

PART VI

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EDUCATION ISSUES



## Choosing a College

When a student at New York University committed suicide recently, it was the 6th suicide at that same institution this year. The suicide of someone in the prime of life, and getting an education that promises a bright future, should be much rarer than it is. But NYU is not unique by any means.

Back when I taught at UCLA, one morning on my way to my office I saw an attractive and well-dressed young woman lying quietly in the bushes next to the building, apparently asleep. But the presence of police nearby alerted me to the fact that something was wrong. She had jumped from the roof of the building to her death.

When I taught at Cornell, it averaged a suicide a year.

Selecting a college for a young man or young woman to attend is more than a matter of looking up the rankings and seeing where the chances of admission look good. How the atmosphere of the college matches the personality of the individual can mean far more than anything in the college catalogue or the pretty brochures.

Some young people are not yet ready for coed living arrangements and the pressures and dangers that can lead to. Some are at risk on a campus with widespread drug usage. Some students can get very lonely when they just don't fit in.

Sometimes there is no one to turn to and sometimes the adults they turn to on campus have nothing but psychobabble to offer.

Late adolescence and early adulthood are among the most dangerous times in people's lives, when one foolish decision can destroy everything for which parents and children have invested time and efforts and hopes for years.

Too many know-it-alls in the high schools and colleges urge or warn parents to get out of the picture and let the child decide where to go and what to do. A high school counselor once told me that I would be "kept informed" of the decisions that she and my daughter were making as to which colleges to apply to.

Apparently there are enough sheep-like parents these days to let "experts" take control of their children at a critical juncture in their lives. But these "experts" suffer no consequences if their bright ideas lead some young person into disaster. It is the parents who will be left to pick up the pieces.

Too often parents are pushed to the sideline in the name of the child's need for freedom and autonomy. But what is presented to parents as a need to set their children free as young adults is too often in fact abandoning those children to the control of others. The stakes are too high to let that happen.

From the moment a student sets foot on a college campus, a whole apparatus of indoctrination can go into motion, in the name of "orientation," so as to mold each young mind to politically correct attitudes on everything from sex to "social justice."

Colleges used to say that their job was to teach the student how to think, not what to think. Today, most colleges are in the business of teaching the student what to think or "feel."

Many colleges—even many of the most prestigious—lack any real curriculum, but they seldom lack an ideological

agenda. Too often they use students as guinea pigs for fashionable notions about how to live their own lives.

As for education, students can go through many colleges selecting courses cafeteria-style, and graduate in complete ignorance of history, science, economics, and many other subjects, even while clutching a costly diploma with a big name on it.

Students who make more astute choices from the cafeteria of courses can still get a good education at the same colleges where their classmates get mush. But seldom is there any curriculum that ensures a good education, even at prestigious colleges.

Parents need to stay involved in the process of choosing a college. They need to visit college campuses before making application decisions—and remember to take their skepticism with them. They also need to ask blunt questions and not take smooth generalities for an answer.

An indispensable guide to the atmosphere on various college campuses, and the presence or absence of a real curriculum, is a 971-page book titled *Choosing the Right College*. It is head-and-shoulders above all the other college guides.

Among other things, it tells you which colleges have a real curriculum, rather than a cafeteria of courses, as well as the kind of atmosphere each campus has. The latter is always important and sometimes can even be a matter of life and death.

## The Idiocy of “Relevance”

One of the many fashionable idiocies that cause American schools to produce results inferior to those in other countries is the notion that education must be “relevant” to the students—and especially to minority students with a different subculture.

It is absurd to imagine that students can determine in advance what will turn out to be relevant to their progress as adults. Relevance is not something you can predict. It is something you discover after the fact—and after you have left school and are out in the real world.

When I was in high school, I was puzzled when a girl I knew told me that she was studying economics, because I had no idea what that was. It never occurred to me to take economics, so it was certainly not something that seemed relevant to me at the time.

Had someone told me then that I would someday spend more than 20 years as an economist at a think tank, I wouldn’t have known what they were talking about, because I had no idea what a think tank was either.

When students are going through medical school, they may not see the relevance of all the things they are taught there. But someday they may have a patient at death’s door, whose life may depend on how well the doctor remembers something he was taught in medical school—and whose relevance may not have been all that clear to him at the time.

People who have already been out in the real world,

practicing for years whatever their particular specialty might be, have some basis for determining which things are relevant enough to go into a curriculum to teach those who follow. The idea that students can determine relevance in advance is one of the many counterproductive notions to come out of the 1960s.

The fetish of “relevance” has been particularly destructive in the education of minority students at all levels. If the students do not see immediately how what they are studying applies to their lives in the ghetto, then it is supposed to be irrelevant.

How are these students ever going to get out of the poverty of the ghetto unless they learn to function in ways that are more economically productive? Even if they spend all their lives in the ghetto, if they are to spend them in such roles as doctors or engineers, then they are going to have to study things that are not peculiar (“relevant”) to the ghetto.

Worst of all, those teachers who teach minority students things like math and science, whose relevance the students do not see, may encounter resistance and resentment, while those teachers who pander to minority students by turning their courses into rap sessions and ethnic navel-gazing exercises capture their interest and allegiance.

Some educators embrace relevance out of expediency, rather than conviction or confusion. It is the path of least resistance, though that path seldom leads upward. By the time minority students get out into the real world and discover the uselessness of what they were taught in “relevant” courses, it is too late for them—but they are no longer the teachers’ responsibility.

Even as a graduate student in economics, I did not see the relevance of a little article by Friedrich Hayek, titled “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” that was assigned

reading in Milton Friedman's course at the University of Chicago. A few years later, however, I was beginning my own teaching career and had to teach a course on the Soviet economy—about which I knew nothing.

As I read through many studies of the Soviet economy in preparation for teaching my course, and was puzzled by all the strange and counterproductive economic practices in the Soviet Union, it then began to dawn on me that what Hayek had said applied to these otherwise inexplicable Soviet actions. For the first time, years later, I saw the relevance of what he had written.

Fast forward another 15 years. I was now writing a book that would be a landmark in my career. It was titled *Knowledge and Decisions*—a 400-page book building on what Hayek had said in a little essay.

Just a few years ago, I was stopped on the streets of San Francisco by a young black man who shook my hand and told me that reading *Knowledge and Decisions* had changed his life. He had seen the relevance of these ideas—at a younger age than I had.



## Julian Stanley and Bright Children

**B**right children and their parents have lost a much-needed friend with the death of Professor Julian Stanley of Johns Hopkins University. For decades he not only researched and ran programs for intellectually gifted students, he became their leading advocate in books and articles.

His efforts were very much needed. Unusually bright children are too often treated like stepchildren by the American educational system.

While all sorts of special classes and special schools are created for various categories of students, there is resistance and even hostility to the idea of creating special classes or schools for intellectually gifted students.

Not only are such elite public schools as New York's Stuyvesant High School and the Bronx High School of Science rare, they are under political pressure to admit students on other bases besides pure academic achievement. So is San Francisco's Lowell High School, where ethnic "balance" affects admissions decisions.

While it is well known that the average American student does poorly on international tests, what is not so well known is that gifted American students lag particularly far behind their foreign counterparts.

Professor Julian Stanley pointed out that the performance level of gifted American students "is well below both the level of their own potential and the achievement levels of previous U.S. generations." In other words, our

brightest kids have been going downhill even faster than our average kids.

Part of the reason is undoubtedly the general dumbing down of American education since the 1960s but what has also been happening since the 1960s has been a preoccupation with the “self-esteem” of mediocre students and a general hostility to anything that might be construed as intellectual elitism.

Even classes in so-called “gifted and talented” programs are too often just more of the same level of work as other students do, or trendy projects, but not work at a greater intellectual depth.

Sometimes, as Professor Stanley has pointed out, it is just busy work, in order to keep bright students from being bored and restless when classes are being taught at a pace far too slow for very intelligent youngsters.

