


Education Matters

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Notes from the Front Lines

Study reveals educators' views on the nation's high school dropout crisis



With nearly one-third of all U.S. public high school students failing to graduate each year, AT&T announced results from the latest study conducted by Civic Enterprises and Peter Hart Research with America's Promise Alliance entitled "On the Front Lines of Schools," where the voices of our nation's education practitioners reflect their outlook on the high school dropout crisis.

The research, which focuses on the educator perspective, follows two other seminal education studies: "The Silent Epidemic," which focused on the dropout perspective, and "One Dream, Two Realities," which focused on the parent perspective. This new study, "On the Front Lines of Schools," rounds out the reports, which together represent key voices in the dropout debate—students, parents, and teachers.

Findings

Teachers and administrators, who are confronted every day with daunting challenges in the classroom, understand the reasons students drop out of school, and express strong support for

reforms in our schools to address dropout rates. The research indicates that the views of many teachers are shaped by what they experience firsthand in the classroom. They believe in large

"Two-thirds of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them in the classroom."

part that they and their students are not receiving the necessary support and resources to achieve success, and as a result, many are skeptical that all students can be successfully educated for college.

Expectation Gap

One of the key findings from the research was the identification of an "expectations gap" between teachers and students. In

“What is really compelling is how the report reveals the vastly different perspectives between teachers and students.”



“The Silent Epidemic,” two-thirds of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them in the classroom. However, this latest study revealed that educators did not share that view. In fact, 75 percent of teachers and 66 percent of principals did not believe students at risk of dropping out would have worked harder if more were demanded of them. Moreover, less than one-third of teachers said they believed “schools should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college level work, and provide extra support to struggling students to help them meet those standards.”

“This expectations gap between students and teachers—which our research shows is very real—may be one of the most important barriers to closing the achievement gap,” said John Bridgeland, President & CEO, Civic Enterprises, LLC. Research has shown the importance of high expectations in boosting student achievement.

Why Students Drop out

Teachers and principals identified many reasons why students drop out, reflecting a deep understanding of the complexity of the problem. They recognize that most students who fail to graduate were capable of graduating, but failed to complete high school for a variety of reasons ranging from a lack of support at home and academic preparation to chronic absenteeism and the press of real life events. Most cite the need for more parental involvement and support at home as a core issue. In fact, 61 percent of teachers and 45 percent of principals felt lack of support at home was a factor in most cases of students’ dropping out, with 89 percent of teachers and 88 percent of principals saying it was a factor in at least some cases.

Previous research has shown that nearly half of dropouts interviewed said they left school because they found it uninteresting and did not see the relevance of school to real life. “On the Front Lines of Schools” showed that 42 percent of teachers questioned this claim—however, half of all teachers and nearly

seven in ten principals felt these former students were speaking to an important cause.

What Could Help Students Stay in School

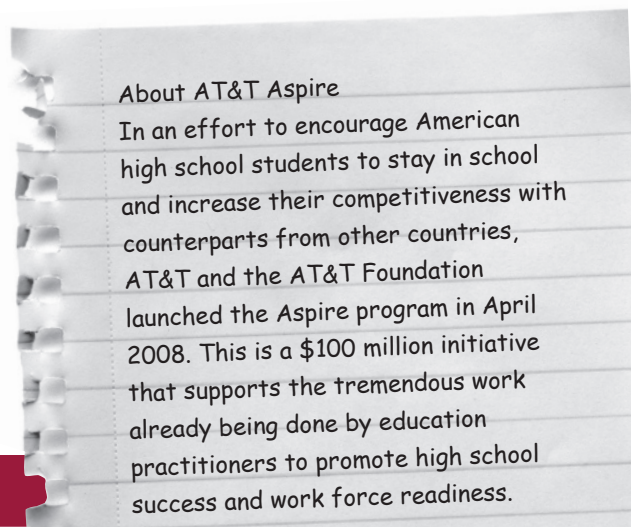
In spite of some skepticism over dropout statistics and differing views about where the responsibility lies, educators universally recognize that changes are needed, and for the most part agree on ways to move forward. Practitioners express strong support for reforms such as early warning systems, parent engagement strategies, rigorous alternative learning communities, expanded college-level learning opportunities, and connecting classroom learning with real world experiences—all methods that the research tells us would help reduce the dropout rate. However, the study concludes that none of these efforts are likely to yield success if not backed by the fundamental belief that all students should be expected to meet high academic standards and graduate fully prepared for college or the work force.

