides without labels such as "Warning" or "Danger"), and only trained workers should handle and apply pesticides, following the directions on the pesticide container and wearing protective equipment. The school community should be notified and provided with reentry recommendations when pesticides are used. After implementing IPM, records of

Lead in soil is of special concern for school playgrounds that may be near a source of lead, such as a battery plant.

phased out through 1986 by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Lead in soil is of special concern for school playgrounds that may be near a source of lead, such as a battery plant. Art supplies such as paint and crayons also may contain lead, but are legally required to be labeled as such, according to the Labeling of Hazardous Art Materials Act of 1988. Lead-lined water pipes may leach lead into drinking water, particularly when the water has been sitting overnight, or over weekends or holidays. A 2006 study found that drinking water was not considered an important source of lead at the background levels typically found in schools' drinking water, although specific schools' piping systems may contain higher levels of lead than those studied.⁶ Water coolers could be lined with lead, but since 1988 they have been legally required to be lead free.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Lead

There are several ways educators can help avoid lead exposure for themselves and their students. They can contact the principal or building manager to ensure that the school has been inspected for any sources of deteriorating lead-based paint, and that the school system's water has been tested. Special precautions such as closing off rooms or buildings should be taken when renovating or removing lead-based paint, as the dust generated can pose a hazard. Even when renovations are not being done, the school should be wet mopped regularly to minimize dust. Educators also can make sure to purchase safe lead-free art supplies and toys for classroom use by checking labels carefully. Teachers can work together with parents to teach children about lead and safe behaviors that can prevent lead ingestion, such as hand washing before eating to remove dust from hands. For more resources, see www.leadfreekids.org or call the National Lead Information Center hotline at 1-800-424-LEAD [5323].



Above, toxins from a chemical plant blow right over a school's athletic field, putting players and fans at risk. Right, wooden playgrounds may look inviting, but some have been built with wood treated with a form of arsenic.



pest control should be reviewed and the IPM program evaluated to address limitations and improve effectiveness. For further information, visit the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's website at www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2007-150.

Mercury

As with lead, there is no safe level of mercury in the human body. High levels of mercury can cause acute neurological symptoms such as hallucinations, flushing, vomiting, and vision changes. Pregnant women, fetuses, and children are particularly at risk for harm from exposure to even low levels of mercury, since it can increase the risk of miscarriage as well as cause damage to the developing brain, leading to decreased IQ and impaired memory and attention. Mercury also can damage the kidneys and heart.

Sources of Mercury in the School Environment

Mercury occurs naturally in coal and petroleum, and enters the environment when these fuels are burned. This mercury deposits

in rivers, lakes, and the ocean. The most common way people are exposed to mercury is by consuming fish that lived in contaminated water, with bigger fish such as tuna and shark containing the highest levels of mercury. Mercury is a silvery liquid at room temperature and is used in many places in the school environment, including lab equipment, thermometers, thermostats, batteries, and fluorescent light bulbs.⁸ If not discarded properly, these items can release mercury into the air or ground, which can then be inhaled or ingested. For example, compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs), which are increasingly popular in schools and homes because of their increased efficiency compared with incandescent bulbs, can release vaporized mercury if broken.⁹ Latex paints contained some mercury in the past, but since 1991 mercury has been banned from paints intended for indoor use.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Mercury

Even small mercury spills in the school environment should be cleaned up by a specialist—and never with a vacuum cleaner—since small amounts of mercury can vaporize and spread through the air if not disposed of properly.¹⁰ Teachers should be educated about and cautious in the storage and use of any mercury-containing equipment to prevent breakages and spills.¹¹ Educators can learn about the safe disposal and clean-up process for broken CFLs or mercury-containing thermometers. They also should be ready to contact local public health authorities immediately in the case of a mercury spill. Schools can make an effort to eliminate unnecessary use of items containing mercury by replacing devices with safer alternatives. Since a more common source of mercury exposure is ingestion of contaminated fish, school cafeterias

should work with local authorities to avoid serving species of fish known to contain high levels of mercury. For more resources, see the EPA's special website for mercury in schools at www.epa.gov/hg/schools.htm or visit www.mercuryinschools.uwex.edu.

Arsenic

A child's developing body is particularly vulnerable to arsenic, a dangerous toxin that can affect every organ system. Exposure to arsenic can increase the risk of cancer and diabetes, cause skin and nervous system problems, and interfere with the body's hormones. Arsenic can be inhaled or ingested and can affect developing fetuses when pregnant women are exposed, increasing the risk of miscarriages and birth defects.

Sources of Arsenic in the School Environment

Arsenic occurs naturally in the earth's crust, and has been used for many industrial purposes, from pest control to smelting, that emit it into water, soil, or air.¹² For instance, a school using well water contaminated with arsenic, or a school situated near a smelter that emits arsenic into the air, would be at higher risk. The best-known potential exposure to arsenic in a school environment is from playgrounds made from wood treated with a type of arsenic known as chromated copper arsenate (CCA) to kill pests and preserve the wood. A 2004 Canadian study found that children who played on CCA-treated wooden playgrounds, or on the ground around them, did indeed have higher levels of arsenic on their hands than children who played on playgrounds made of other materials. However, the study also found that the overall exposure was lower than the amount of arsenic typically ingested from food and water.¹³ A 2010 study confirmed these findings and found no difference in the level of arsenic in the urine and saliva

of children playing on CCA-treated wooden playgrounds compared with children playing on other playgrounds.¹⁴

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Arsenic

As research continues about the impact of CCA-treated wooden playgrounds, educators can encourage children to wash their hands after playing on such playgrounds or on the ground around them, especially before eating. The Safe Playgrounds Project, through the Center for Environmental Health, has successfully lobbied to remove arsenic from wood intended for new playgrounds as of 2003. The project's website provides more information about how to minimize arsenic exposure when playing on older playgrounds (visit www.safe2play.org). Educators also can work with school administrators to ensure that the school's water has been tested for arsenic.

Outdoor Air Pollution

Acute health effects associated with outdoor air pollution are increased respiratory symptoms (e.g., wheezing, cough, and transient decrease in lung function) and increased school absenteeism due to respiratory illnesses. Children with asthma in particular are at risk for more respiratory symptoms, increased medication use, chronic phlegm, and more bronchitis following exposure to high levels of particulate pollution. In urban areas, a decrease in air quality can result in an increased number of hospitalizations among asthmatics. Living near areas of high traffic-related pollution has been linked to increased incidences of wheezing, bronchitis, and asthma hospitalization. Furthermore, attending schools in areas with high levels of traffic-related pollution has been implicated in higher rates of asthma diagnoses in children.¹⁵ Diesel exhaust, specifically, may worsen allergic and inflammatory responses to antigens (e.g., pollen) and may lead to the development of new allergies.¹⁶

Children are particularly sensitive to outdoor air pollution because they spend more time outside and are more active than adults, breathing more rapidly and inhaling more pollutants per pound. Furthermore, because children's airway passages are smaller, irritation by air pollutants can cause a proportionally greater level of airway obstruction.

Sources of Outdoor Air Pollution in the School Environment

The sources of outdoor air pollution include both stationary and mobile sources that may be located adjacent to school buildings. Stationary sources of air pollution are factories, power plants, and smelters, as well as smaller sources such as dry cleaners and degreasing operations. The mobile sources of outdoor air pollution are cars, buses, trucks, trains, and airplanes. Naturally occurring sources (windblown dust and volcanic eruptions) also contribute to outdoor air pollution. These pollution sources can emit a wide variety of pollutants and affect air quality.