It is not at all uncommon for the brightest students to become problem students in their boredom and frustration, to develop negative attitudes towards education and society—and to fail to develop their inborn talents.

Julian Stanley did not just criticize existing practices. He created special programs for unusually bright high school students on weekends and during the summer at Johns Hopkins University. The success of these programs has inspired similar programs at Purdue University and elsewhere.

Such programs have not only produced academic benefits, the gifted students in such programs have expressed an almost pathetic gratitude for finally being in a setting where they are comfortable with their peers and are viewed positively by their teachers.

In regular public school classrooms, these gifted students have been too often resented by their classmates and their

teachers alike. Some teachers have seemed glad to be able to catch them in occasional mistakes.

Given the low academic records of most public school teachers, it is hard to imagine their being enthusiastic about kids so obviously brighter than they were—and often brighter than they are. No small part of the gross neglect of gifted students in our public schools is the old story of the dog in the manger.

Julian Stanley made a unique contribution to the development of gifted children, both directly through his program at Johns Hopkins and indirectly through his research and advocacy. Fortunately, he is survived by collaborators in these efforts, such as Professors Camilla Persson Benbow and David Lubinski of Vanderbilt University.

The effort must go on, both to stop the great waste of gifted students, whose talents are much needed in the larger society, and for the humane purpose of relieving the frustration and alienation of youngsters whose only crime is being born with more intellectual potential than most of those around them.

## For What Purpose?

It has been said that, when Ronald Reagan was governor of California, someone told him that admitting students to the University of California on individual performance alone could mean that all the students at Berkeley might be Asian Americans.

“So what?” was the Gipper’s response.

Like many other Reagan remarks, it cut through mountains of nonsense and knocked over numerous houses of cards that keep the intelligentsia wringing their hands. A classic example is a recent *New York Times* story that said: “Asians gain when affirmative action ends. Other minorities don’t. What’s fair?”

Let’s go back to square one. Why do universities exist in the first place? Is it to parcel out benefits to different racial or ethnic groups? If so, why not just give them money? Do universities exist to be fair—whatever that means? If fair means equal chances or proportional representation, then why not make admissions a lottery?

All too many people in college admissions offices talk and act as if their job is to hand out goodies to those who seem most deserving, in terms of how well they used whatever particular opportunities they happen to have had.

In other words, if student *A* went to a top-notch high school and scored 1500 on the SATs, while student *B* went to a mediocre high school and scored 1300, then student *B* may be admitted and student *A* denied admission if the little

tin gods in the admissions office decide that *B* made better use of his limited opportunities.

You couldn't make up anything as silly as this. Educational institutions do not exist to reward people for their past but to prepare them for the future. The taxpayers and donors who are supporting these institutions with their hard-earned money are doing so to benefit the society that these graduates will be serving, not to allow bureaucrats to hand out pork barrel benefits to individuals or groups.

In all the swirl of words around the issue of affirmative action in college and university admissions—including the endlessly repeated mantra of “diversity”—there is seldom a single word about serving the public by admitting those who have the academic skills to put the educational resources to the best use.

If a disproportionate number of those who can master the skills that educational institutions provide are Asian Americans, then as the Gipper said, “So what?”

Do you want to fly in planes flown by the best qualified pilots available or in planes flown by quota pilots or by pilots whose life stories were most appealing to those on admissions committees? If you are going to have heart surgery, do you want the best surgeon you can get or do you want a surgeon who had to overcome a lot of handicaps just to make it through medical school?

Would you be offended to have your life saved by someone who had easily become the best surgeon around because he was born in the lap of privilege and always had the finest education available, regardless of how much it cost? Would it bother you if he was Asian American or even—heaven help us—a WASP?

Institutions and occupations exist for a purpose—and that purpose is not to provide a statistical picture that is

pleasing for those people who are preoccupied with statistical pictures. Food and shelter, housing and health, life and death, are among the many things that depend on how well institutions function and how well people do their jobs.

These things are too important to sacrifice so that busybodies can feel important directing other people's lives. Indeed, the freedom of those other people is too important to be sacrificed for the sake of third parties' vanity.

Anyone who is serious about wanting to help minority young people must know that the place to start is at precisely the other end of the educational process. That means beginning in the earliest grades teaching reading, math and other mental skills on which their future depends. But that would mean clashing with the teachers' unions and their own busybody agenda of propaganda and psychological manipulation in the classrooms.

The path of least resistance is to give minority youngsters a lousy education and then admit them to college by quotas. With a decent education, they wouldn't need the quotas.

## School Performances

Everyone knows that black students in general do not perform as well in school as white students, much less Asian American students. But few realize how painfully large the gap is. Even fewer know that there are particular black schools, even in low-income neighborhoods, where students perform above the national average.

Discussing racial gaps in education is taboo in some quarters. But this subject is discussed deeply and thoroughly in a new book titled *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* by Abigail Thernstrom of the Manhattan Institute and Stephan Thernstrom of Harvard. They are also the authors of the best book on race relations—*America in Black and White*—so there are high expectations for this new book.

*No Excuses* lives up to those expectations. If you read just one book about American education all year, this should be the book. It not only goes into the causes and cures of racial disparities in education, in the process it punctures many of the fads, dogmas, and pious hypocrisies of the education establishment.

First, the existing gap: Black high school students graduate an average of four years behind white students in academic skills. In other words, the high school diplomas they receive are given—not earned—for a junior high school education.

The excuses for this range across the spectrum from poverty to racism and even innate lack of ability. Yet none of these excuses stands up to the facts.

As the Thernstroms show, there are some schools where the students are equally poor and equally black, where test scores are outstanding. Moreover, such schools seldom get any more money than the schools that are failing.

Some of the most heavily financed schools are doing miserably. Even spending \$17,000 per pupil, Cambridge, Massachusetts, was still left with a huge gap between the test scores of its black and white students. In fact, black students in Cambridge scored lower than other black students in nearby communities with less than half as much spending per pupil.

Those who believe that money is the answer are not going to be stopped by anything so mundane as facts. To many in politics and in the media—and to everyone in the teachers' unions—"improving" the schools means spending more money on them. But what is called "investing" in better education could more accurately be called pouring money down a bottomless pit.

Don't suburban schools with high levels of spending do better than other schools with lower levels of spending? Usually, yes. But olympic-sized swimming pools and tennis courts do not make you any smarter. Nor do generous-sized parking lots for affluent students with fancy cars.

*No Excuses* does not limit its comparisons to blacks and whites. In some cases, the educational performance of Asian American students exceeds that of whites by more than the performance of whites exceeds that of blacks.

There is nothing mysterious about any of these differences. Asian students put more time into study and homework and watch less television. They behave themselves in class. Their parents don't tolerate low grades—or even medium grades.

In those rare black schools where the students follow a



pattern similar to that of Asian Americans, they get educational results similar to those of Asian Americans.

What about the role of the schools in all this?

American schools waste an incredible amount of time on fads, fun and propaganda for political correctness. Those students who come from homes with highly educated parents, or parents whose values stress education, get a lot of what they need outside of school, as well as making the most of what they get within the school.

It is those children who do not come from these kinds of homes whose futures are forfeited when class time is frittered away. Low-income black students are the biggest losers when educators fail to educate and when courts create so many legal obstacles to enforcing school discipline that a handful of classroom clowns or hoodlums can prevent everyone else from getting a decent education.

More money won't cure any of this.

## School Performances: Part II

**M**y son learned fractions and decimals when he was in the first grade. He learned them from me as I drove him to school on the Los Angeles freeways, where he became curious about the signs that said things like “Wilshire Boulevard 2¼ miles.”

At the private school he attended, he never went near a math class because that was optional and he found the math they taught too boring. Yet, if test scores for that school were collected, his would have helped the school look impressive in math and some might conclude that they did a great job of teaching the subject.