The disparities in what dropouts, parents, and practitioners point to as the root cause issues make it clear that these audiences must be brought together to sort through the differences. A number of stakeholder groups agree, including Bob Wise from Alliance for Excellent Education who said:

“What is really compelling is how the report reveals the vastly different perspectives between teachers and students. “On the Front Lines of Schools” can surely help inform public policy surrounding this issue by highlighting these differences in attitude, and the critical need to bring these groups together.”

AT&T is taking significant steps to help make this happen. The Aspire program is underwriting follow-up research, including face-to-face focus groups with Civic Enterprises and Peter Hart research between teachers, parents, and students, to help facilitate and address communication gaps among these critical groups, as well as online dialogues with practitioners and other education experts facilitated through Education Week.

“We applaud John Bridgeland and the Peter Hart Research team for the important work they have done going directly to the source—students, parents, and now teachers and principals—to determine why students drop out and recommendations for ways forward,” said Laura Sanford, president, AT&T Foundation. “We were very pleased to fund this groundbreaking research initiative as part of our AT&T Aspire high school success program and we are heartened by the response of the education community, which views the findings as critical for charting the course towards increased high school graduation rates.” ■



DECLARING INDEPENDENCE

AAE Affiliate Helps St. John Teachers Discard Washington Education Association and National Education Association for Local-Only Bargaining Option

In an historic move, teachers of the St. John School District in Eastern Washington voted to disaffiliate their local teacher's association from the Washington Education Association (WEA) and the National Education Association (NEA). St. John teachers sought the assistance of Northwest Professional Educators (NWPE) to educate them about negotiation options, legal and liability insurance, benefits such as medical insurance, as well as other needs of teachers.

This is the second school district in Washington to have made such a move. The Sprague-Lamont School District teachers decertified their union in 2005 to establish a local-only teacher union. On a national scale, about a dozen school district staffs have been successful in booting out the state and national unions' control of their local association, the most recent being in Riley, Kansas.

Led by Missy Kjack and Marianne Gfeller, the disaffiliation means that teachers in this school district are no longer forced to financially support the WEA and NEA in order to have a voice in the bargaining process.

"It is liberating to declare our independence from the big teacher unions," said Ms. Gfeller, who teaches at St. John Elementary School. "Our politics just did not mesh with the politics of the WEA, and we couldn't see throwing any more money to their causes."

Teachers in St. John each paid a total of \$744 last year to the WEA and the NEA.

"We're proud St. John teachers didn't accept a status quo that violated their professional standards," stated Cindy Omlin, Executive Director of Northwest Professional Educators. "We're happy to pro-



Marianne Gfeller, president of St. John Education Association (left) with Missy Kjack, SJEA secretary

vide teachers with support services that empower them to establish local-only teacher unions that unite teachers on local issues and student needs instead of being divided along political lines."

"Having worked with NWPE, it was clear to us that we can provide for our

As members of NWPE, St. John teachers will receive liability protection that is double the coverage offered by the WEA. NWPE annual dues are a fraction of union dues.

local needs without the high cost of sending dues to WEA or NEA," Gfeller remarked. "It is great to have the support of a like-minded organization which believes that when teachers are free from union control, both teachers and students benefit, and the quality of education is improved."

