

Education Matters

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Teacher Assessment

It's not pleasant
but it is useful

By Mary Sanchez

The school doors had been barely flung open for the new academic year and already the education profession was caught in a tempest. *The Los Angeles Times* published rankings of the effectiveness of 6,000 elementary school teachers in the city's unified school district, based on standardized test scores.

"The height of journalistic irresponsibility," thundered the local teachers union in a statement denouncing the *Times* decision to post the database online. The union's leader called for a boycott of the paper.

I understand why a teachers union would protest. Who, after all, wants their job evaluation published on the Internet?

But would it be more responsible to suppress information about which public school teachers are effective at their jobs? As the *Times* made clear, school district officials could have performed the analysis its reporters did—they've had the data for years—but they declined to do so, fearful of provoking a fight with the union. Now that the *Times* analysis is out there for ev-

erybody to see, school officials and teachers are talking about how such metrics can be used responsibly.

The statistical method the *Times* used is known as “value-added” analysis. It tracks individual students progress from year to year on standardized tests on math and English, and correlates it to teachers. When a student outperforms expectations (based on past scores), the effect may be attributable to value added by the teacher. The performance of a single student cannot be ascribed with much certainty to the influence of the teacher alone, but with an aggregate of students this method of analysis yields a fairly reliable picture.

Standardized tests are controversial among teachers and policy experts, not least because some types of students consistently perform better on them than others. However, because value-added analysis focuses on how individual students perform over time, noting which years their performance advances or declines, the usual arguments about bias in testing don’t apply.

Teachers of well-heeled white students do not necessarily have a leg up on teachers whose students are poor, minority, or non-native speakers.

The *Times* was careful to acknowledge many caveats about the limits of value-added analysis. It’s good at highlighting the highest- and lowest-ranking teachers, but not for distinguishing the merit of the majority of teachers who show up in the middle. And the system can only look at the outcomes of teachers whose students are tested annually in their subjects.

The paper turned up some interesting, even counterintuitive, findings. Some of the highest-ranking teachers in the study taught challenging student populations, such as

immigrant children with limited English, the poor, and children whose parents have little education. Decoding what those teachers are doing right is an important next step.

No one is arguing that the value-added analysis is the only way to determine which teachers are better at their jobs, or why. Nor is anyone disputing that such assessments should only be one of several metrics for evaluating or rewarding teachers.

Access to a quality public education is the bedrock of the country’s prosperity. And teachers, the *Times* points out, are the “single most important school-related factor in a child’s education.” Sparing teachers from rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness serves neither the children nor the education profession. Nor is it kind to subpar teachers, who need opportunities to learn and grow professionally (or consider other career options).



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IN MEMORY OF
DOUGLAS S. BARNETT
SEPTEMBER 20, 1956 — SEPTEMBER 29, 2010

Douglas S. Barnett, 54, of Olathe, Kansas, went to be with his Lord Wednesday, September 29, 2010, at home after a three-year battle against leukemia. Doug was born September 20, 1956, to Joe and Janelle Barnett in Bozeman, Montana. Doug leaves behind an incredible legacy. He was a loving husband, dedicated father, compassionate son, caring brother, revered teacher, encouraging coach, and a passionate follower of Jesus Christ. Doug taught in the Olathe School District for 32 years, coached basketball for over 20 years, and served as President of the Kansas Association of American Educators for 13 years. He impacted thousands of lives, is loved by many, and will be deeply missed.

“Doug was a supreme example of a professional educator and an inspiration to all of us at the Association of American Educators. In his role as the State Director of the Kansas Association of American Educators, he truly made Kansas a better place for teachers to teach and children to learn.”

— Gary Beckner, AAE Executive Director

As long as its limits are understood, assessing public teachers more openly doesn’t have to be a draconian, self-esteem-busting exercise that merely provides fodder for gadflies. It can be useful for teachers and administrators, and especially for parents who want the best education for their children. ■



Mary Sanchez is a syndicated columnist with the Kansas City Star.