The EPA, as well as national, state, and local organizations, monitors air quality by measuring the levels of six pollutants (ground-level ozone, carbon monoxide, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, lead, and nitrogen dioxide). Of these six, ground-



As the article states, "attending schools in areas with high levels of traffic-related pollution has been implicated in higher rates of asthma diagnoses in children." Above, a scientist measures the diesel particulate pollution from a school bus.

level ozone and particulate matter are the most hazardous to humans. Ozone is the principal component of urban smog, formed in the atmosphere from a chemical reaction involving sunlight and exhaust from motor vehicles and power plants. The movement of chemical emissions from these sources can affect ozone levels hundreds of miles downwind from the original sources. Ozone levels are highest on hot, dry, stagnant summer days and increase in the late afternoon. Particulate matter consists of a mixture of solid particles and liquid droplets. Particulate matter smaller than 10 micrometers in diameter (called PM₁₀) can be seen as a general haze that impairs visibility.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Outdoor Air Pollution
There are several steps schools can take to minimize the exposure

Schools near busy roads can decrease children's exposure by ensuring proper installation and maintenance of heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems.

of students to outdoor air pollution. For example, many states have instituted idling laws for vehicles. These laws require the driver of a school bus, transit bus, or other commercial heavy-duty vehicle to minimize idling at public and private schools. Schools can work with officials to limit truck traffic near classrooms during school hours if the nearby roads are under local jurisdiction. Schools also can develop a policy to minimize idling of cars at the school, especially during drop-off and pickup times when many children are nearby. The school community can promote the purchase of clean, low-emitting fuels for buses when replacing old diesel school buses, and can equip existing buses with exhaust particle filters. In addition, schools near busy roads can decrease children's exposure by ensuring proper installation and maintenance of heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, and can try to avoid locating air-intake vents close to busy roads. Furthermore, schools can upgrade their current HVAC filters to higher-efficiency ones. During peak traffic hours, windows and doors should be closed to reduce traffic pollution. Also, if possible, outdoor school activities should occur in areas farther from high-traffic roads, especially during peak traffic hours.

A school nurse (which all schools should have) may want to check the daily air quality index, a color-coded scale that reports levels of air pollutants, and recommend precautions for asthmatics on days when the air quality is forecasted to be poor. Some examples of precautions include staying indoors, limiting outdoor activities as much as possible, or venturing outdoors only in the early morning when pollutant levels are often lower. If the air quality forecast calls for poor air quality, the nurse can discuss with physical education teachers and administrators whether scheduled outdoor activities should be held indoors for the day. For further information, visit www.oehha.ca.gov/eastbaykids/



[factsheetschoolsfinal.pdf](#) and www.dnr.wi.gov/air/aq/health/healthprofessionals.htm.

Indoor Air Pollution

Indoor air quality problems often cause nonspecific symptoms rather than clearly defined illnesses. Indoor air pollutants can irritate the skin, eyes, nose, throat, and upper airways. They may also cause redness or inflammation of the skin, headache, and abnormal taste. Exposure to these chemicals can result in respiratory effects such as rapid breathing, exacerbation of asthma and allergies, and flu-like symptoms. Asthmatics may be particularly susceptible to indoor pollutants. Central nervous system effects from carbon monoxide, one example of an indoor air pollutant, may include headache, fatigue, nausea, and if severe, lack of coordination, impaired judgment, and blurred vision.

Sources of Indoor Air Pollution in the School Environment

Many schools are in old, ill-maintained buildings that are at risk for poor indoor air quality. The levels of specific contaminants in indoor air can be significantly higher than outdoor levels. Some examples of indoor air pollutants are formaldehyde and other volatile organic compounds (which include highly scented products, paints and lacquers, rug cleaners, and paint strippers), pesticides, molds and bacteria, and byproducts of combustion such as solid particles, carbon monoxide, and nitrogen oxides. Other factors that affect the quality of indoor air include the activities of building occupants (including maintenance activities), types of building materials, furnishings and equipment, levels of outdoor contamination, seasons, indoor humidity and tempera-

ture, and ventilation rates. Secondhand cigarette smoke is also an important source of indoor air pollution.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Indoor Air Pollution

Teachers and staff should protect students' health and set a positive example by not smoking. In addition, it is important for students, teachers, and staff to be trained to take precautions in storing and handling toxic materials used in school (such as formaldehyde for animal specimen preservation). Furthermore, instructional facilities and equipment, including exhaust systems, need to be properly designed to avoid exposing students and staff to pollutants. All schools must have an effective way to ventilate the building by supplying outdoor air to the occupied areas within the school to remove pollutants.¹⁷ For more information, see the EPA's Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Tools for Schools website at www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/index.html. The site's Action Kit includes a variety of resources, checklists, and other means to evaluate and optimize air quality in schools.

Mold

The main way that mold causes health problems is through inhalation of airborne mold spores. Research has shown that exposure to mold can result in allergic symptoms (e.g., runny nose and red, itchy eyes), common cold-type symptoms (e.g., nasal congestion and cough), and asthma attacks.¹⁸ Some individuals are allergic to certain types of mold, which places them at higher risk for having symptoms. Children with difficult-to-control asthma may benefit from allergy testing, including evaluating for mold allergy. Families of children with asthma should discuss this issue with their health care provider. In addition, children with compromised immune systems, including those with cancer or receiving chemotherapy, also may be more susceptible to health problems from mold.

Sources of Mold in the School Environment

While typically thought of as a problem with forgotten food in the back of the refrigerator, mold can grow in any room in any type of building, including schools, where there is too much moisture or inadequate ventilation. Molds are fungi that occur naturally throughout the world. While you cannot see mold spores (the reproductive units of molds) with the naked eye, they are usually present in both outdoor and indoor air.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Mold

Where there is a mold problem, there is a moisture problem. If mold is found, then the area should be cleaned appropriately, and the source of moisture that led to the mold must be identified and dealt with. The area should not just be painted over without



addressing the source of water. Not all mold problems are directly visible, since mold can grow in hidden locations, such as underneath carpets and above ceiling tiles. Therefore, school staff should be aware of musty odors and water damage, both of which could be signs of mold. Areas of mold covering less than 10 square feet can be cleaned with water and soap, while larger areas should be addressed by trained individuals. The EPA has a fact sheet regarding mold in schools that lists several preventive strategies, including fixing any water leaks promptly, avoiding installing carpets in areas prone to getting wet, and ensuring rooms are adequately ventilated.¹⁹ In addition, relative humidity in the school should be maintained at 30 to 50 percent.

Air testing to determine the specific type of mold generally is not warranted, as the area should be cleaned regardless of the testing results. Complicating the question of whether to perform air testing are the facts that molds occur naturally, specific health levels have not been determined for the various types of mold, and individuals may react to certain types but not to others. If sampling for mold is deemed necessary, perhaps due to a persistent moldy odor of unknown source, then this should be performed by experienced contractors who adhere to recommended methods. Schools should consider hiring separate contractors to perform testing and remediation to reduce conflicts of interest. For further information, see www.cdc.gov/mold and www.epa.gov/mold/moldresources.html.

Asbestos

Asbestos is a fibrous mineral that occurs in nature in certain countries, notably Canada, Russia, Brazil, Australia, and South Africa. It is mined and then manufactured into a wide array of products. Asbestos is extremely resistant to fire and heat. Because of these properties, asbestos was used extensively in insulation and con-

Above, this water-damaged ceiling could be growing mold, causing allergy-like symptoms and asthma attacks. Right, asbestos, found in a variety of construction materials, is very dangerous when disturbed—for instance, when floor tiles with asbestos are broken. Removal must be done by trained specialists.

struction materials in the years prior to recognition of the grave dangers that it poses to human health. Much asbestos was used in school construction in the United States, especially from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Asbestos is an extremely hazardous material. While it does not cause acute health effects or symptoms following exposure, asbestos is a known human carcinogen. All forms of asbestos have been shown capable of causing cancer in humans, including mesothelioma and cancers of the lungs, larynx, ovaries, and probably the gastrointestinal tract.²⁰

Asbestos poses no hazard to health so long as it is in place and intact. Therefore, a child who attends a school known to have asbestos-containing materials is unlikely to be at risk for developing these health problems as long as these materials are well maintained and remain undisturbed.