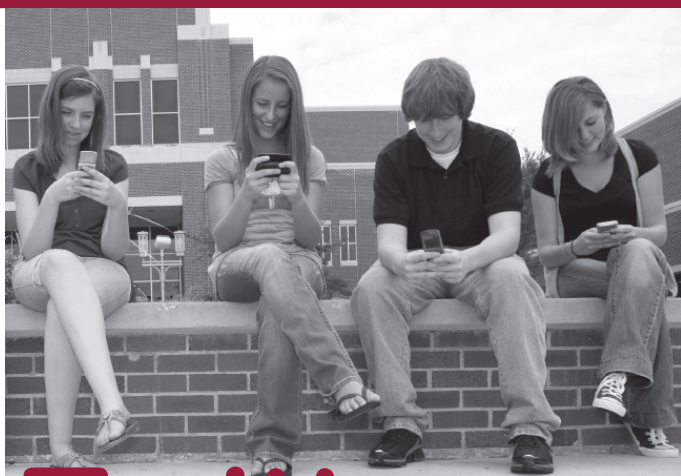
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double the coverage offered by the WEA. NWPE annual dues are a fraction of union dues.

"In this litigious society, it is absolutely necessary to have good liability insurance," added Gfeller. "We also appreciate the savings that comes with membership in NWPE."

Northwest Professional Educators is a nonunion professional educators' organization focused on advancing the professionalism of education. NWPE provides liability insurance, legal services, practical classroom resources, professional development, teacher scholarships and classroom minigrants, and a voice on education issues. ■

NWPE is an affiliate of the Association of American Educators. For more information, visit www.nwpe.org.



Twitter

Lessons in 140 Characters or Less

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo

The Twitter feed for Lucas Ames' class in American history has shown some lively exchanges of ideas and opinions among students at the Flint Hill School. One day this month, eleventh graders at the private school in Oakton, Virginia, shared articles on the separation of church and state, pondered the persistence of racism, and commented on tobacco regulation in Virginia now and during the Colonial period—all in the required Twitter format of 140 or fewer characters.

Those are exactly the kinds of interactions Mr. Ames had hoped for when he decided to experiment with the microblogging tool in his classroom this school year.

He and other teachers first found Twitter valuable for reaching out to colleagues and locating instructional resources. Now, they're trying it out in the classroom as an efficient way to distribute assignments and to foster collaboration among students.

But as more teachers sample the uses of popular social-networking tools like Twitter as part of their lessons and class work, some observers are cautioning that the educational effectiveness of such tools, or the implications those quick, short-form communications may have for students' thinking and learning, are not known.

"It's not a research-based tool," said Daniel T. Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. "The most important thing to remember is that we have no idea what impact these tools have on learning, and it will take a decade to answer that question."



Fostering Collaboration

Twitter is defined as a "real-time short messaging service" on the Web site of the San Francisco-based company of that name, which was founded in 2006. Users subscribe to the blog feeds of others on the site and send out messages—called "tweets"—to their own "followers" within the allotted number of characters.

The site is used extensively by businesses to market products and spread messages related to their work.

It has created its own celebrity class of microbloggers as well. Some famous and previously not-so-famous users have gained thousands or even millions of followers who read their tweets and send—or retweet—them to others.

Nearly 10,000 users, for example, follow Georgia teacher Vicki Davis, who uses the login name @coolcatteacher to share resources and suggestions about educational technology. (*Education Week* and several of the paper's reporters send out daily tweets under names like @educationweek, @kmanzo, and @Teacherbeat.)

Twitter has not caught on among school-age children as quickly or universally as other Web 2.0 tools, such as Facebook or MySpace: only about one percent of the estimated 12 million users in the United States are between the ages of 13 and 17, although young adults are the fastest-growing group of users, according to recent reports. Still, some teachers are hoping that, given the appeal of social networking, Twitter can be used to get students engaged in the content and processes of school.