Our Economics Knowledge Deficit

Too many students aren't receiving the economics education they—or our nation—need.

By Lawrence W. Reed



Economics dominates public life and important policy discussions these days, but most people who rely on what they've learned of it in the schools are entering the intellectual battle unarmed.

Elementary Knowledge

Economics courses in high school are few and far between, and often deal with little more than “consumer” issues: how to balance a checkbook, how to find the best deals in the market, or how to borrow money at the lowest interest rate. Those are all useful things to know, but the mental tools and essential principles needed to analyze and evaluate the paramount issues of the day are too often missing.

Biased Textbooks

Even a cursory examination of textbooks used in high school economics courses reveals a dismal level of understanding or an outright bias by the text authors themselves. Students are sometimes reading that citizens are under-taxed, that government spending creates new wealth, and that politicians are better long-term planners than private entrepreneurs. It is not uncommon for texts to portray free-

market competition and private property in a suspicious light, while presenting government intervention with little or no critical scrutiny.

Economics is immensely important. Without it we miss an understanding of much of what makes us the unique, thinking creatures we are. Economics is the study of human action in a world of limited resources and unlimited wants

— a lively topic that cannot be reduced to lifeless graphs and mind-numbing equations that occupy the pretentious planner's time.

Economics teaches us that everything of value has a cost. It informs

us that higher standards of living can only come about through greater production. It tells us that nations become wealthy not by printing money or spending it, but through capital accumulation and the creation of goods and services. It tells us that supply and demand are harmonized by the signals we call prices and that political attempts to manipulate them produce harmful consequences.

Economics explains that good intentions are worse than worthless when they flout inexorable laws of human action. It

reminds us to think of the long-term effects of what we do, not just the short-term or the flash-in-the-pan effects.

The Cost of Good Intentions

When people have little or no economic understanding, they embrace impractical pie-in-the-sky solutions to problems. They may think that whatever the government gives must really be “free,” and that all it has to do to foster prosperity is to command it.

Citizens are being asked every day to form judgments and cast votes for programs and proposals that are largely economic in nature. We should think about how we can provide the missing tools we need to make those and other such decisions, so that we don't dig ourselves deeper in the muck of poor thinking and bad public policy. I'm thankful that the Mackinac Center helps fill the void created by the dearth of sound economics in primary and secondary education. ■

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Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Foundation for Economic Education and president emeritus of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute. This article

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The All-Purpose Science Teacher

New report gives a state-by-state analysis of the quality of science teachers

That the U.S. has a shortage of math and science teachers is well known. But the problem is deeper still: while students suffer not only because of the math and science teachers they don't have, many states set unacceptably low expectations for the science teachers they do have.

Based on their high school science licensure requirements, many states seem to presume that it is all the same to teach anatomy, electrical currents, and Newtonian physics. In addition to licensing in single subjects such as biology and chemistry, most states also allow certification in "general science," with requirements that do not ensure that all secondary biology, chemistry, and physics teachers have mastered the content they teach. By clinging to a loose definition of "science teacher," many states treat specialized science teachers as interchangeable.

In *The All-Purpose Science Teacher*, National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) takes a state-by-state look at preparation and credentialing requirements for secondary science teachers and finds some pretty big loopholes. All but eleven states allow secondary science

teachers to obtain general-science certifications or combination licenses across multiple disciplines. In most cases, these teachers need only pass a general-knowledge science exam that does not ensure subject-specific knowledge.

States say districts—especially rural districts—need the flexibility to assign teachers across the science disciplines. And the U.S. Department of Education has bought into this mindset, allowing teachers with "broad field" science certification to be considered Highly Qualified Teachers. But this approach only masks and perpetuates the problem, rather than expanding strategies that improve the science teacher pipeline, such as distance learning or alternate route programs such as UTeach.