When asbestos is disturbed or fractured, microscopic fibers of asbestos mineral are released into the air. Without the protective gear that asbestos remediation crews wear, these invisible air-



borne fibers can be inhaled. Because of their very small diameter, inhaled asbestos fibers can move deep into the respiratory tract and become trapped in the lungs. Once they are trapped in lung tissue, asbestos fibers can remain in the human body for years.

Chronic exposure to high levels of asbestos can lead to multiple lung diseases, including asbestosis, a chronic inflammation of the lungs that can cause shortness of breath and respiratory failure; malignant mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the lungs; and lung cancer. Asbestosis and asbestos-related lung cancer are seen primarily in industrial and construction workers with long histories of intense occupational exposure to asbestos. The risk of lung cancer is greatly magnified in asbestos-exposed workers who smoke cigarettes.²¹ But malignant mesothelioma can result from even brief, low-dose, nonoccupational exposures to asbestos. Thus, there is no safe level of exposure to asbestos. Mesothelioma can occur in students, teachers, and other school personnel who are exposed to asbestos in their schools. Malignant mesothelioma typically arises 20 to 50 years after exposure. Asbestos is the only known cause of malignant mesothelioma.

Sources of Asbestos in the School Environment

Many buildings, including schools, constructed or renovated prior

to the 1980s still contain asbestos today.²² Specific materials in schools that may contain asbestos include boiler wraps, ceiling tiles, dry wall, floor tiles, and insulation surrounding pipes.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Asbestos

Due to its potentially fatal effects, the use of asbestos has been largely phased out in developed countries. Since asbestos still remains in many buildings, however, exposure may still occur. Exposure is likely to occur during renovation or demolition projects. Through the Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act of 1986, the federal government requires that all schools in the United States periodically inspect for asbestos-containing materials, create a plan to manage these materials, and regularly evaluate these locations to check for any degradation. School authorities are mandated to make the results of these inspections available to the public. Asbestos that remains intact in a building typically does not represent a threat; actions that may disturb asbestos-containing materials and release the fibers into the air should be avoided.²³ For this reason, authorities usually recommend that schools do not remove asbestos unless the material is severely damaged or is a component of a renovation project. Any such projects should be performed by trained, certified individuals. If there is concern about asbestos due to, for instance, a fallen ceiling tile or damaged insulation in a boiler room, then the school's custodial staff and administration should be notified. The EPA maintains a website dedicated to the topic of asbestos in schools, including a description of the health effects and ways to minimize exposure to asbestos; for further information, see www.epa.gov/asbestos/pubs/asbestos_in_schools.html.

Radon

Radon is an odorless, tasteless, invisible gas produced through the decay of uranium in soil and water. It is a type of ionizing radiation that can cause lung cancer, the only known effect of radon on human health. There is no evidence that children are at a higher risk of lung cancer than adults.

Sources of Radon in the School Environment

Radon is found in both outdoor and indoor air. A nationwide survey of radon levels in schools estimates that nearly one in five has at least one classroom with a short-term radon level above the action level of 4 pCi/L (picocuries per liter), the EPA level at which schools are required to take action to reduce the level. More than 70,000 schoolrooms in use today are estimated by the EPA to have high short-term radon levels.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to Radon

The EPA recommends that all schools be tested for radon, but according to a recent estimate, only 20 percent of schools nationwide have performed some testing. Some states, however, have tested all their public schools.²⁴ It's important to test all frequently used rooms on and below the ground level and to conduct tests in the cooler months of the year. If the average of the initial and short-term follow-up tests is 4 pCi/L or greater, or the result of the long-term test is 4 pCi/L or greater, then a qualified radon service professional must evaluate and remediate the problem (see www.epa.gov/radon/radontest.html).



Left, this playground had unsafe levels of lead and arsenic in the soil, so the ground was covered in fabric and capped with clean soil to prevent children from being exposed to the toxins. Below, one of the most important things teachers can do to minimize exposure is to have students wash their hands frequently—especially before eating.

as shower curtains and floor tiling; and personal care products (often an ingredient in the “fragrance” listing).

The Educator’s Role in Preventing Exposure to BPA/Phthalates

Due to concerns about potential health effects, especially in children, some government bodies have banned BPA in certain products, such as baby bottles. In the school

setting, measures to reduce children’s exposure to BPA include avoiding #7 plastics, using BPA-free plastics, not microwaving food in plastic containers, and seeking alternatives to canned food, such as fresh or frozen vegetables.

In daycare and preschool settings, infants and toddlers may be at the highest risk for exposure to phthalates given their developmentally appropriate hand-to-mouth behavior. Schools with youth of all



ages should seek to purchase phthalate-free plastics, use fragrance-free products, and ensure that dust is minimized, as this also can be a source of phthalate exposure. For further information, see www.aoc.org/pehsu/facts.html.

Bisphenol A (BPA)/Phthalates

During the past two decades, there has been an increasing focus on the potential health effects of various groups of chemicals used in plastic materials. Many of these chemicals are endocrine disruptors, meaning they can interfere with our hormone system. Bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates are examples of endocrine disruptors that have come under scrutiny.

Much of the information we have regarding potential health effects for both of these chemicals comes from animal studies. Studies have found that individuals with higher levels of BPA in their urine have changes in some of their hormone levels, increased levels of abnormal liver enzymes, and higher rates of diabetes mellitus (“type 2 diabetes”) and cardiovascular disease.²⁵

Exposure to phthalates while in the womb has been associated with abnormalities in the genitals of newborn males and with poorer scores on behavior tests (specifically aggression, conduct, and attention) in school-age children.²⁶ Similar to the BPA studies, these findings do not prove that phthalates cause these changes or diagnoses directly, but that there is an association and further research is needed to clarify the potential relationship between these chemicals and human health.

Sources of BPA/Phthalates in the School Environment

BPA, which was initially considered to have potential medical applications due to its ability to mimic the female hormone estrogen, has been used in plastics for decades. It is commonly found in items made of #7 plastics, such as drinking water bottles; in the linings of food cans; in dental sealants; and in the ink used to print receipts.²⁷ Diet is thought to be the greatest source of exposure for most individuals, as BPA leaches into food and drinks from packaging. Exposure to BPA is common, with more than 90 percent of people in the United States having BPA in their urine.²⁸

Phthalates, which are often found in polyvinyl chloride (PVC) or #3 plastics, are in a wide variety of materials, including medical bags, tubing, and catheters; children’s toys; household items such

Polychlorinated Biphenyls

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are man-made chemicals that were frequently used in building materials and electrical products. The EPA banned manufacturing of PCBs in 1978, but buildings constructed or renovated between 1950 and 1978 may still have materials and electrical products with PCBs. Products containing PCBs include caulk, paint, glues, plastics, fluorescent lighting ballasts, transformers, and capacitors.

Acute exposure to high levels of PCBs can lead to rashes, decreased liver function, headaches, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain. These symptoms are seen only among people with exposure to very large amounts of PCBs (for example, workers who handle PCBs or people who ingest PCBs).²⁹ Long-term exposure to lower levels of PCBs also can cause health effects. Results from animal studies have shown that exposure may affect the immune, reproductive, nervous, and endocrine systems, and may cause cancer. Studies with humans have shown inconsistent findings for these health outcomes. Studies also show that high levels of PCBs in pregnant women (through regular ingestion of PCB-contaminated fish, for example) can affect their children’s birth weight, behavior, and development.³⁰

Sources of PCBs in the School Environment

PCBs remain in the environment for a long time because they

break down very slowly; they can be found in soil, air, water, and food. Because they are ubiquitous in the environment, almost everyone has been exposed to PCBs, and most people have some level of PCBs in their bodies. Since their ban, however, PCB levels in people have been decreasing.