"For a lot of teachers who started off using Twitter as a professional development tool, they've been building a professional learning community and using information that's been shared," said Steve Dembo, the online-community manager for the Discovery Educator Network, or DEN, which encourages collaboration among its more than 100,000 members across the country. "The more they've seen the value in making connections with each other, [the more] they're realizing the same process might be valuable to students as well."



Increased Interest

In discussions on the DEN, which is hosted by the Silver Spring, Maryland-based Discovery Education, Mr. Dembo has noticed a significant uptick in questions and recommendations among teachers about using Twitter, mostly addressing how to simplify administrative tasks or encourage students to conduct research or collaborate with classmates and their peers across the country.

Mr. Ames, the history teacher, has already seen some results in classroom participation by students who are given the choice of participating in the Twitter feed or writing an extra research paper. "These students are not always sure about how to use the Internet to find and filter information, so this is forcing them to do that," said Mr. Ames, who requires students to submit only school-related tweets. "It's getting kids who aren't necessarily engaged in class engaged in some sort of conversation."

Dorie Glynn, who teaches a bilingual second grade class at Kirk Elementary School in Houston, has been preparing students for conversations of their own on Twitter. The students have started following other classes at the school, and across the country, as they get ready to share data on regional cultures, weather, and to play a virtual *I Spy* game, in which they will hunt for geometric shapes in maps and photos sent from Twitter followers in other places.

"I see a huge amount of potential for connecting with another classroom, asking regional questions, comparing and contrasting areas," Ms. Glynn said.



Pros and Cons Debated

With scant research on the efficacy of social-networking tools such as Twitter, and few clear insights into the best (and worst) uses for them, there is little agreement among researchers and educators about how or whether Twitter-like technologies could or should be used in schools.

“There are generally two camps on this issue: one says how terrible all this is, and the other talks about all the things you can learn using social-networking tools,” said Pamela B. Rutledge, the director of the Media Psychology Research Center at Fielding Graduate University, an online degree program.

But, she added, “there are many different ways, because of those media, that you can engage students” in content.

Today’s students, she added, are going to need to have highly developed critical-thinking skills, be able to digest large amounts of information, and determine what’s important and what’s not. Those are the very kinds of skills they tend to use with Web 2.0 tools, she argued.

Research in related areas might have some answers to questions about the usefulness of such tools, according to Mr. Willingham, who is the author of the new book, *Why Don’t Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom*.

A few studies have found some positive correlations between text-messaging aptitude and literacy. Research on gaming and educational multimedia programs have also shown some positive impact on learning. But few scientific experiments can show a direct link between the use of such technology and student achievement.

A recent study, however, renewed concerns about the potential negative impact of the latest technological applications. The study, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found that adults who attempted multiple tasks while using a range of media simultaneously had difficulty processing the information or switching between tasks.

Few teachers, though, need definitive studies to tell them that social media can be a problem in the classroom if not carefully planned for and controlled.

“The thing about new technology that I’ve observed is that it’s an enormous distraction, and it varies from classroom to classroom depending on how successful teachers are in controlling usage,” Mr. Willingham said. “Kids are often seen texting and carrying on a conversation at the same time, but they’re almost certainly not doing them as well as they think they are.” The study on multitasking adults provides some evidence for that argument.

Even so, Mr. Willingham said, tools such as Twitter may have utility in helping students communicate, stay organized, and learn research and analytical skills.

The anecdotal evidence among Twitter fans, however, has been positive, Mr. Dembo of the Discovery Educator Network said.

“Most of the people expressing concerns are not the people who’ve found value in Twitter in their professional or personal lives,” he said. “That’s not to say their points about the potential downsides are not valid.”



Those downsides include the mundane or pointless tweets that some users submit, such as what they are having for lunch, and other messages that could prove distracting if access to student or class Twitter accounts isn’t controlled. Teachers, though, can choose which users to follow, or to limit access to students only, an approach many take to ensure Internet safety as well.

Beyond Technology

At the Flint Hill School in Virginia, Mr. Ames has been carefully considering how he might control usage before expanding Twitter use in his class. Right now, students contribute to Twitter outside the classroom, although tweets are mostly related to conversations and content from class.