NCTQ has heard from a couple of states that their teachers with general science certification are, in fact, only able to teach introductory, general science courses. But without such a restriction clearly stated in the certification requirements, regardless of the intent, the loophole remains.

For a complete report giving a state-by-state look at preparation and credentialing, visit www.nctq.org. ■

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MA • MN • NH • NJ
NY • TN • VA

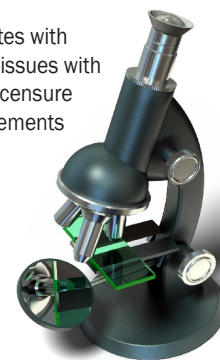
■ States with no major issues with their science-teacher licensure requirements

AR • GA • IL • ME
MD • OK • SD

■ States with some issues

AL • AK • AZ • CA
CO • CT • DE • DC
HI • ID • IA • LA
MI • MS • MO • MT
NE • NV • NM • NC
ND • OH • OR • PA
RI • SC • TX • UT
VT • WA • WV • WI
• WY

■ States with major issues with their licensure requirements



STEM SALE

Schools Get Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Teachers at a Discount

Low math and science scores and a lack of qualified Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) teachers have left schools scrambling to hire math and science educators. A new paper from the Center on Reinventing Public Education looks at the salaries of math and science teachers in Washington State with an interesting spin. Districts and states are not only resisting market pressures to provide higher salaries to these teachers, but, in fact, as a group these teachers are earning a fair amount less than their peers.

Math teachers earn 4.5 percent less and science teachers earn 2.9 percent less than their colleagues for a simple reason: they have fewer years of experience than the typical teacher. Even though STEM teachers are more likely than average to have a master's degree, which in Washington brings a healthy salary bump, their wages are below the district average in 19 of the 30 largest districts in the state. ■ (Source: www.nctq.org)

Deaf Storytellers Entertain Students



Deaf storyteller, Peter Cook, with AAE award recipient, LaWanda Brewer.

The Association of American Educators Foundation awarded a classroom grant to LaWanda Brewer, a teacher at Becky-David Elementary in St. Charles, Missouri. The grant supported bringing deaf storytellers Peter Cook and Nina Wilson to students in the Francis Howell School District to celebrate the St. Louis Storytelling Festival.

Local newspaper chain *Suburban Journals* reported a touching story about the impact of the storytellers:

“They love to play and they want to be a part of the story,” [storyteller Peter Cook] said. “At that age level they have a huge imagination. I take that and I incorporate sign language.”

Brewer, a teacher of the deaf and hard-of-hearing, said she is always looking for an opportunity to bring deaf students together.

Kelsi Long, 11, got to meet her pen pal—a student from another district school—for the first time during the lunch. She said she enjoyed the whole experience.

“You meet other deaf and hard-of-hearing kids,” she said. “It makes you feel like you’re not the only one. Sometimes you feel different.” ■

AAEF awards teacher scholarships and classroom grants twice a year. All educators are eligible to apply although AAE members receive first preference.

An online application is posted at www.aateachers.org.

Author Willing to Visit Your Class by Phone

Science fiction thriller is becoming a teacher (and kid) read-aloud favorite

When Douglas E. Richards set out to write his science fiction adventure, *The Prometheus Project: Trapped*, he had a single goal: hook kids from the first page and never let go. Writing a book that could make an ideal read-aloud was the farthest thing from his mind—but many teachers believe this is exactly what he did.

“If a teacher contacts me, I’m always more than happy to schedule a time to phone their class and field questions from their students.”



“My class loved it,” fifth grade teacher Jeff Montag told the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. “They were totally engaged. It’s a hard book to put down.”

Trapped is a fast-paced adventure containing short chapters, cliffhanger chapter endings, and accurate, mind-expanding science. The book has been called “perfect for middle grades” by *Teaching Pre K-8* magazine and is listed as “recommended literature” by the California Department of Education.