It is a completely different ball game for some kid in the ghetto attending a public school. If his teachers don’t do a decent job of teaching math, chances are that he won’t know much math.

Among the many misleading statistics on education are test scores comparing results from affluent suburban schools and poorer schools in the inner city. The results may well be valid in the sense that there really is a huge difference in educational achievement. But they may be very misleading as to why.

Schools in both places may be wasting vast amounts of time on non-academic fads and activities. But the children from homes with educated and affluent parents will learn a lot before going to school and outside of school. That will show up on the tests.

The schools in poorer neighborhoods may not be that

much worse, in themselves, but they are the only places where many poor children with poorly educated parents have any opportunity to get an education. When these particular schools waste time, they are dooming most of their students to a life of poverty.

Homes matter—and they matter especially when the schools are not doing their job of educating the children.

Too many suburban parents may be too easily satisfied that their schools are doing a good job because the students there score in the top 10 or 20 percent on standardized tests. Suburban schools may look good compared to inner city schools, but both look bad compared to their counterparts in other countries.

The fact that schools in high-income areas get better results than schools in low-income areas has allowed the education establishment to escape responsibility for their own failings by saying that it all depends on the economic and educational levels of the home. It does not.

With all the abysmal results in ghetto schools in general, there are nevertheless particular schools serving low-income minority students with test results well above the national average. What is the difference?

The biggest difference is that successful schools teach in ways that are directly the opposite from what is fashionable in the public schools in general. Successful schools spend their time on the three R's, they teach reading with phonics, they memorize multiplication tables, and—above all—they have discipline, so that a few disruptive students are not able to prevent all the others from being educated.

Despite the self-serving claim from the teachers' unions that successful schools for minorities skim the cream from the public schools, often these successful charter schools or other private schools admit students on the basis of a lottery,

so that those they take in are no better than those they don't.

The students they admit are just a lot better after they have been educated where education is the top priority.

One of the schools I researched years ago that impressed me the most—in fact, moved me to the verge of tears—was a ghetto school in a run-down building, located in a neighborhood that caused a friend to say that I was “brave”—he probably meant foolhardy—to park a car on the street there.

The children in that school scored above the national average on tests. In their classrooms, they spoke the king's English, behaved like little ladies and gentlemen, and made thoughtful answers to the questions they were asked. Yet these kids came from poor homes, often broken homes, and many were on welfare.

You can't buy that quality of education for any amount of money. It has to be created by people who have their priorities straight. Don't tell me it can't be done when I have seen it done with my own eyes.

## School Performances: Part III

Many of the pronouncements coming from those who run our public schools range from fallacies to frauds. The new book *No Excuses* by Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom exposes a number of these self-serving lies.

You may have heard how hard it is to find enough teachers—and therefore how necessary it is to raise salaries, in order to attract more people into this field. One example can demonstrate what is wrong with this picture, though there are innumerable other examples.

A young man who graduated *summa cum laude* from elite Williams College decided that he wanted to be a teacher. He sent letters and résumés to eight different school districts. Not one gave him even the courtesy of a reply.

Does that sound like there is a teacher shortage? Moreover, any number of other highly qualified people have had the same experience.

The joker in the deal is that, no matter how highly qualified you are, your desire to become a teacher is not likely to get off the ground unless you have jumped through the bureaucratic hoops that keep people out of this field—thereby protecting the jobs of unionized incompetents who are already in our schools.

The most important of these hoops is taking unbelievably dreary and stupid courses in education. Using these costly and time-consuming courses as a barrier, those in the education establishment “maintain low standards and

high barriers at the same time,” as Secretary of Education Rod Paige has aptly put it.

Factual studies show no correlation between taking these courses and successful teaching. Private schools are able to get good teachers by hiring people who never took any such courses. That is where our Williams graduate finally found a job.

The very people in the education establishment who maintain barriers to keep out teachers are the ones constantly telling us what a shortage of teachers there is—and how more money is needed. This is a scam that has worked for years and will probably work for more years to come.

Then there are the “studies prove” scams. According to the education establishment, studies prove that Head Start helps poor children’s educational performance, small classes lead to higher test scores, and busing black children to white schools produces educational benefits due to “diversity.”

The quality of many of these studies is as unbelievably bad as the quality of courses in education.

Here is a common pattern: If you do 20 studies comparing the effect that *A* has on *B*, you may find that in 18 of those studies there is no correlation between *A* and *B*. In one of the other two, you may find that more *A* is followed by more *B*. And in the other, more *A* is followed by less *B*. Overall, still no correlation.

Depending on what the education establishment wants, they can seize upon the one study out of 20 that showed more *A* leading to more *B* and burst into the media with it. If the conclusion of that one study fits in with the media vision of the world, then it may be trumpeted across the land as “proof.”

The Head Start program is a classic example. Anyone who expresses any skepticism about claims that Head Start is a great success will be denounced as someone who doesn't "care" about the low-income and minority children that this program supposedly helps. One of the great propaganda tricks is to change questions of fact into questions of motives.

The Thernstroms show what feeble facts there are behind the Head Start program that has cost billions of dollars. Look for them to be denounced for being heartless, if not racist. But don't expect advocates of Head Start to engage in a serious discussion of facts.

It is much the same story when it comes to claims that "studies prove" that small classes lead to better education. The Thernstroms show cases where class sizes as small as 12 led to no better results when the students were tested.

Ordering students bussed from their own neighborhoods for the sake of racial balance has similarly failed to produce the much-trumpeted educational benefits.

The time is long overdue to start looking at facts instead of listening to rhetoric. Reading *No Excuses* is a good place to start.

## College Admissions Voodoo

Every year about this time, high school students get letters of admission—or rejection—from colleges around the country. The saddest part of this process is not their rejections but the assumption by some students that they were rejected because they just didn't measure up to the high standards of Ivy U. or their flagship state university.

The cold fact is that objective admissions standards are seldom decisive at most colleges. The admissions process is so shot through with fads and unsubstantiated assumptions that it is more like voodoo than anything else.

A student who did not get admitted to Ivy U. may be a better student than some—or even most—of those who did. Admissions officials love to believe that they can spot all sorts of intangibles that outweigh test scores and grade-point averages.

Such notions are hardly surprising in people who pay no price for being wrong. All sorts of self-indulgences are possible when people are unaccountable, whether they be college admissions officials, parole boards, planning commissions or copy-editors.

What is amazing is that nobody puts the notions and fetishes of college admissions offices to a test. Nothing would be easier than to admit half of a college's entering class on the basis of objective standards, such as test scores, and the other half according to the voodoo of the admissions office. Then, four years later, you could compare how the two halves of the class did.



But apparently this would not be politic.

Among the many reasons given for rejecting objective admissions standards is that they are “unfair.” Much is made of the fact that high test scores are correlated with high family income.

Very little is made of the statistical principle that correlation is not causation. Practically nothing is made of the fact that, however a student got to where he is academically, that is in fact where he is—and that is usually a better predictor of where he is going to go than is the psychobabble of admissions committees.

The denigration of objective standards allows admissions committees to play little tin gods, who think that their job is to reward students who are deserving, sociologically speaking, rather than to select students who can produce the most bang for the buck from the money contributed by donors and taxpayers for the purpose of turning out the best quality graduates possible.

Typical of the mindset that rejects the selection of students in the order of objective performances was a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* which said that colleges should “select randomly” from a pool of applicants who are “good enough.” Nowhere in the real world, where people must face the consequences of their decisions, would such a principle be taken seriously.

Lots of pitchers are “good enough” to be in the major leagues but would you just as soon send one of those pitchers to the mound to pitch the deciding game of the World Series as you would send Randy Johnson or Roger Clemens out there with the world championship on the line?

Lots of military officers were considered to be “good enough” to be generals in World War II but troops who

served under General Douglas MacArthur or General George Patton had more victories and fewer casualties. How many more lives would you be prepared to sacrifice as the price of selecting randomly among generals considered to be “good enough”?