“As we prepare students for college, we tell them it’s not always just about how hard you work, but how smart you work,” he said. “These collaborative tools can help them become smarter students, and to use collaborative knowledge versus going through these classes on your own and never talking to anyone about them.”

As with any tool, Mr. Willingham said, the medium should not be the primary concern for teachers. The way students receive information—through Twitter, via e-mail, or in a printed handout—may not have a dramatic effect on how they use it.

“Like any other tool, the way we make it useful is to consider very carefully what this particular tool is very good at, rather than simply say, ‘I like Twitter, so how can I use it?’ ” said Mr. Willingham.

“The medium is not enough,” he added. “People talk about the vital importance of Web 2.0 and 3.0, and that kids have got to acquire those skills. But we can’t all just be contributing to wikis and tweeting each other. Somebody’s got to create something worth tweeting.” ■

Kathleen Kennedy Manzo is an associate editor for Education Week. Her beats include the curriculum areas of social studies, literacy and languages, arts, and textbook policy.

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Back to the Future for the NEA

By Chelsea Schilling

As reported by *WorldNet Daily*, the National Education Association (NEA) has made a glowing assessment of radical community organizer Saul Alinsky and is enthusiastically recommending American public school teachers read two of his books.

On its website, the NEA dubs Alinsky “an inspiration to anyone contemplating action in their community! And to every organizer!”

It recommends

Alinsky’s *Reveille for Radicals*, a 1946 book about the principles and tactics of “community organizing,” and *Rules for Radicals*, a 1971 text that articulated a socialist strategy for gaining political power to redistribute wealth from the “haves” to the “have-nots.”

The NEA describes Alinsky as a “master political agitator, tactical planner and social organizer” who wrote a “guidebook

for those who are out to change things.”

The NEA continues, “Alinsky’s goal seems to be to encourage positive social change by equipping activists with a realistic view of the world, a kind of

preemptive disillusionment. If a person already knows what evil the world is capable of, then perhaps the surprise factor can be eliminated, making the person a more effective activist. Alinsky further seems to be encouraging the budding activist not to worry too much about getting his or her hands dirty. It’s all a part of the job, he seems to say.”

In “Alinsky for Teacher Organizations,” a 1972 document written for use in training teachers, NEA training consultant J. Michael Arisman explained that Alinsky believed the teacher association’s

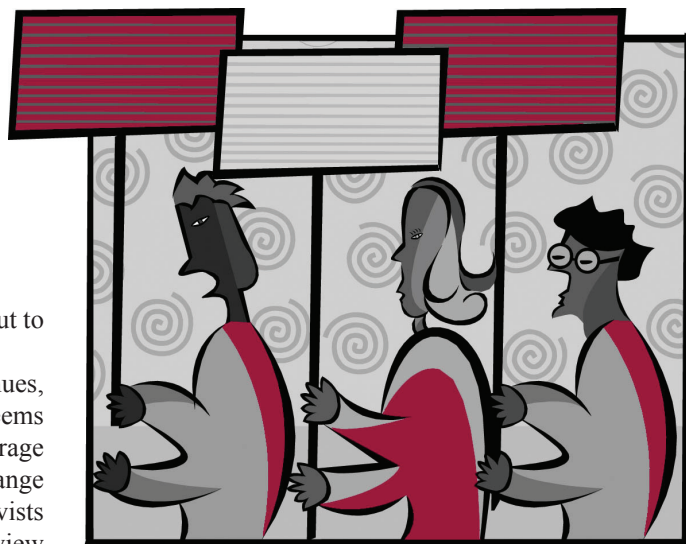
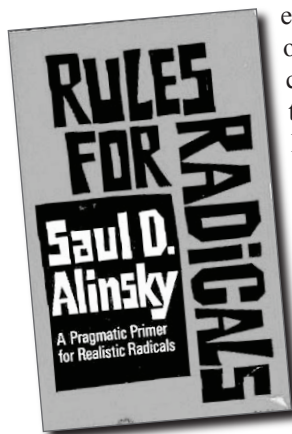
real power base was in the community. He advocated organizing the community by using the natural interest in the children to send teachers into children’s homes so they could develop relationships with parents.