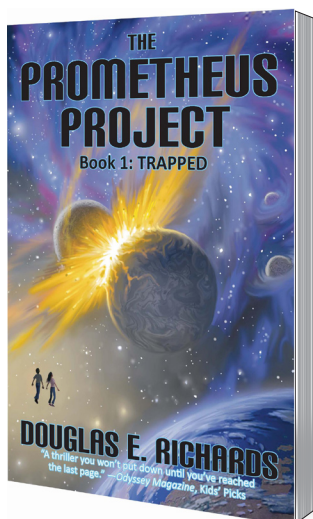
The story follows Ryan and Regan Resnick, two kids whose family just moved to what they consider “the world’s most boring place.” But when they discover their parents are part of an ultra-secret project called Prometheus, they are plunged into the ultimate adventure. Soon, they are under attack and facing hostile alien worlds, alien technology, and unimaginable danger at every turn.

Teachers have called the book fun, intelligent, thought provoking, and a great discussion-starter. They report that their classes thoroughly enjoy the book from start to finish, including girls, boys, reluctant and advanced readers alike. The United Kingdom journal, *Primary Science*, wrote that the book is a “brilliant adventure story, perfect for a read-aloud, and a must for any school library.”

“The fact that a growing number of teachers see fit to read the book to their classes is incredibly gratifying,” said Richards, who has written extensively for *National Geographic KIDS* magazine. “And if a teacher contacts me,” he continued, “I’m always more than happy to schedule a time to phone their class and field questions from their students. I think this has gone over very well with the kids, and it’s always been fun for me as well.”

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The Prometheus Project: Trapped is available at all major bookstores and online retailers. For more information, visit www.douglaserichards.com. ■



WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT CHRISTMAS?

Answers to the question teachers often ask themselves

By Eric Buehrer

As the holidays approach, many educators assume it is illegal to teach the religious aspects of Christmas. Many want to teach about Christmas but are afraid to do so. Their fear usually stems from complaints they have had (or think they will have) from parents, administrators, or colleagues.

However, schools and teachers can teach about the religious aspects of holidays as an important part of learning about American culture.

Part of a Student's Education

In the case of *Florey v. Sioux Falls School District*, the U.S. Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit, upheld the constitutionality of the school's policy on religious holidays. The policy, in part, stated:

Music, art, literature, and drama having religious themes or basis are permitted as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday.

The Court of Appeals held that:

We view the thrust of these rules to be the advancement of the students' knowledge of society's cultural and religious heritage, as well as the provision of an opportunity for students to perform a full range of music, poetry, and drama that is likely to be of interest to the students and their audience.... School administrators should, of course, be sensitive to the religious beliefs or disbeliefs of their constituents and should attempt to avoid conflict, but they need not and should not sacrifice the quality of the students' education.

Recognizing Christmas in the Classroom

In *Lynch v. Donnelly* (1984), the Supreme Court stated, "The concept of a 'wall' of separation between church and state is a



useful metaphor but is not an accurate description of the practical aspects of the relationship that in fact exists. The Constitution does not require complete separation of church and state; it affirmatively mandates accommodation, not merely tolerance, of all religions, and forbids hostility toward any. Anything less would require the 'callous indifference,' (*Zorach v. Clauson*) that was never intended by the Establishment Clause."

By prohibiting or *even discouraging* teachers from recognizing the religious aspects of Christmas, schools are engaging in the hostility and callous indifference that the Supreme Court opposes.

Reading the Christmas Story

In *Stone v. Graham* (1980), the Supreme Court stated "The Bible may constitutionally be used in an appropriate study of history, civilization, ethics, comparative religion, or the like."