If you or your child had to have a major operation for a life-threatening condition, would you be just as content to have the surgery done by anyone who was “good enough” to be a surgeon, as compared to someone who was a top surgeon in the relevant specialty?

The difference between first-rate and second-rate people is enormous in many fields. In a college classroom, marginally qualified students can affect the whole atmosphere and hold back the whole class.

In some professions, a large part of the time of first-rate people is spent countering the half-baked ideas of second-rate people and trying to salvage something from the wreckage of the disasters they create. “Good enough” is seldom good enough.

## Summer De-Programming

Parents who are worried because their children are receiving a steady diet of politically correct propaganda in the schools and colleges often ask for suggestions of things they should get for their children to read, in hopes of de-programming them.

The summer is a good time to let young people know that what they have been told in class is not the only side of the story or the only way to look at the world.

If all that today's students seem to know about American history are its negative aspects—which is what our society shares with human societies in general—then they may think that we are a truly awful country, without asking the question, “Compared to what?”

It speaks volumes about our schools and colleges that far-left radical Howard Zinn's pretentiously titled book, *A People's History of the United States*, is widely used across the country. It is one indictment, complaint, and distortion after another.

Anyone who relies on this twisted version of American history would have no idea why millions of people from around the world are trying, sometimes desperately, to move to this country. The one virtue of Zinn's book is that it helps you identify unmistakably which teachers are using their classrooms as propaganda centers.

There are still some honest history books around. Best-selling British historian Paul Johnson has written an outstanding book titled *A History of the American People* and

another excellent book on recent world history titled *Modern Times*.

If you want a thorough, accurate, and no-spin history of race relations in the United States, the best history on that subject is *America in Black and White* by Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom. For a history of American ethnic groups in general, there is my own *Ethnic America*. I cannot be unbiased about it, of course, but the fact that it has been translated into six other languages suggests that other people liked it too.

If you would like to know the fundamental basis for the Constitution of the United States under which we all live, there is no book more important to read than *The Federalist* or *The Federalist Papers*, as it is sometimes called. It is a series of popular essays written by those who helped create the Constitution, explaining to their fellow Americans why they did what they did and what they hoped to achieve—and prevent.

It is as readable today as it was two centuries ago—and just as much needed. *The Federalist* should be at or near the top of any summer reading list.

Sometimes the way to understand your own society is to find out about other societies and other economic and political systems, so that you can get some idea of the nature and magnitude of the differences. Two Soviet economists' accounts of that country's economy makes the difference between a market economy and a centrally planned economy stand out in sharp relief. That book is titled *The Turning Point* by Nikolai Shmelev and Vladimir Popov. *India Unbound* by Gurcharan Das tells the story of India's turning toward a market economy—and the benefits that followed. The best book about the Third World in general is *Equality*,

*the Third World, and Economic Delusion* by the late Peter Bauer of the London School of Economics.

The appeal of socialism—the beauties of it in theory and its painful consequences in practice—are discussed in a very readable book titled *Heaven on Earth* by Joshua Muravchik. The young need not be embarrassed by finding socialism attractive. Many who were old enough to know better also fell for it.

Economic illiteracy is almost as dangerous as slanted political propaganda. A painless way to get some sense of economic realities would be by reading a popular, topical, and often humorous treatment of economic issues in John Stossel's book titled, *Give Me A Break*.

The current issue of the *Cato Journal* strongly recommends “two remarkable books” on economics as a way for voters to understand economic issues in this election year. The books are *Basic Economics* and *Applied Economics*. The former takes the reader “on an exhilarating tour” of economics, the *Cato Journal* says, and the latter is characterized by “cogent reasoning.” I could not use such glowing terms myself, since I am the author of both books.

Happy de-programming this summer.

## Fat in California's Budget

Whenever there is a budget deficit, politicians automatically want taxes raised. In our private lives, whenever we find ourselves running out of money, most of us think about cutting back on our spending. Not so in government.

Despite California's record budget deficit there is still a lot of fat left that has not yet been cut—and may never be cut. Every pound of fat has a constituency ready to proclaim that the world will end if that spending is toned down, much less eliminated.

Typical of such political spin is a “news” story about California in a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the trade publication of the academic world. The headline says: “Preparatory programs at universities help low-performing pupils excel, but budget cuts imperil the efforts.”

Wait a minute. I thought 12 years of taxpayer-provided education were supposed to prepare students for college. Now we have to have courses in college to prepare students for college?

The long, rambling story in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, complete with photographs, at no point offers any hard evidence that these programs actually work any better than the public schools, which have obviously failed if you need such remedial programs in college.

Instead, the Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement program (MESA) is praised because it helps

students become “excited” about math and science. “Exciting” is one of the big fad words in educational circles, as if getting your emotions worked up is the same as mastering skills.

In keeping with the excitement theme, students in this program are pictured making balloon-powered rockets and one of them is quoted as saying that this program “inspires” him to go to school.

One of the teachers in this program calls it “crazy” to cut the program—“as he watches another balloon-powered rocket fly across the room.” But just what is this actually accomplishing?

The teacher says, “Look at this: It gets a bunch of diverse cultures into one room to build things. You always feel like a family here. It’s just a good place.”

But actual bottom-line results in terms of math and science? According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: “State leaders are often foggy on what exactly the various programs do, and it takes many years for supporters of the programs to gather tangible evidence of their long-term impact.”

Apparently the state legislators have not been too foggy to spend \$85 million of the taxpayers’ money to bankroll this program that apparently cannot show hard evidence of serious improvement in math and science, as a result of balloons flying across the room in this “good place.”

As for needing “many years” to document their success, that is a strange claim. I once ran a six-week summer program in economics for black students and documented its results simply by giving the students an economics exam at the beginning and at the end—both exams being sent away to be graded by others at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton.

Why would it take “many years” to show any tangible

improvement in math and science by the students in California's \$85 million program? Or is this just a way of postponing accountability—indefinitely?

Even if we take it on faith that it really does require “many years” to produce results, the cold fact is that this program has been going on since 1970. That's more than 30 years. Is that not yet “many years”?

Because this is a program for low-income and minority students, lower expectations may be tolerated by many in the educational establishment. But the real irony is that Jaime Escalante produced hard evidence of high achievement in math by low-income Mexican American students years ago. And he didn't take 34 years to do it or require an \$85 million budget.

At one time, one-fourth of all the Mexican American students who passed advanced placement calculus—in the entire country—came from the school where Jaime Escalante taught.

Incidentally, Mr. Escalante is still around. They could always ask him how he did it, if they really wanted to know. But they already know how to get millions of taxpayer dollars, which apparently is what it is all about.



## A Scary Report

Most discussions of the problems of American education have an air of utter unreality because they avoid addressing the most fundamental and intractable problem of our public schools—the low quality of our teachers. There is no point expecting teachers to teach things that they themselves do not know or understand.

That becomes painfully obvious from a recently released report from the U. S. Department of Education. This report has an innocuous title on the cover—“Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge”—and devastating facts inside.

According to this report, in 28 of the 29 states that use the same standardized test for teachers, it is not even necessary to come up to the national average in mathematics to become a teacher. In none of these states is it necessary to come up to the national average in reading. In some states, you can score in the bottom quarter in either math or reading (or both) and still meet the requirements to become a teacher.

This report is only the latest in a long series of studies of teachers, going back more than half a century, showing again and again the low standards for teaching. Those who go into teaching have consistently had test scores at or near the bottom among college students in a wide variety of fields.

Despite the title of this report, the issue is not highly qualified teachers. The problem is getting teachers who are even decently competent. It is a farce and a fraud when

teachers' unions talk about a need for "certified" teachers, when certification has such low requirements and when uncertified teachers often have higher qualifications.

Secretary of Education Rod Paige put his finger on the crucial problem when he said that, in selecting teachers, states "maintain low standards and high barriers at the same time." You don't have to know much, but you do have to jump through all kinds of hoops, in order to become certified to teach in the public schools.