The major source of PCB exposure is through food. Meat, dairy products, and fish contain small amounts of PCBs. In schools, exposure to PCBs can occur through the use of building materials and electrical products such as fluorescent light ballasts that release PCB-containing vapor and dust when they break down or are disturbed. Teachers and students can be exposed by inhaling these vapors and dust, through hand-to-mouth contact, and by dermal contact with PCB-containing materials.

The Educator's Role in Preventing Exposure to PCBs

There are steps educators can take to minimize exposure to PCBs. By consulting the EPA's IAQ Tools for Schools Action Kit (www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/actionkit.html), schools can assess their risk for having PCBs and find resources for testing and remediation. Some steps teachers can routinely take in their classrooms to minimize children's exposure to PCBs are cleaning surfaces and toys regularly, having children wash their hands with soap and water before eating, and improving ventilation in the classroom. Also, schools should not wait for fluorescent light ballasts containing PCBs to break; all PCB-containing ballasts need to be removed expeditiously from schools. If caulk containing PCBs is found, then it is important to follow safe work practices when renovating and to avoid direct contact with it. For more information on PCBs, see www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/epi/pcb.shtml and www.epa.gov/pcbsincaulk/caulkschoolkit.pdf.

Due to public health measures instituted over the past several decades, children's exposure to some environmental toxins, such as lead and mercury, has decreased substantially. In the case of lead, this decrease has had enormous benefits not only on an individual level, but also from a societal and economic standpoint.³¹ However, as exposure to these well-known toxins is decreasing, the emergence of other potential environmental threats to children's health, such as phthalates and BPA, must be investigated. As institutions integral to the health and development of children, schools should take steps to minimize exposure to the threats discussed in this article. By addressing these issues, we can ensure that schools are safe for students and staff. Our children are 30 percent of our population, but they are 100 percent of our future. They deserve our protection. □

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Meaningful Work

How the History Research Paper Prepares Students for College and Life



BY WILL FITZHUGH

“Without history, there is no way to learn from mistakes or remember the good times through the bad. History is more than a teacher to me; it’s an understanding of why I am who I am. It’s a part of my life on which I can never turn back.... In a sense, history is me, and I am the history of the future. History does not mean series of events; history means stories and pictures; history means people, and yet, history means much more. History means the people of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. History means me.”

Will Fitzhugh is the founder and editor of the Concord Review, a quarterly journal of history research papers by high school students, available at www.tcr.org. Previously, he taught history for 10 years at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School in Concord, Massachusetts. His education writing has appeared in EducationNews.org, the Washington Post’s The Answer Sheet, and the New York Times’ Room for Debate.

A junior from a public high school wrote these words as part of her grand-prize-winning essay in a national civics competition. The competition asked students to write about what history meant to them in 500 to 700 words. What it did not ask students to do was read any history books or journal articles or primary sources on which to base their writing, nor did it ask students to give references for the works they used. The competition did not ask students to develop a thesis statement or a narrative, support it with research, or write numerous drafts—all hallmarks of good writing. And so, the prize-winning essay excerpted above is really no prize. The student who wrote it read nothing to prepare for her short “essay” and so wrote nothing substantive.

Our students’ academic writing will rise, or fall, to the level of our expectations. Competitions like this one have low expectations. In so doing, they convey the idea that academic, expository writing based on research is neither valued nor necessary to a good education.

Writing competitions like this do not require so little of stu-

dents in a vacuum; they base their standards on those set by our schools. All too often, students are required to read far more fiction than nonfiction, and to write no more than five paragraphs about themselves, their families, or their neighborhoods. As a result, reading and writing have become diluted parts of the curriculum from elementary through high school. This is especially true in history, a discipline that requires close reading of sources (even an occasional actual history book) and carefully researched writing that seeks to understand, inform, and persuade.

For the lack of serious academic writing by our students, teachers are not to blame. A study I commissioned in 2002 found that 95 percent of U.S. public high school history teachers consider it important for students to write research papers in history and the social sciences. But the focus on standardized tests and superficial writing skills has left educators with little time to teach students how to write serious research papers and even less time to correct and grade them. As a result, this same study found that 81 percent of history teachers never assign a 20-page paper, and 62 percent never assign a 12-page paper, even to high school seniors.

Yet college professors continue to assign research papers. And they complain when the majority of students turn in mediocre (or abysmal) work. When college professors were asked in a 2006 survey conducted for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about students' preparation for college-level writing, reading, and research, only 6, 10, and 4 percent (respectively) said students were very well prepared. For many colleges and universities, this lack of preparation has shifted their focus from higher education to remediation. According to *Diploma to Nowhere*, a report published by Strong American Schools in 2008, more than one million of our high school graduates take remedial courses at our colleges each year. Periodically, the U.S. Department of Education tracks the percentage of students nationwide who are required to take remedial writing courses at two- and four-year colleges. According to recent estimates, between 7 and 14 percent of students take such classes. In fact, postsecondary institutions aren't the only ones offering them. A report published in 2005 by the National Commission on Writing found that state governments spend nearly a quarter of a billion dollars each year on remedial writing instruction for their employees.

By not preparing students for academic reading and writing, we set them up for failure in college and in the workplace. When we only ask that they read textbooks and write journal entries, we are not educating them. We are cheating them. We deny them the opportunity to see that reading is the path to knowledge, and that writing is the way to make knowledge one's own. The history research paper can help restore the importance of academic reading and writing in our schools, and in turn, refocus the purpose of education.

In 1987, I founded the *Concord Review*, the only quarterly journal that publishes history research papers by high school students from across the country and around the world. The papers, which average 5,500 words with endnotes and bibliographies, focus on a variety of topics and times, such as the hijab in Islam, the Bar Kokhba revolt, the Alaska pipeline, Irish nationalism, and Chinese immigration. I receive nearly 400 submissions for each issue, and I have the pleasure of selecting the best to publish. So far, essays in the *Concord Review* have come from 44

states and 38 foreign countries.

When I graduated from Harvard in 1962 with a degree in English literature, I had no idea that one day I would edit a unique journal. I'm a former corporate manager who worked for Polaroid, Pan Am, and North American Aviation. After 11 years in industry, I became a history teacher at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School in Concord, Massachusetts. While on sabbatical in my 10th year, I started the *Concord Review* with \$100,000 of an inheritance and the principal of my teacher retirement account. The exemplary work of some of my own students suggested that there were many others in the English-speaking world who were doing academic papers their peers might learn from. I wanted secondary students to see that they might be capable of serious historical scholarship.

Reading is the path to knowledge,
and writing is the way to make
knowledge one's own.

When I first began teaching in 1977, I assigned five- to seven-page papers in my 10th-grade classes. Often, a couple of students would find a topic so fascinating that they would read and write more than I had asked them to; they would turn in longer papers that were based on serious study and were well written. One 28-page paper that I still remember focused on the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. I figured there were students elsewhere who could also produce papers of that caliber and who would jump at the chance to have them considered for publication. I also hoped that by publishing the very best papers by high school students, I could motivate their peers to do similar work. Indeed, more than a few students over the years have told me that reading the essays in the *Concord Review* inspired them to try writing research papers themselves.