The NEA’s recommended reading excerpt states “Alinsky was hated and defamed by powerful enemies, proof that his tactics worked. His simple formula for success: ‘Agitate + Aggravate + Educate + Organize.’”

Alinsky’s “training” may serve the NEA well in the political arena, but how does studying Alinsky’s methods make one a better classroom teacher? ■

“The philosophy of the classroom in one generation is the philosophy of government in the next.”

Abraham Lincoln



NEA to “Revisit” Merging with AFT

Reflecting the priorities of its president, the National Education Association will examine its current policies and partnerships with other labor organizations in 2010 and determine whether changes need to be made.

While mention of merger remains exclusive to a handful of supporters, NEA President Dennis Van Roekel seems committed to reducing the barriers that derailed the Principles of Unity in 1998, and at least weaving together a series of intertwining relationships with AFT, AFL-CIO, and Change to Win.

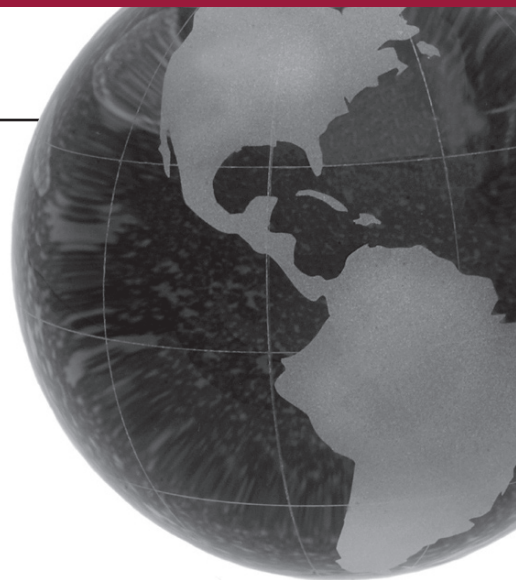
Raw numbers suggest a tipping point is near: about 700,000 of NEA’s 3.2 million members also belong to the AFL-CIO. The anti-AFL-CIO sentiment that fueled much of the opposition to the 1998 merger with AFT has largely dissipated. But in context, the numbers change very little of the 1998 equation. More than 400,000 of those 700,000 are NEA members in name only. These are folks who belonged to New York State United Teach-

ers before the state merger with NEA New York. They neither pay dues to NEA nor have representation in NEA’s decision-making bodies.

Additionally, the AFL-CIO/NEA Labor Solidarity Partnership has not led to a stampede of NEA locals joining the AFL-CIO. Back in February 2006, the *New York Times* reported the partnership “could increase the federation’s membership by nearly a million over the next five years.” So far, that estimate is several orders of magnitude short.

There is little internal organized opposition at NEA’s national level—to anything. But the wild card on the issue of NEA’s relations with organized labor is the stance of its state affiliates. Some would be thrilled to be part, or leader, of a labor coalition. Others would rather keep an arm’s length from the Trumkas, Gettelingers, and Buffenbargers (and no, those are not residents of Hobbiton).

Source—*The Education Intelligence Agency*, www.eiaonline.com



Teaching the Teachers in Louisiana



Having touted teacher quality as an important spoke of his reform wheel, it was only a matter of time before Edu-

cation Secretary Arne Duncan took on the largest purveyor of teacher training: education schools. In two recent speeches, one at UVA's Curry School and one at Columbia Teachers College, Duncan called them "mediocre," explaining that student teachers don't get enough hands-on classroom management training or classes on how to use data to inform their practice.