The biggest obstacles are the education courses which can take up years of your time and thousands of dollars of your money, but which have no demonstrated benefit on future teaching. Research shows that teachers' actual knowledge of the subject matter is what benefits students.

Emphasis on something that does not affect educational quality reflects the priorities of the teachers' union in restricting competition, not the requirements for educating children. It would be hard for anyone who has not looked into education courses to believe just how bad they are. I wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't seen the data, the professors and the students.

People go to these institutions in order to get certified, not because they expect to find anything either interesting or useful. Education courses repel many intelligent people, who are just the sort of people needed in our schools. As Secretary of Education Rod Paige puts it, "schools of education fail to attract the best students." That is an understatement. They repel the best students.

Although many states provide alternative routes to teacher certification, these alternative routes are usually made burdensome enough to protect existing schools of education from losing their students. Indeed, these alternative routes often include many hours of education

courses. The net result is that only 6 percent of certified teachers received their certificate via alternative routes. Many such programs, according to the report, “are ‘alternative routes’ in name only, allowing states to boast of reform while maintaining artificial restrictions on the supply of new teachers.”

These artificially created shortages are then used by teachers’ unions to argue for higher pay. Secretary Paige does not buy the teachers’ union argument that teacher shortages are due to inadequate pay. He points out that “compensation in most private schools is lower than in public schools.”

Yet private schools are able to get better qualified people, partly because most private schools do not let education course requirements screen out intelligent people. Some private schools even refuse to hire people who have been through that drivel.

It is refreshing to see a Secretary of Education who says what is wrong in plain English, instead of being a mouthpiece for the status quo in general and the teachers’ unions in particular.

## “Teaching to the Test”

Florida’s school year has already started early, so that its students will have more preparation before the state-mandated tests that will be administered to them later in the school year. Meanwhile, there is much wringing of hands and gnashing of teeth because so much classroom time is spent “teaching to the test” as our “educators” put it.

Unfortunately, most of the people who call themselves educators have not been doing much educating over the past few decades, as shown by American students repeatedly coming in at or near the bottom on international tests. That is why some states are trying to force teachers to teach academic material by testing their students on such material, instead of relying on the inflated grades and high “self-esteem” that our schools have been producing, instead of producing knowledge and skills.

While our students spend about as much time in school as students in Europe or Asia, a higher percentage of other students’ time is spent learning academic subjects, while our students’ time is spent on all sorts of non-academic projects and activities.

Those who want to keep on indulging in popular educational fads that are failing to produce academic competence fight bitterly against having to “teach to the test.” It will stifle “creativity,” they complain. The author of a recent feature article in the *New York Times Magazine* declares that “genuinely great teaching—the sort of thing that Socrates and his spiritual descendants have delivered”

will be discouraged by having to “stuff our charges with information” in order to pass tests.

If there has actually been such “genuinely great teaching,” then why has there been no speck of evidence of it during all these years of low test scores and employer complaints about semi-literate young people applying for jobs? Why do American students learn so much less math between the 4th and the 8th grades than do students in other countries? Could it be because so much more time has been wasted in American schools during those four years?

Evidence is the one thing that our so-called educators want no part of. They want to be able to simply declare that there is genuinely great teaching, “creative” learning, or “critical thinking,” without having to prove anything to anybody.

In states where tests have been mandated by law, the first order of business of the teachers’ unions has been to introduce as much mushy subjective material as possible into these tests, in order to prevent anyone from finding out how much—or rather, how little—academic skills they are actually providing their students.

The more fundamental question is whether our educational establishment has even been trying to impart academic skills as a high priority goal. Over the past hundred years, American educators have been resisting the idea that schools exist to pass on to the next generation the basic mental skills that our culture has developed. They have said so in books, articles, speeches—and by their actions in the schools.

Since the rise of teachers’ unions in the early 1960s—which coincided with the decline of student test scores—the education establishment has increasingly succeeded in de-

emphasizing academic skills. In that sense, our schools have not failed, they have succeeded in changing the goals and priorities of education.

Despite all-out efforts by the education establishment to blame the declining educational standards in our schools on everything imaginable except the people who teach there—on parents, students, television, or society—the cold fact is that today’s students are often simply not taught enough academic material in the first place. Even if there were flawless parents, perfect students, no television, and no problems in society, students could still not be expected to learn what they were never taught.

In fact, it is a lot to expect the teachers themselves to teach what they do not know or understand. Tests have repeatedly shown, for decades on end, that college students who go into teaching score at or near the bottom among students in a wide variety of fields. No wonder they dislike tests! And no wonder that they find innumerable fads more attractive than teaching solid skills, which they themselves may not have mastered.

## “Teaching to the Test”: Part II

One of the objections by the educational establishment to state-mandated tests for students is that this forces the teachers to teach directly the material that is going to be tested, instead of letting the students “discover” what they need to know through their own trial and error, under the guidance of teachers acting as “facilitators” from the sidelines.

In other words, the students should not simply be taught the ready-made rules of mathematics or science, but discover them for themselves. The fact that this approach has failed, time and again, to produce students who can hold their own in international tests with students from other countries only turns the American education establishment against tests.

“Discovery learning” is just one of the many fads in education circles today. Only someone with no real knowledge or understanding of the history of ideas could take such a fad seriously.

It took more than a century of dedicated work by highly intelligent economists to arrive at the analysis of supply and demand that is routinely taught in the first week of Economics One. How long are novices in economics supposed to flounder around trying to “discover” these same principles?

Nobody believes that the way to train pilots is to let them “discover” the principles of flight that the Wright brothers arrived at—after years of effort, trial and error. Would

anyone even try to teach people how to drive an automobile by taking them out on a highway and letting them “discover” how it is done?

The issue is not what sounds plausible but what actually works. But judging one method of teaching against another by the end results that each produces is the last thing that our fad-ridden educators want. That is at the heart of their objections to having to “teach to the test” instead of engaging in “creative” teaching and “discovery learning” by students—as they arbitrarily define these terms.

The education establishment’s bitter opposition to the testing of students by independent outsiders with standardized tests is perfectly understandable for people who do not want to have to put up or shut up. For decades, the ultimate test of any teaching method has been whether it was fashionable among educators.

Educational philosophies that have been put to the test in other countries—Russia in the 1920s and China in the 1960s, for example—and which have failed miserably there, as they are now failing here, continue in vogue because there are no consequences for failure here. Not so long as teachers have iron-clad tenure and get paid by seniority rather than results.

At the heart of the problem of educational failure is the low academic quality of the people who become teachers and principals. This low academic quality has been documented by empirical research so many times, over so many years, that it is incredible how this crucial fact gets overlooked again and again in discussions of the problems of our schools.

So long as teacher training courses in education schools are Mickey Mouse, they are going to repel many intelligent people who would like to teach, and we are going to be left



with the dregs of the college students. When the resulting pool of “certified” teachers consists disproportionately of these dregs, do not expect them to be even intellectually oriented, much less intellectually competent.

It is impossible to understand what is happening in our schools without understanding the kind of people who run them. But, once you see the poor academic quality of those people, you can easily understand why textbooks have been dumbed down and why there is such bitter opposition by educators to letting exceptionally bright children be taught in separate classes with more advanced material. Do not expect intellectual losers to look favorably on intellectual winners.

Such teachers are the natural prey of education gurus pushing non-intellectual fads with glittering names. If you got rid of every single counterproductive fad in our schools today, but left the same people in place, this would lead only to a new infusion of different counterproductive fads tomorrow.

And there would still be the same bitter opposition to “teaching to the test,” which spoils their self-indulgences.

## “Teaching to the Test”: Part III

While we ought to learn from our own experiences, it is even better to learn from other people’s experiences, saving ourselves the painful costs of the lessons. In the case of the dominant educational fads of our times, many have been tried out before in other countries. Their failures there should have warned us that they were likely to fail here as well.