Christmas Carols

The Supreme Court assumes your school is having children sing Christmas carols. In *Lynch v. Donnelly*, dealing with the public display of a nativity scene, the Court commented:

To forbid the use of this one passive symbol *while hymns and carols are sung and played in public places including schools*, and while Congress and state legislatures open public sessions with prayers, would be an overreaction contrary to this Nation's history and this Court's holdings. (Emphasis added)

The largest organization of public school music teachers, the Music Educators National Conference (MENC), states the following regarding the use of music with religious themes:

It is the position of Music Educators National Conference (MENC): The National Association for Music Education that the study and performance of religious music within an educational context is a vital and appropriate part of a comprehensive music education. The

omission of sacred music from the school curriculum would result in an incomplete educational experience.

Is Equal Time Necessary?

The truth is, no court has said equal time must be given to all the religious holidays. You can find a reasonable guideline for deciding which holidays to emphasize and how much time to devote to them by answering two questions:

1. Which religion or religions have had the most influence in shaping American culture?
2. Which religions have a prominent influence in the local community?

How much time is spent on each holiday should be determined by its relevance and influence in American culture and the local community. While avoiding slighting any religion, teachers should not leave students with the impression that all religions have had an equal impact on American culture.

The issue is one of proportionality. *Fair* does not always mean *equal*. For instance, a first-year teacher has the same number of students and has the same workload as a 25-year veteran. However, the rookie will not receive equal pay for equal work. She will receive compensation *proportional* to her years of service. Yet, by most teachers, this is considered fair.

Teaching about or Instruction in?

There is a difference between “teaching about” and “instruction in” religion. The California Department of Education offers this distinction that is instructive for educators everywhere:

To teach about religion is not to instruct in religion.

Teaching about religion embraces the study of various religions; appreciation of the nature and variety of religious experience historically and currently; information on past and present sources, views, and behavior of religious persons or groups; and the influence of religion on cultures and civilizations. Instruction in religion, by contrast, is to seek acceptance of and commitment to a particular religion, including a non-religion, such as secularism.

Terminology

It may be helpful to use the term “recognizing Christmas” rather than “celebrating Christmas.” Using the word “celebrate” may cause some people to feel that you are promoting religious participation in the holiday. There is a difference between “participating” in the holiday in a devotional manner and “recognizing” the holiday in an engaging and enjoyable academic manner.

It is also best to teach about Christmas

using words of attribution such as: “Christians believe...,” “The Bible says...,” “Christmas is special for Christians because...,” and so forth.

Here are other examples of how to talk about recognizing Christmas:

- *Nativity scenes are teaching aids* to illustrate the cultural lesson regarding the birth of Jesus. They are not permanent fixtures in the classroom.
- Students sing *Christmas carols as an educational experience*, not a devotional experience.
- Teachers read the story of the birth of Jesus to students so they become familiar with the story of the birth and life of Jesus and gain *a basic academic familiarity with a person who has influenced so many people throughout history in government, art, literature, music, and social movements*.

Presented with an eye toward education, not endorsement or devotion, recognizing the religious aspects of Christmas is a legitimate academic activity. ■



Eric Buehrer is president of Gateways to Better Education and presents a professional development seminar for public school educators entitled Faith, Freedom & Public Schools: How to address the Judeo-Christian tradition. For more information, contact Eric: ebuehrer@gtbe.org

Hanukkah in Your Classroom

Hanukkah (or literally *rededication*) is an eight-day Jewish celebration. This year Hanukkah is celebrated from December 1 to 9.

Too often, if public schools address Hanukkah, they tend to focus only on the food, songs, and games of the holiday. However, in helping students understand America’s Judeo-Christian heritage, it is important to teach the story of faith behind the holiday.

In 168 B.C., the Jewish people, in what is now Israel, were being ruled by a cruel king named Antiochus. Antiochus made it against the law for them to worship their God and read their Scriptures. He also desecrated their temple.

A brave family named the Macabees led the Jewish people to fight against this king. It took three years, but in 165 B.C. they won. They cleaned their temple and rededicated it to their God.