Students who wish to be published in the *Concord Review* often submit papers they have written for the few classes that still require them. For instance, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme, a rigorous curriculum for the junior and senior years of high school, requires that students write a 4,000-word research paper. Students choose a question to investigate for the paper, known as the "extended essay," that relates to one of the six academic areas they study in the IB curriculum: language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, experimental sciences, mathematics and computer science, and the arts. The IB program provides explicit steps, such as constructing an argument, referencing sources, and setting deadlines that students must take to complete the essay, the purpose of which is to help them "develop the skills of independent research that will be expected at university," according to the program's website. In addition to teachers in the IB program, some Advanced Placement (AP) teachers still assign research papers, even though the College Board, which runs AP, does not require them.

While I have published many such IB and AP essays, I often publish papers that students have spent several months, even an entire year, working on outside of class, usually with the guidance of a teacher. I have found that the more students learn about something, the more likely they are to want to write about it—and to strive to do it well.

While I admire these self-starters, I don't believe we should leave high standards for academic writing up to the students who set them for themselves. But this is what we have done in many of our public schools, where overburdened teachers do not have the time to guide students in writing history research papers. Having talked to hundreds of teachers over the years, I can attest that while many teachers may not have the time to devote to such papers, they do have the interest.

I have found that the more students learn about something, the more likely they are to want to write about it—and to strive to do it well.

Last summer, I gave a three-day workshop on student history research papers for middle and high school English and social studies teachers in Collier County, Florida. I showed these teachers how to assess four high school students' research papers using the procedures of the National Writing Board, a service I created to provide high school students with independent assessments of their history research papers. The board employs a few high school teachers we have trained to assess each research paper for the author's understanding of the topic, use of sources, evidence, and language. After reviewing each paper, the board provides each student with a four-page report of the paper's strengths and weaknesses. Students often ask us to send this report to college admissions officers if the students believe the assessment will strengthen their college applications.

The Florida teachers and I discussed the advantages students have in college—strong research and writing skills, deep knowledge of a historical topic—if they have researched and written a serious paper in high school. Still, the teachers could not fully commit to assigning their students a 20-page history research paper, the typical length of the ones I publish in the *Concord Review*. Each teacher had six classes of about 30 students, and one teacher was asked to teach seven classes that year, with more than 30 students in each class. If teachers with six classes were to ask

for 20-page research papers, they would have to guide 180 students in researching 180 individual topics. Who knows how many thousands of pages of rough drafts they would have to read, correct, and comment on? At the end of term, each teacher would have to assess 3,600 pages of final papers. The one teacher with more than 210 students would have at least 4,200 pages of final papers to grade.

It frustrates me that these willing teachers, who want to prepare their students for higher education by assigning them research papers, may not be able to do so. I share this story to illustrate that our educational priorities and practices must change. I applaud these public school teachers who invited me to Florida and the ones elsewhere who work with students on history research papers outside of class. Their predicament explains the dearth of public school students published in the *Concord Review*. Of the 11 papers published in each issue, usually two to four are written by students in public schools. The rest come from students in private schools. This was not always the case. In the first 10 years of the *Concord Review*, more than a third of the papers I published came from public school students. I have published and continue to publish several excellent papers by students from public

schools where teachers through the years have been able to encourage academic research and writing. These schools include Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville, Maryland; Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, New York; and Hunter College High School in New York City, for instance. But all too often, private school teachers seem to have more opportunities to engage students in this kind of work. As a result, publishing few public school students is one of the criticisms I continually face, but I can publish only the papers students send me.

I often wonder what insightful history papers students like Laura Arandes could have written had their teachers had time to challenge them with reading non-fiction books, analyzing dozens of primary sources, and writing history research papers. Arandes graduated from a public high school in Los Angeles where she never wrote more than five paragraphs. About a decade ago, when she arrived as a freshman at Harvard, she was shocked at how poorly prepared she was.

"I thought a required freshman writing course was meant to introduce us to college paper-writing.... In reality, the course was a refresher for most of the other students in the class," she wrote in a letter to me. "At a high-level academic institution, too many of the students come from private schools that have realized that it would be an academic failure on their parts to send their students to college without experience with longer papers, ... exposure to non-fiction literature, and knowledge of bibliographic techniques.

(Continued on page 40)



A Closer Look at Meaningful Work

As Will Fitzhugh makes clear in his article (which begins on page 32), educators tend to agree that writing history research papers is an important learning experience for students. It compels them to think deeply about a topic, conduct detailed research, formulate an argument, and organize their thoughts into a coherent and persuasive piece of writing.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the dedicated teachers who guide students through the months of work needed to research and write a serious paper. One such teacher is Richard Luther of Tenafly High School in Tenafly, New Jersey. A 40-year veteran teacher who is retiring this year, Luther (at right) always assigns his Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History students an extensive research paper and integrates their research into their coursework and preparation for the AP exam.

For teachers interested in learning how they, too, can challenge students with such an assignment and better prepare them for college-level work, American Educator asked Luther to explain how he guides students through the research and writing process. And, to show both the fruits of Luther's process and the high-quality writing in the Concord Review, we have reprinted roughly half of "Young Hickory: The Life and Presidency of James Knox Polk," which Rachel Waltman wrote for Luther during the 2009–2010 school year and which appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of the Concord Review.

—EDITORS

Editors: You've spent the past 40 years guiding students through the difficult tasks of researching and writing a historical essay. No doubt you've honed your methods over time, and other teachers will benefit from learning about your process. Let's start with your basic requirements.

Richard Luther: In AP U.S. History, each student writes one major research paper on an American president. The paper, which must be between 25 and 27 pages, excluding bibliography, is a yearlong project. I actually discuss the paper with students during their sophomore year before they begin the course junior year. At a March meeting after school, I meet with all students interested in taking AP U.S. History. I explain the goals, expectations, and requirements for the course, including the research paper. I then tell the students that there is a June meeting where they will all receive their textbooks and course assignments. At this meeting, they will also



COURTESY OF DAVID DI GREGORIO

select a president for their research paper. Between the March and June meetings, the students have to come up with a list of the top five presidents they would like to research. Several students do some quick reads concerning presidents before this meeting. By June, the master schedule for each section of AP U.S. History is complete, and I obtain student rosters from the guidance department so I know which students are in which section. At the June meeting, I select students at random from each list, and they announce their choices. Students in each section of AP U.S. History must pick a different president; we don't duplicate. While a few students may be upset at first because they don't get to research their top choice, by the end they would not have wanted to research another president.

Editors: Many students find writing an extensive research paper overwhelming at first. How do you help them structure their research?

Richard Luther: I give them the following 15 questions/topics to address about their president. This not only breaks the research project into manageable chunks, it also ensures that students will not overlook an important facet of the presidency and helps them spread the work over the year. And, this gives students a strategy for writing research papers that they can use throughout college.

1. Summary of family background and childhood. How does this influence him later as president?

2. Description of character and personality. Explain how these attributes help or hurt his presidency.
3. Nongovernment career (before and after the presidency). How does this prepresidency career prepare him for the presidency?
4. Government career (before and after the presidency). How does this prepresidency career prepare him for the presidency?
5. Detail and describe literary and other achievements.
6. Philosophy of life (provide examples). Relate to his presidency.
7. Philosophy of government (provide examples). Relate to the presidency.
8. Analyze how the president handled major problems/crises during his term of office (describe problems/crises, rank order them from most severe to least severe, and then analyze solutions).
9. How would you have solved these problems if you were president?
10. Analyze the impact on the country (both long- and short-term) of the president's successes.
11. Analyze the impact on the country (both long- and short-term) of the president's failures.
12. Analyze his relationships with the American people and Congress.
13. Was he a mirror to the age in which he lived? Explain!
14. Imprint on U.S. and world history.
15. Evaluate why and how your president did or did not change the power of the presidency. Explain!



According to Daniel T. Willingham, well-crafted questions can increase learning. See [www.aft.org/pdfs/american_educator/spring2009/Willingham\(2\).pdf](http://www.aft.org/pdfs/american_educator/spring2009/Willingham(2).pdf).