Our education establishment’s objections to “teaching to the test” are echoes of what was said and done in China during the 1950s and 1960s, when examinations were de-emphasized and non-academic criteria and social “relevance” were given more weight. In 1967, examinations were abolished.

This was an even bigger step in China than it would be in the United States, for China had had extensive examinations for more than a thousand years. Not only were there academic examinations, for centuries most Chinese civil servants were also selected by examinations.

A decade after academic examinations were abolished in China, the Ministry of Education announced that college entrance examinations “will be restored and admittance based on their results.” Why? Because “the quality of education has declined sharply” in the absence of examinations and this had “retarded the development of a whole generation of young people.”

Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping, complained about “the deterioration of academic standards” and said, “schools have

not paid attention to educational standards and instead overemphasized practical work; students' knowledge of theory and basic skills in their area of specialization have been disregarded."

None of these failing educational fads was unique to China. They went back to the teachings of John Dewey, whose "progressive" ideas shaped developments in American schools—and especially American schools of education, where future teachers were trained. Moreover, Dewey's ideas were tried out on a large scale in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, before they had achieved similar influence in the United States.

During a visit to the Soviet Union in 1928, Dewey reported "the marvelous development of progressive educational ideas and practice under the fostering care of the Bolshevik government." He noted that the Soviets had broken down the barriers between school and society, which he had urged others to do, and said "I can only pay my tribute to the liberating effect of active participation in social life upon the attitude of the students."

Here we see the early genesis of the current idea in today's American schools that the children there should be promoting causes, writing public figures and otherwise "participating" in the arena of social and political issues. Another progressive educator, W. H. Kilpatrick, was likewise exhilarated to find that his books were being used in Soviet teacher training programs.

Kilpatrick was also delighted to learn that the three R's were not being taught directly but were being learned "incidentally from tasks at hand." Here was the basic principle behind today's "discovery learning."

Even as visiting progressive educators from America were gushing over the use of their ideas in Soviet schools, the bad

educational consequences were turning the Soviet government leadership against these fads. The commissar who had imposed progressive education on Soviet schools was removed shortly after John Dewey's visit.

When the romantic notions of progressive education didn't work, the Soviet and Chinese governments were able to get rid of them because they were not hamstrung by teachers' unions. They were able to restore "teaching to the test"—which was not very romantic, but it worked.

The "barriers between school and society," which Dewey lamented, existed for a reason. Schools are not a microcosm of society, any more than an eye is a microcosm of the body. The eye is a specialized organ which does something that no other part of the body does. That is its whole significance.

You don't use your eyes to listen to music. Specialized organs have important things to do in their own specialties. So do schools, which need to stick to their special work as well, not become social or political gadflies.

## Smart “Problems”

During my first semester of teaching, many years ago, I was surprised to encounter the philosophy that the brightest students did not need much help from the teacher because “they can get it anyway” and that my efforts should be directed toward the slower or low-performing students.

This advice came from my department chairman, who said that if the brighter or more serious students “get restless” while I was directing my efforts toward the slower students, then I should “give them some extra work to do to keep them quiet.”

I didn’t believe that the real difference between the *A* students and the *C* students was in inborn intelligence, but thought it was usually due to differences in attitudes and priorities. In any event, my reply was that what the chairman proposed “would be treating those who came here for an education as a special problem!”

A few days later, I handed in my resignation. It turned out to be only the first in a series of my resignations from academic institutions over the years.

Unfortunately, the idea of treating the brighter or more serious students as a problem to be dealt with by keeping them busy is not uncommon, and is absolutely pervasive in the public schools. One fashionable solution for such “problem” students is to assign them to help the less able or less conscientious students who are having trouble keeping up.

In other words, make them unpaid teacher’s aides!

High potential will remain only potential unless it is developed. But the very thought that high potential should be developed more fully never seems to occur to many of our educators—and some are absolutely hostile to the idea.

It violates their notions of equality or “social justice” and it threatens the “self-esteem” of other students. As a result, too often a student with the potential to become a future scientist, inventor, or a discoverer of a cure for cancer will instead have his time tied up doing busy work for the teacher.

Even so-called “gifted and talented” programs often turn out to be simply a bigger load of the same level of work that other students are doing—keeping the brighter students busy in a separate room.

My old department chairman’s notion that the better students “can pretty much get it without our help” assumes that there is some “it”—some minimum competence—which is all that matters.

People like this would apparently be satisfied if Einstein had remained a competent clerk in the Swiss patent office and if Jonas Salk, instead of discovering a cure for polio, had spent his career puttering around in a laboratory and turning out an occasional research paper of moderate interest to his academic colleagues.

If developing the high potential of some students wounds the “self-esteem” of other students, one obvious answer is for them to go their separate ways in different classrooms or different schools.

There was a time when students of different ability levels or performance levels were routinely assigned to different classes in the same grade or to different schools—and no one else collapsed like a house of cards because of wounded self-esteem.

Let's face it: Most of the teachers in our public schools do not have what it takes to develop high intellectual potential in students. They cannot give students what they don't have themselves.

Test scores going back more than half a century have repeatedly shown people who are studying to be teachers to be at or near the bottom among college students studying in various fields. It is amazing how often this plain reality gets ignored in discussions of what to do about our public schools.

Lack of competence is only part of the problem. Too often there is not only a lack of appreciation of outstanding intellectual development but a hostility towards it by teachers who are preoccupied with the "self-esteem" of mediocre students, who may remind them of what they were once like as students.

Maybe the advancement of science, of the economy, and finding a cure for cancer can wait, while we take care of self-esteem.

## Vouchers Vindicated

The court cases that get the most media attention are not necessarily the cases that will have the most impact on the society. Despite all the controversy surrounding the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals' decision outlawing "under God" from the pledge of allegiance or the Supreme Court's decision outlawing executions of murderers with low test scores, the decision with the greatest potential for benefitting American society is the Supreme Court's decision declaring vouchers constitutional, even if most of these vouchers end up being used at religious schools.

One of the main phony arguments against vouchers is now dead. Vouchers are no more a violation of the Constitution than the G.I. Bill that paid for the education of military veterans at Notre Dame, Holy Cross, and other religious colleges.

Opponents of vouchers have other phony arguments to fall back on, however. One is that vouchers will drain money away from the public schools, making it harder for them to provide a good education to the students remaining.

That argument is just bad arithmetic, perhaps brought on by fuzzy math. Vouchers almost invariably pay much less money than the average cost of educating students in the public schools. When students who cost \$8,000 a year to educate in the public schools transfer to a private school with a \$4,000 voucher, the total cost of educating all the students does not go up. It goes down.

Far from reducing per capita spending in the public



schools, the departure of voucher students leaves more money per pupil for those left behind. It is of course true that the total sum of money in the public school may decline, but if half the students depart, should the school continue to get the same money it had when there were twice as many students?

This emphasis on money is a tragic farce, in view of all the research that shows virtually no correlation between spending per pupil and educational outcomes. Districts with some of the highest per pupil expenditures have some of the lowest test results, and vice versa. Students in countries that spend less than half as much per pupil as we do outperform American students on international tests, year after year.

One of the most hypocritical objections made by opponents of vouchers is that the vouchers pay so little that they can only be used in religious schools. If that is the critics' real concern, why don't they advocate raising the amount of money per voucher?

In reality, those who are up in arms about disparities in per pupil expenditure from one public school district to another almost never advocate equalizing expenditures between voucher recipients and students in the public schools.

The truly ugly aspect of the case against vouchers is the objection that vouchers will allow private schools to "skim off" the best students from the public schools. Students are not inert objects being skimmed off by others. These students and their parents choose what they want to do—for the first time, as a result of vouchers setting them free from the public school monopoly.

When these voucher critics send their own children off to upscale private schools, do they say that Phillips Academy

or Sidwell Friends School are “skimming” the best students out of the public schools? Affluent parents are simply doing what any responsible parents would do—choosing the best education they can get for their children.