The menorah was supposed to be burning constantly in the temple to remind them that God was always with them. After they cleaned the temple, they only found enough oil for one day. However, the oil burned for eight days. They saw this as a miracle, and this is why Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days.

For Christian students, Hanukkah is relevant in that Jesus, being Jewish, would have celebrated it with his family. The Bible indicates he was at the temple during Hanukkah in the book of John 10:22.





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A Few Lists I've Made

A member reflects on his first ten years of teaching

By Robert H. Brown

Our word *education* comes from the Latin *educare* – to lead out.

Whom do we trust to be our leaders, our teachers?

My choices, in *alphabetical* order:

- Aristotle
- Elizabeth Brown
- Siddhartha Gautama
- Sharon Dawson Hardy
- Jesus
- Patricia Johnson
- Thomas Keating
- Laozi
- Anna Merriman
- Plato
- Benedict Reid
- Socrates
- Jon Kabat Zinn

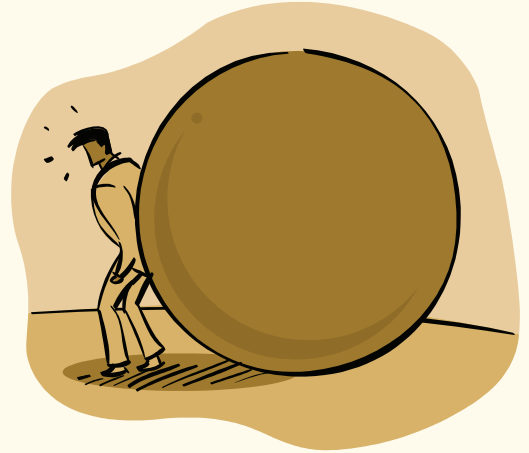
From what do we need to be led? To what do we hope to be led? From:

- darkness to enlightenment
- cacophony to symphony
- abrasion to comfort
- bitterness to sweetness
- stench to perfume
- pride to humility
- anger to contentment
- lust to chastity
- envy to fulfillment
- gluttony to moderation
- avarice to generosity
- sloth to industriousness
- carelessness to prudence
- profligacy to temperance
- anarchy to justice
- cowardice to fortitude
- despair to consolation
- caprice to purpose

- profane to sacred
- selfishness to charity
- want to abundance
- brokenness to wholeness
- ignorance to wisdom
- deceit to truth

What should be our educational priorities? This past June marked the completion of my ten years as a teacher of mathematics and English in the Simi Valley Unified School District. Listed below are, sadly, the unwritten (until now?) priorities I have experienced:

1. Maximize salaries, benefits, and pensions for the greatest number of school employees, regardless of their workload or competence.
2. Avoid lawsuits.
3. Extol endlessly the excellence of the institution, deserved or not.
4. Authorize textbooks, curricular materials, and grading rubrics that allow the greatest number to meet the lowest standards.
5. Allocate the least amount of resources possible to help people who are falling behind.
6. Establish codes of behavior and dress that will be ignored with impunity.
7. Uphold the ethos that receiving a high school diploma at the graduation ceremony (cue the streakers and air horns) is a right guaranteed by the Constitution.
8. Canonize the notion that receiving a high school diploma will result in



guaranteed maximum salary, benefits, and pension throughout one's lifetime.

9. Those elected to student government offices learn the important lesson that attracting a majority of voters has nothing to do with establishing and upholding wise, temperate, prudent, and just policies and everything to do with pandering.
10. Avoid asking the truly important questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What should I do?

Perhaps we should revisit the seven cornerstones of the classical liberal arts curriculum: the Trivium—grammar, rhetoric, logic—and the Quadrivium—arithmetic (number in itself), geometry (number in space), music (number in time), and astronomy (number in space and time). At least one course in morals and ethics is essential.

May I weep for the future with tears of joy. ■

Robert H. Brown is a teacher at Royal High School in Simi Valley, California.