Editors: Addressing these 15 questions would require a lot of research. How do you keep students focused throughout the year? Do you integrate their research into the rest of the course?

Richard Luther: The answers to these questions ultimately form the basis for the research papers. But throughout the months leading up to the AP exam, students give what I call “recitations” or oral presentations in which they share answers to these 15 questions with the rest of the class. In this way, the research project serves as a preview to, or review of, material in the too few months we have prior to taking the AP exam. So, if it’s September or October and one of the students is talking about Bill Clinton or Ronald Reagan, that’s really a preview of material that we’re going to be studying later in the course. In January and February, recitations by the students who have chosen people like Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, or McKinley are reviews of material. So this research paper helps to reinforce their knowledge of American history in preparation for the AP exam.

Editors: How do the recitations prepare students for the research papers?

Richard Luther: The recitations allow students to bite off a little bit of the research project as they go along. I tell them to consider each question like a chapter in a book about your president. So the first question about family background and childhood would be chapter 1. I always admonish them, “Make sure you write your sources down. After the recitation is over, you can write it as an essay and bring it to me if you want. I can look at it for you and make suggestions.” Some students just write notes. Others will transform the recitation into a short essay that can stand on its own. By the time they’re done, one may say the research paper is a collection of 15 essays, each answering one of those questions.

After the AP exam, students have three to four weeks to work on their papers before the final paper is due, usually at the end of May or beginning of June. During this time, students spend class time using computers at school to polish their papers. Good writing doesn’t happen with the first draft. It happens after several drafts. Some

students ask me to read and comment on their drafts, but I grade only the final paper. Some students work on their papers in the classroom; some go to the library. I’ll walk around to make sure everyone is on task and to answer questions. Administrators at Tenafly High School have been very good at carving out time for this project.

Editors: What do students get out of this assignment?

Richard Luther: The recitations motivate students to dig further into their research, which in turn makes them well prepared to write. The best papers provide analysis. That’s what I look for. I want the students to think and evaluate what it is that this president has done. They don’t have to be this president’s chief cheerleader, so to speak. It’s all right to say this president made a mistake on this particular issue. I want the students to be able to think about and evaluate their sources. I believe that it’s very important that they learn to question their sources: Is this author biased or not? So that way, whenever they’re doing research in the future, they can be critical thinkers. That’s what I’m really after. □

Young Hickory: The Life and Presidency of James Knox Polk

The following unedited sample from the Concord Review is not quite half of the essay Rachel Waltman wrote for Richard Luther’s AP U.S. History class. We regret that we did not have room to reprint the whole essay; to read it in full, go to www.aft.org/pdfs/american_educator/winter1112/Waltman.pdf. For more essays from the Concord Review, go to www.tcr.org/tcr/essays.htm.

—EDITORS

BY RACHEL WALTMAN

In May 1844, Democratic Party leaders met in Baltimore to nominate their candidate for the presidential election to be held later that year. They passed over leading contenders, including Martin Van Buren, Lewis Cass, John C. Calhoun, and Thomas Hart Benton, and instead nominated James Knox Polk, a relatively unknown former Congressman from Tennessee.¹ Many people thought Polk’s political career was over following his second failed bid to win reelection as Governor of Tennessee just nine months before.² The nomination of this “dark horse” candidate—which surprised no one more than Polk himself—was met with ridicule and derision by the opposing Whig Party.³ “Who is James K.

Polk?” they jeered.⁴ The Whigs considered Polk no match for their candidate, Henry Clay, a popular and influential politician from Kentucky. Even Clay, in a moment of “arrogant candor,” expressed regret that the Democrats had not selected a candidate “more worthy of a contest.”⁵ The Whigs should not have been so smug. Buoyed by the popularity of the Democrats’ expansionist platform, Polk won the election by a narrow margin.⁶ At age 49, he became the 11th President of the United States, the youngest man up to that time to be elected to the position.⁷

For the next four years, Polk tirelessly devoted himself to achieving *each and every one* of the goals he set during his presidency. Yet, despite his many accomplishments, Polk did not escape his four years in office with his reputation unscathed. Despite America’s victory in the Mexican War, the Whigs, led by Abraham Lincoln, harshly criticized Polk for his role in the outbreak of the war, which led to his censure by the House of Representatives in 1848.⁸ Several years later, Ulysses S. Grant concurred with Lincoln’s assessment of Polk in his memoirs, referring to the Mexican War as “the most unjust war ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation.”⁹ These

attacks on Polk negatively affected history’s view of him. However, attitudes about him began to change in the 20th century, as presidential historians took a fresh look at Polk’s accomplishments, and consistently included him in their rankings of America’s “great” or “near great” presidents.¹⁰ As a result, many Americans were again asking, “Who is James K. Polk?”

I. Polk’s Background and How it Influenced him as President

James K. Polk was born on November 2, 1795 in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, a place “where men lived simply on the fruits of their own labor without expectations of easy wealth and dealt honestly with each other on a basis of rough equality and mutual respect.”¹¹ Polk was the first of 10 children. His father, Samuel Polk, was of Scots-Irish descent, and was a slaveholder, a successful farmer, and a surveyor. His mother, Jane Knox Polk, was the great-grandniece of Scottish Reformation leader John Knox.¹²

Polk’s childhood was marked by several distinct influences that would later affect him as President. Significantly, Polk’s grandfather, Ezekial, and his father Samuel, were staunch supporters of Jefferson’s

Republican philosophy, which undoubtedly influenced Polk's later political views. As one historian notes, "As Polk grew into adulthood, everything he had grasped about the conflict between Federalist and Republican values seemed to reinforce a basic and logical argument that the country would be better served if national government was the declared servant of all the people (or all those who were not slaves) and was barred from acting chiefly as the agent of the rich and powerful constituencies."¹³

While the Polk family may have agreed on politics, they did not agree on religion. Polk's mother, Jane, was a devout Presbyterian. Raised under the influence of her strict Presbyterianism, Polk derived a rigid self-discipline that would govern his actions throughout his life.¹⁴ His father, however,

During his childhood, Polk suffered from extremely poor health. As a result, his early education was delayed "in consequence of having been very much afflicted."¹⁸ When he was 17, his illness was diagnosed as urinary stones, which required major surgery.¹⁹ His father sent Polk to Philadelphia in the back of a covered wagon to be operated on by Dr. Philip Syng Physick, who was known as "the father of American surgery."²⁰ However, Polk's pain became so severe during the journey that his father instead turned to Dr. Ephraim McDowell of Danville, Kentucky to perform the surgery. Polk was awake during the incredibly painful surgery, in which a sharp instrument called a "gorget" was forced through his prostate and into his bladder to remove the urinary stones.²¹ Despite excruciating pain, the surgery was a success, although it may have left Polk sterile, as he never had children.²² One historian concludes that surviving this encounter gave Polk the characteristics of "courage, grit, and unyielding iron will" that he later displayed in dealing with his opponents as President.²³

After he was cured of his bad health, Polk was determined to get a proper education. Following his recovery from the surgery, he enrolled at a Presbyterian school near his home. A year later, his father agreed to send him to the more distinguished Bradley Academy, located in Murfreesboro, a small town near Nashville. Polk excelled at his new school, where he was adjudged "the most promising boy in the school."²⁴

In 1816, Polk was admitted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He majored in mathematics and the classics, "subjects he felt would best discipline his mind."²⁵ At the University of North Carolina, Polk joined the Dialectic Society, one of the school's debate clubs, where he honed both his debate and leadership skills. Polk held a succession of offices in the Dialectic Society, and twice was elected as its president.²⁶ Polk's participation in the Dialectic Society led to an interest in a career in law and politics. According to historian Walter R. Borneman, "it was here that he learned to speak, write, and formulate an argument."²⁷