Only when low-income parents are now able to do the same thing is it suddenly a question of these students being “skimmed” by other institutions. But whenever any group rises from poverty to prosperity, whether by education or otherwise, some do so before others. Why should low-income families be told that either all of them rise at the same time or none of them can rise?

If there has actually been harm done to the public schools by vouchers, there ought to be evidence of it by now. But voucher critics have none, after all these years, and rely on scary but unsubstantiated theories instead.

What we are really talking about are the teachers’ unions wanting to keep a captive audience, for the sake of their members’ jobs, and social engineers wanting to control low-income children and their parents, as they themselves would never want to be controlled.

## Artificial Stupidity

A recent news story about a teacher who assigned her students to write anti-war letters may have seemed like just an isolated episode but teachers using students for their own little ego trips is by no means uncommon. Perhaps the worst recent example was a teacher who unleashed her venom on the children of military personnel who had gone off to fight in Iraq.

Just last week I received a bundle of letters from students who have apparently been given an assignment to write to me by a teacher in an English class in Flat Rock High School in Flat Rock, Michigan. This was occasioned by a column of mine that said some things that were not politically correct.

The first of these letters was from a girl who informed me, from her vast store of teenage wisdom, of things that I knew 30 years ago, and closed by telling me that I needed to find out about poverty. Since I spent more years in poverty than she has spent in the world, this would be funny if it were not so sad.

With American students consistently scoring at or near the bottom on international tests, you would think that our schools would have better things to do than tell kids to write letters to strangers, spouting off about things they know little or nothing about.

Flat Rock High School's envelopes, in which the students wrote their assigned letters, has the motto: "Where Tomorrow's Leaders Learn!" Sadly, they are learning not to be leaders but to be sheep-like followers, repeating

politically correct notions and reacting with snotty remarks to anyone who contradicts them.

It is bad enough when someone takes the position that he has made up his mind and doesn't want to be confused by the facts. It is worse when someone else makes up his mind for him and then he dismisses any facts to the contrary by attributing bad motives to those who present those facts.

Creating mindless followers is one of the most dangerous things that our public schools are doing. Young people who know only how to vent their emotions, and not how to weigh opposing arguments through logic and evidence, are sitting ducks for the next talented demagogue who comes along in some cult or movement, including movements like those that put the Nazis in power in Germany.

At one time, the educator's creed was: "We are here to teach you how to think, not what to think." Today, schools across the country are teaching students what to think—whether about the environment, the war, social policy, or whatever.

Even if what they teach were true, that would be of little use to these young people in later life. Issues and conditions change so much over time that even the truth about today's issues becomes irrelevant when confronted with the future's new challenges.

If students haven't been taught to think, then they are at the mercy of events, as well as being at the mercy of those who know how to take advantage of their ignorance and their emotions.

Classroom brainwashing is not new. I wrote about it a decade ago in my book *Inside American Education*. Hearings at the Department of Education brought out the same things a decade before that.

When will the voting public get the message? Where are

the parents of these children? Do parents in Flat Rock, Michigan, want their children's time in school wasted on their teachers' ideological hobby horses, instead of being used to prepare an intellectual foundation for their further education?

In the long run, the greatest weapon of mass destruction is stupidity. In an age of artificial intelligence, too many of our schools are producing artificial stupidity, in the sense of ideas and attitudes far more foolish than young people would have arrived at on their own. I doubt whether the youngsters in Flat Rock, Michigan, were brought up by their parents to say and do the silly things their teachers have assigned them to do.

Weapons of mass destruction in the hands of an avowed enemy can destroy many Americans, but they cannot destroy America, because we are too strong and too capable of counterattack. Only Americans can destroy America. But too many of our schools have for years been quietly undermining the values and abilities that are needed to preserve any society—and especially a free society.

## “Good” Teachers

The next time someone receives an award as an outstanding teacher, take a close look at the reasons given for selecting that particular person. Seldom is it because his or her students did higher quality work in math or spoke better English or in fact had any tangible accomplishments that were better than those of other students of teachers who did not get an award.

A “good” teacher is not defined as a teacher whose students learn more. A “good” teacher is someone who exemplifies the prevailing dogmas of the educational establishment. The general public probably thinks of good teachers as people like Marva Collins or Jaime Escalante, whose minority students met and exceeded national standards. But such bottom line criteria have long since disappeared from most public schools.

If your criterion for judging teachers is how much their students learn, then you can end up with a wholly different list of who are the best teachers. Some of the most unimpressive-looking teachers have consistently turned out students who know their subject far better than teachers who cut a more dashing figure in the classroom and receive more lavish praise from their students or attention from the media.

My own teaching career began at Douglass College, a small women’s college in New Jersey, replacing a retiring professor of economics who was so revered that I made it a point never to say that I was “replacing” him, which would

have been considered sacrilege. But it turned out that his worshipful students were a mass of confusion when it came to economics.

It was much the same story at my next teaching post, Howard University in Washington. One of the men in our department was so popular with students that the big problem every semester was to find a room big enough to hold all the students who wanted to enroll in his classes. Meanwhile, another economist in that department was so unpopular that the very mention of his name caused students to roll their eyes or even have an outburst of hostility.

Yet when I compared the grades that students in my upper level economics class were making, I discovered that none of the students who had taken introductory economics under Mr. Popularity had gotten as high as a *B* in my class, while virtually all the students who had studied under Mr. Pariah were doing at least *B* work. “By their fruits ye shall know them.”

My own experience as an undergraduate student at Harvard was completely consistent with what I later learned as a teacher. One of my teachers—Professor Arthur Smithies—was a highly respected scholar but was widely regarded as a terrible teacher. Yet what he taught me has stayed with me for more than 40 years and his class determined the course of my future career.

Nobody observing Professor Smithies in class was likely to be impressed by his performance. He sort of drifted into the room, almost as if he had arrived there by accident. During talks—lectures would be too strong a word—he often paused to look out the window and seemingly became fascinated by the traffic in Harvard Square.

But Smithies not only taught us particular things. He got

us to think—often by questioning us in a way that forced us to follow out the logic of what we were saying to its ultimate conclusion. Often some policy that sounded wonderful, if you looked only at the immediate results, would turn out to be counterproductive if you followed your own logic beyond stage one.

In later years, I would realize that many disastrous policies had been created by thinking no further than stage one. Getting students to think systematically beyond stage one was a lifetime contribution to their understanding.

Another lifetime contribution was a reading list that introduced us to the writings of top-notch minds. It takes one to know one and Smithies had a top-notch mind himself. One of the articles on that reading list—by Professor George Stigler of Columbia University—was so impressive that I went to graduate school at Columbia expressly to study under him. After discovering, upon arrival, that Stigler had just left for the University of Chicago, I decided to go to the University of Chicago the next year and study under him there.

Arthur Smithies would never get a teaching award by the standards of the education establishment today. But he rates a top award by a much older standard: By their fruits ye shall know them.



## A Sign of the Times

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. That was certainly true of a recent photo of a little seven-year-old boy holding a sign demanding more money for the schools and holding his fist in the air.

He was part of a demonstration organized by his teachers, and including parents and other students, all of whom were transported to California's state capital in Sacramento to protest budget constraints brought on by the state's huge deficit.

There was a time when taking children out of classes to fight the political battles of adults would have been considered a shameless neglect of duty. But that was long ago.

The little boy with the sign and his fist raised in the air is just one of the millions of victims of a shameless education establishment. It is not just that he is not in class learning the things he will need for his own mental development. He is out in the streets learning dangerous lessons for the future.

The most dangerous lesson of all is that he doesn't need to know what he is talking about, that what matters is venting his feelings and being an activist.

He is also learning to let himself be manipulated by others, setting him up for all sorts of pied pipers he is likely to encounter in later years, who may lead him into anything from personal degeneracy to movements like the Taliban or the cult that Jim Jones led to their doom at Jonestown.