II. Polk's Character and Personality

With respect to his character and personality, Polk was a man who was true to his beliefs, and who never seemed in doubt. As one historian notes, "On the first day when

he strode onto the floor of the Tennessee House of Representatives, there was about him a moral certitude and self-righteousness that he carried to the White House."²⁸ Others have been less charitable of Polk's character and personality, referring to him as "colorless, methodical, plodding [and] narrow"²⁹ and a "stern task-master."³⁰

Polk's adversaries often poked fun at his stiff and humorless demeanor. For example, John Quincy Adams once wrote in his diary that Polk "has no wit, no literature, no point of argument, no gracefulness of delivery, no elegance of language, no philosophy, no pathos, no felicitous impromptu; nothing that constitutes an orator, but confidence, fluency, and labor."³¹

Nonetheless, even Polk's detractors would surely agree that he was extremely disciplined and hard-working. He routinely worked 12-hour days, and rarely delegated responsibilities to others. "I have never in my life labored more constantly or intensely," he once said of his presidency. "I am the hardest working man in the country."³² Polk's strong work ethic, self-discipline, and confidence would allow him to accomplish much during his presidency. In *A Country of Vast Designs*, author Robert W. Merry sums it up best:

Small of stature and drab of temperament, James Polk was often underestimated by Whig opponents and sometimes by his own Democratic allies, despite his early political accomplishments in Congress. He struck many as a smaller-than-life figure with larger-than-life ambitions. But he harbored an absolute conviction that he was a man of destiny, and his unremitting tenacity ultimately produced a successful presidency.³³

III. Polk's Non-Government Career

After graduating from the University of North Carolina with honors in 1818, Polk returned to Tennessee to study law. Polk never envisioned the law as a permanent career choice, but rather as a means to an end. His participation in the Dialectic Society had spurred an interest in politics, and for Polk, the law provided the most obvious path into the political arena.³⁴

To gain admission to the bar in Polk's day, it was necessary to study cases under the guidance of a licensed practitioner. Polk was accepted to study under Felix Grundy, a prominent Nashville trial lawyer and experienced politician. Grundy had moved to Tennessee from Kentucky, where he had served both as a representative to the United States House of Representatives and



was not deeply religious. During Polk's baptism ceremony, Samuel Polk refused to affirm his belief in Christianity. As a result, the Reverend James Wallis refused to baptize the infant Polk.¹⁵ Perhaps due to this religious tension within his family, Polk was not known to "speak on his religious commitment" during his presidency, nor is there anything in his presidential diary to suggest "that he prayed for guidance or heavenly intervention in his life—not even during the war with Mexico."¹⁶

When Polk was 11, he and his family moved to the Duck River region of Middle Tennessee. There, the family grew rich, with Samuel Polk turning to land speculation and becoming a county judge and respected civic leader.¹⁷ His family's desire for land and the success they encountered after moving west no doubt influenced Polk's later commitment to the large-scale expansion of the nation's borders during his presidency.

as chief justice of the Kentucky Supreme Court.³⁵ Grundy quickly became Polk's first mentor, and the two men would remain close friends and political allies in the years to come.³⁶

After completing his law studies with Grundy, Polk was admitted to the Tennessee bar in June 1820.³⁷ He established a law practice in Columbia, Tennessee. His first case involved defending his father against a public fighting charge. He was able to secure a dismissal of the charge for a fine of \$1 plus costs.³⁸ Polk's law practice was successful, since there were many cases regarding the settlement of debts following the Panic of 1819. In the courtroom, Polk was described as "wary and skillful, but frank and honorable [and] in addressing a jury he was always animated and impressive in manner."³⁹

Despite his busy law practice, Polk still found time for socializing. During this time, he met Sarah Childress, the daughter of a wealthy and respectable family from Murfreesboro. While the details of their courtship are largely unknown, a favorite story among historians is that Andrew Jackson encouraged their romance:

Supposedly, Polk asked his mentor, Jackson, what he should do to advance his political career. Jackson advised him to find a wife and settle down. Asked if he had anyone in particular in mind, Old Hickory replied, "The one who will never give you trouble. Her wealthy family, education, health and appearance are all superior. You know her well." It took Polk only a moment to suggest what should have been the obvious. "Do you mean Sarah Childress?" he asked. "I shall go at once and ask her."⁴⁰

Polk and Sarah Childress were married on New Year's Day 1824. Polk was 28 years old; Sarah was 20. They remained married until Polk's death in 1849.⁴¹ By all accounts, their marriage was a true love match, and Sarah was an "ideal mate" for Polk.⁴² As John Seigenthaler notes in his biography of Polk, "Sarah's personality—outgoing, vivacious, and witty—was a natural complement to her husband's formal reserve. She brought out the best in him."⁴³

IV. Polk's Government Career

In 1819, during the time Polk was studying law under Felix Grundy in Nashville, Grundy was elected to the Tennessee state legislature. He suggested that Polk accompany him to Murfreesboro, where the legislature was to meet, and seek election as clerk of the state senate. In September 1819, Polk was elected clerk of

the Tennessee state senate. He was paid the sum of \$6 per day to manage the paperwork of the senate, which was viewed as a very generous wage, since legislators received only \$4 per day.⁴⁴ Polk quickly established a reputation as "a diligent and effective senate clerk."⁴⁵ He was reelected in 1821, and remained in the post until 1822.⁴⁶

In 1822, Polk resigned his position as clerk of the state senate to run for the Tennessee state legislature. He won the election, defeating the incumbent, William Yancey, and became the new representative of Maury County, Tennessee.⁴⁷ In 1825, Polk ran for the United States House of Representatives for Tennessee's sixth congressional district. He campaigned vigorously, traveling throughout the district to court voters. Polk's opponents said that at 29 years old, he was too young to serve in the House of Representatives.⁴⁸ However, Polk proved them wrong and won the election.

Polk's congressional career lasted 14 years. Elected to the House of Representatives seven times, Polk learned campaigning techniques and strategies that would serve him well with the voters.⁴⁹ He was a loyal supporter of the policies of his mentor and fellow Tennessee Democrat, Andrew Jackson, who was elected the seventh President of the United States in 1828. Jackson was known as "Old Hickory"—as in "tough as hickory"—a nickname earned during the early days of the War of 1812.⁵⁰ Polk's support for Jackson's policies was so strong that he was nicknamed "Young Hickory" after his mentor.⁵¹

In 1833, after being elected to his fifth term in Congress, Polk became chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.⁵² In this position, Polk was at the center of the major domestic policy debate over the nation's banking system. Throughout the crisis, Polk remained loyal to the position of his mentor and now-President Andrew Jackson, and was an outspoken critic of the Second Bank. After the Ways and Means Committee undertook an investigation of the bank at Jackson's request, the majority of committee members found no evidence of wrongdoing. Polk, however, issued a minority report that contained a stinging criticism of the bank, and recited a long list of justifications for removing federal deposits from it.⁵³ Polk would later deliver a speech on the floor of the House, in which he railed against the Bank and its head, Nicholas Biddle, calling them "despotic."⁵⁴

In June 1834, Speaker of the House Andrew Stevenson resigned to become minister to Great Britain, leaving the position open. Polk ran against John Bell of Tennessee for the post. After 10 ballots, Bell won, handing Polk the first defeat of his political career.⁵⁵ However, in 1835, Polk ran against Bell for Speaker, and this time Polk won. A master of rules and procedures, Polk was an effective Speaker of the House.⁵⁶ He was the first Speaker to "promote openly a president's agenda," first endorsing the policies of Andrew Jackson, and then those of his successor, Martin Van Buren.⁵⁷

The two major issues during Polk's term as Speaker were slavery and the economy, following the Panic of 1837.⁵⁸ As discussed in more detail herein, both of these issues, particularly slavery, would continue to plague Polk throughout his political career.

In 1839, concerned that the rival Whig party was becoming increasingly popular in his home state of Tennessee, Polk left Congress to return home and run for the governorship.⁵⁹ He defeated the incumbent Whig, Newt Cannon, yet after serving only one two-year term, Polk twice failed to be reelected.⁶⁰ Although his rivals assumed Polk's political influence had peaked, he continued to look for opportunities to revive his political career, and remained close to Andrew Jackson.⁶¹

In 1844, delegates to the Democratic Convention—who had not forgotten Polk's dedication to the Democratic Party over the years—viewed Polk as a potential vice presidential candidate.⁶² However, when the party's leading presidential contenders, Martin Van Buren and Lewis Cass, failed to gain sufficient support to win the nomination, the deadlocked convention needed a compromise candidate. Polk was put forth as a "dark horse" candidate, and after nine ballots, the Democratic Convention





most notable achievement was likely his utter lack of achievement:

The trouble with Polk was that he never did anything to catch the people's eye; he never gave them anything to remember him by; nothing happened to him. He never cut down a cherry tree, he didn't tell funny stories, he was not impeached, he was not shot, he didn't drink heavily, he didn't gamble, he wasn't involved in scandal.⁷⁰

Similarly, in accounting for the fact that so few Americans are familiar with Polk, another historian remarked that "men are remembered for their unique qualities, and Polk had none."⁷¹

Nonetheless, while Polk never wrote his memoirs and had no literary or other achievements during his lifetime, he did keep a detailed diary during his presidency. It was discovered—along with a collection of his other personal correspondence and papers—in the attic of his widow, Sarah, after her death in 1896.⁷² The diary was first published in four volumes in 1910, and reprinted and abridged in later editions. Today, it is recognized as "one of the most valuable documents for the study of the American presidency," since it provides a "rare behind-the-scenes glimpse of the decision-making process in the White House, and offers insight into the day-to-day administration of the government during one of the most critical and exciting periods in American history."⁷³ □

To continue reading, go to www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1112/Waltman.pdf.

Endnotes

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30. Thomas M. Leonard, *James K. Polk: A Clear and Unquestionable Destiny* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2001) p. 43.
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33. Merry, p. 242.
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37. Bergeron, "The Presidency," p. 10.
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42. Seigenthaler, p. 117.
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51. Seigenthaler, p. 4.
52. Borneman, p. 34.
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57. Seigenthaler, p. 57.
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59. Leonard, pp. 30–31.
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61. Leonard, p. 34; Borneman, p. 84.
62. Seigenthaler, p. 68.
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64. Borneman, p. 125.
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unanimously nominated Polk as its presidential candidate for the election to be held later that year.⁶³

Challenging the well-known Whig candidate Henry Clay in the 1844 election, Polk promised to actively encourage America's westward expansion. He favored the annexation of Texas and the acquisition of the Oregon territory.⁶⁴ Although critics expressed concern that aggressive expansionism might lead to war with Great Britain or Mexico, a majority of American voters accepted Polk's vision, and in 1844, they elected him the 11th President of the United States by a slim margin. He was 49 years old, the youngest person up to that time to be elected president.⁶⁵

After receiving his party's Democratic nomination in 1844, Polk announced that if he were elected President, he would not seek a second term.⁶⁶ Aware that the Democratic Party had been splintered into bitter factions, Polk hoped that by promising to serve only one term if elected, his disappointed Democratic rivals would unite behind him, believing they had another chance at the nomination in four years.⁶⁷

True to his campaign pledge, at the end of his first term, Polk left office and returned to Tennessee in March 1849. However, he did not have much time to pursue a career after leaving the presidency—either in the public or private sector—since he died of cholera on June 15, 1849 in Nashville, Tennessee, only three months after leaving office.⁶⁸

V. Polk's Literary and Other Achievements

Many people find Polk's election as President somewhat baffling, since he lacked the charisma of many of his fellow presidents. In addition, while Polk garnered praise for his oratorical skills—earning him the nickname "Napoleon of the Stump"⁶⁹—he had no literary or other achievements during his lifetime. As one historian points out in his tongue-in-cheek essay on Polk, his

(Continued from page 34)

“It took me two years to gain a working knowledge of paper-writing ... where I was constructing arguments and using evidence to support them.... So here I am, about to graduate, with a GPA much lower than it should be and no real way to explain to graduate schools and recruiting companies that I spent my first semesters just scraping by.”

Arandes, who graduated from Harvard in 2005, was unprepared for college-level writing because serious academic reading, research, and writing had been neglected in her K-12 curriculum, as it is in so many schools. In elementary schools, teachers rightfully focus on teaching students how to read. However, as E. D. Hirsch, Jr., an emeritus humanities professor whose research on comprehension inspired him to establish the Core Knowledge

The best writing emerges from a rich store of knowledge that the author is trying to pass on. Without that knowledge and the motivation to share it, all the strategies in the world will not make much difference.

Foundation, and Daniel T. Willingham, a professor of psychology who focuses on applying cognitive science to K-12 classrooms, have written, teachers have erroneously been told to focus on reading comprehension strategies, such as finding the main idea and identifying the author’s audience.* Such an approach is time-consuming and shifts the emphasis away from texts that build students’ knowledge and vocabulary. As a result, students tend to spend more time practicing strategies with trivial fiction than acquiring the knowledge (found in serious fiction and nonfiction) that drives comprehension. In middle and high school, students are expected to independently read nonfiction science and social studies texts, but far too many of them struggle because they haven’t acquired the necessary foundation in elementary school.

As for writing, many elementary teachers do teach students to write, but this writing tends to focus only on students writing about themselves or writing short stories. Because students don’t spend enough time in the early grades reading nonfiction in sci-

ence and history, they lack the knowledge—of both content and the nature of nonfiction writing—necessary to undertake research papers in middle and high school. Teachers who do assign research papers must begin with the basics of academic writing.

To really teach students how to write, educators must give them examples of good writing found in nonfiction books and require students to read them, not skim them, cover to cover. Reading nonfiction contributes powerfully to the knowledge that students need in order to read more difficult material—the kind they will surely face in college. But more importantly, the work of writing a research paper will lead students to read more and become more knowledgeable in the process. As any good writer knows, the best writing emerges from a rich store of knowledge that the author is trying to pass on. Without that knowledge and the motivation to share it, all the literacy strategies in the world will not make much difference.

I suggest that our schools start assigning a page per year: each first-grader would be required to write a one-page paper on a subject other than himself or herself, with at least one source. At least one page and one source would be added each year to the required academic writing, so that fifth-graders,

for example, would have to write a five-page paper with five sources, ninth-graders would have to write a nine-page paper with nine sources, and so on, until each and every high school senior could be asked to prepare a 12-page history research paper with 12 sources.

Such a plan would gradually prepare students for future academic writing and could also reduce the need for remedial instruction in writing (and perhaps in remedial reading as well) when students enroll in college. If school districts adopted such a plan, it wouldn’t take high school teachers nearly as much time as it does now to teach students to

write history research papers; students could draw on the knowledge they gained in previous grades to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, formulate an argument or a narrative based on those sources, develop a bibliography, and write and revise numerous drafts.

As long as we leave it to chance whether students encounter teachers who somehow manage to carve out time to guide students through the research and writing process, students like Laura Arandes will continue to “scrape by” in college writing. “Modern public high schools have an obligation not to simply pump out graduates at the end of the year, but also to prepare them for the intellectual rigors of college,” Arandes wrote in her letter to me. As she learned, there is no better preparation for college than having students write history research papers.

So I urge teachers to do their best to assign them. I look forward to reading them. □



*For more on why reading comprehension depends largely on knowledge, see the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2006/index.cfm.