What can a seven-year-old boy know about the issues that he is carrying a sign for or shaking his fist about? Has he even heard—much less understood—any other side of the issue he is being used for?

Can he have read any of the many empirical studies which show that there is very little correlation between the amount of money that schools spend and the quality of the education that the children receive? Per pupil spending in Washington, D.C. schools is among the highest in the nation but test results there are among the lowest.

American school children have more money spent on them than the children in countries that regularly finish higher on international tests than we do.

When confronted with the undeniable fact that American high school students repeatedly finish at or near the bottom on international tests, there is a standard teachers' union party line. Supposedly only the elite finish high school in other countries, the spin goes, so it is unfair to compare other countries' elite students with our average students.

If there was ever any validity to this argument, it is long past. Countries with a higher percentage of their youngsters finishing high school still have their students outperform American students.

Sometimes the education establishment tries to use the fact that American students don't do badly in the lower grades. That is true: Our children are not stupid. It is just that the longer they stay in our school system, the further they fall behind the rest of the world.

This is not accidental. Far too many public schools have far too many other agendas than providing children with intellectual skills. Political propaganda is just one. Using the children as guinea pigs for fashionable notions is another.

And, at the top of the agenda is protecting the jobs of teachers, even those who are grossly incompetent.

Those who engineered this educational disaster have lots of glib excuses. One of the most popular is that students and parents are flawed. The great non sequitur seems to be that, if there is anything wrong with parents or students, there can't be anything wrong with the schools.

But, if the current crop of "educators" had better students, better parents, and more money, all that it would amount to would be smaller classes in nicer surroundings having their time wasted on the fads and fetishes that take the place of education in our classrooms.

We would have more expensive incompetence. And we would have more children being prepared to be led by pied pipers, like the little boy with his sign and his fist in the air.

## Suspicious Stats

One of the latest in the seemingly endless rounds of alarming statistics is that one out of 12 American children has some form of disability. With all the things that are supposedly getting worse, you have to wonder how our life expectancy keeps increasing. A cynic might even wonder if the increasing availability of money from the government has anything to do with the increasing number of “problems” that need to be “solved” by government programs.

One way of telling whether a given statistic is a fact or an artifact is to ask whether the definition used fits the thing that is being defined. Buried in the news story about the children with disabilities is the fact that the definition of “disability” has been expanding over the years.

A child who is likely to be diagnosed as autistic today might not have been some years ago. Yet that is seldom mentioned in alarming statistics about the escalating number of cases of autism. As the author of a couple of books about late-talking children, I hear regularly from parents who tell me that they are being asked to allow their children to be labeled “autistic,” in order to get either the government or their insurance company to pay for speech therapy.

It is amazing that, with something as serious—indeed, catastrophic—as autism, statistics are thrown around without mentioning the variation in what is being diagnosed as autism. In something much less serious, such as sales

receipts at Wal-Mart, a comparison of how much money was taken in this year, compared to last year, will almost certainly make a distinction between sales receipts at the same stores as last year versus sales receipts that include new stores opened since last year.

In other words, they notify you of changing definitions behind the numbers. Otherwise, the statistics could mean almost anything. If it is important enough to do this for Wal-Mart sales, it certainly ought to be important enough to do it for autism.

Regardless of whether the old or the new criterion for autism is better, they are different criteria. Statistics should tell us whether or by how much autism has risen by any consistent standard. Moreover, those who diagnose autism range from highly trained specialists to people who never set foot in a medical school or had any comparable training elsewhere.

Another set of statistics whose definition is at least questionable are statistics about the incomes of high school dropouts versus those who have more education. Since most high school dropouts resume their education at some later time, are these statistics really counting all—or even most—dropouts? Or just the minority of dropouts who never enter a classroom again?

Although I dropped out of high school more than half a century ago, and still do not have a high school diploma, I do have a couple of postgraduate degrees. Is my income counted when they add up the incomes of dropouts? Not bloody likely.

This is not just a fine point. All sorts of efforts are being made to prevent kids from dropping out of high school, as if dropping out means the end of their education. Since it usually means only an interruption, leading eventually to a

resumption of their education after some experience in the real world, the urgency of preventing them from encountering the real world is by no means obvious. They may become more serious students afterwards.

One of the most brazen uses of statistics which do not fit the definition was in a much-praised book that attempted to show that black students admitted to colleges under affirmative action do just fine. The book was titled *The Shape of the River*, written by William Bowen and Derek Bok, former presidents of Princeton and Harvard, respectively.

Although this book is crammed full of statistics, not one of those statistics is about black students admitted under affirmative action. Black students admitted under the same standards as white students are lumped together with black students admitted under lower standards. Yet, from this the authors conclude that affirmative action is a good thing—to the applause of those who apparently wanted to see that conclusion more than they wanted to see meaningful statistics.

Advocates of campaign finance reform often speak of the corrupting influence of money. But they seldom include the corrupting influence of the government's money on what statistical "facts" are fed to the public.

## Peers and Pied Pipers

Some years ago, while walking across the campus of Stanford University, I happened to encounter the late Glen Campbell, then head of the Hoover Institution, where I work. Glen was also a regent of the University of California and the regents had just made some horrible decision that had me upset.

After I explained to Glen why I thought the regents' decision was so terrible, he said with a wry smile, "They know all that, Tom." That stopped me in my tracks.

"Why did they do it, then?" I asked.

"They want to be liked," he replied. "If they voted the way you wanted them to vote, they wouldn't be liked." Glen could never be accused of courting popularity and he had voted the other way.

Cynics say that every man has his price, but it is amazing how low some people's price is. Being a regent is not a career or even a stepping stone to a career.

Many of the regents were already independently wealthy—or rather, they were wealthy enough to be independent, if they were not concerned about their popularity.

Popularity may not be the right word, if it means being liked by the public at large. Many things are done—by regents, by judges, and by the intelligentsia—that are very unpopular with the public. But these things enhance their status with their peers.

The very fact that the public doesn't like what they do

may only solidify their sense of being one of the special people who are wiser, nobler or more daring. Some things are believed, without evidence, because such beliefs are a mark of belonging.

Once I asked a federal judge why some of his fellow judges made some of the incredibly bad rulings that they had made. His answer was not very different from that of Glen Campbell—except that he specified that it was the opinions of the liberal media and the elite law school professors that was the gallery to whom these judges were playing.

“You mean they care what Linda Greenhouse of the *New York Times* writes about them?” I asked, incredulous.

“Yes,” he replied.

That certainly gave new meaning to the term “the Greenhouse effect.”

It was even more baffling to hear, within the past year, professors at two of the top law schools in the country tell me that (1) they found the arguments used to justify affirmative action were just a crock and (2) they supported affirmative action anyway. One said he didn’t want to offend donors to his law school.

We usually think of peer pressure as something that kids succumb to. But not only is such pressure effective with people who have long since passed childhood, not all the peer pressure on children is spontaneous.

Schools across the country promote using peers as guides. There are even “trust-building” exercises designed to get students to rely on their classmates. At the same time, these same schools try to put distance between students and their parents.

“Many parents wonder why they lose their children to a whole new value system,” a parent once said plaintively. It is



not accidental. There are not only individual pied pipers in the schools but whole nationwide educational efforts to detach children from their parents, as a way of promoting “social change.”

It is not just parents, but the whole moral structure of society that must be undermined through such misnamed programs as “values clarification” and its sequels—if the fashionable brand of “change” is to be imposed.

That the pathetically under-educated people who staff our public schools should take upon themselves the task of shaping a whole society is staggering. What is even more staggering is that the rest of us let them get away with it—for the most part, because so few even know that it is happening.

There is no way to quantify just how much we are all paying so that a relative handful of people can feel important as part of some elite peer group. But we are paying, not only economically, but in everything from social disintegration to violent crime. Whole societies have come apart when the things that hold them together have been dissolved.