In particular, Duncan wants ed schools to focus less on inputs and more on outputs, namely the achievement of the future students of the some 220,000 teachers graduating every year from ed schools. "Education schools act as the Bermuda Triangle of higher education—students sail in but no one knows what happens to them after they come out," Duncan told Curry students. States like Louisiana have tried to remedy this disconnect by tracking student achievement for individual teachers back to the schools or alternative certification programs from which they graduated. More states should follow suit, says Duncan.

Louisiana researcher George Noell explains that you have to look at the supply side of teaching: "Then you can make a link between who taught a kid, who trained the teacher, and the overall efficacy of that teacher." That data can then be used to strengthen ed schools' weak spots, or shut them down all together.

This shift in focus from "highly qualified" to highly effective is certainly welcome, but there are still forty-nine states with many hundreds of education schools with a long way to go.

Texas Two-Step



Arne Duncan may continue lambasting teacher preparation programs nationwide, but Texas could

soon give him something to smile about. A proposal authored by veteran state Senator Florence Shapiro would impose stricter standards on the state's 177 traditional and alternative teacher prep programs. (Final approval is expected in February 2010.)

Heretofore, program accreditation was based on only one factor: percentage of teaching candidates passing a written certification exam. Shapiro's two-step plan would raise the combined passing rate of all teacher candidates from 70 to 80 percent by 2012 (a move initiated in Rhode Island last month), and would also establish three other accreditation criteria: mandating evaluations by the principals of schools into which the products of teacher prep programs go to teach, instituting teacher prep program follow-up with certified graduates for at least one year, and ensuring that prep program graduates are improving student achievement for their first three years.

Linking student test scores back to teacher training programs would be a big step for Texas; currently, such scores are only used to determine yearly bonuses for teachers. But the current proposal leaves undefined the required "improvement in student achievement" of prep program graduates, the details of program follow-up with graduates, or how principal evaluations will be weighted; setting these bars too low and/or making them easy to circumvent, of course, would undermine the changes entirely.

The good news is that if a program is on "accreditation probation" for at least one year, the state can remove accreditation and/or order it to close. We'll give one cheer for a good first step and reserve the second for when we get more details.

The UK tries charters?



It's been a long time coming, but the British Tories have a new idea in education. With the ruling party falling out of favor, these con-

servatives may just spark a revolution, if they can get it done.

Instead of trying to change the calcified system, they'll bring in fresh blood, by funding up to 500 privately run schools with public dollars.

But this charter-like model is even more radical than its peers in the U.S.; backers site Sweden's "free school" model, where all students have had the option of attending free publically funded, independently run schools since 1992, as their inspiration. (Imagine charter schools being legal in every corner of the U.S., and an accepted and welcomed educational option, often started by parents or community groups to pressure already existing schools to shape up or close down. That's Sweden.)

In Britain, however, these private operators would be banned from making a profit, whereas Sweden's free schools are often run by for-profit companies. British teachers' unions might even learn from their Swedish counterparts, which originally opposed free schools until they realized that their teachers enjoyed working there, where they have more classroom autonomy and are paid accordingly for good work.



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The Fictional Horace Mann High School

An observation on priorities

By Will Fitzhugh

Imagine that somewhere in the United States there is a Horace Mann High School, with a student who is a first-rate softball pitcher. Let us further imagine that although she set a new record for strikeouts for the school and the district, she was never written up in the local paper. Let us suppose that even when she broke the state record for batters retired, she received no recognition from the major newspapers or other media in the state.

Imagine a high school boy who had broken the high jump record for his school, district, and state, who also never saw his picture or any story about his achievement in the media. He also would not hear from any college track coaches with a desire to interest him in becoming part of their programs.

In this improbable scenario, we could suppose that the coaches of these and other fine athletes at the high school level would never hear anything from their college counterparts, and would not be able to motivate their charges with the possibility of college scholarships if they did particularly well in their respective sports.

These fine athletes could still apply to colleges and, if their academic records, test scores, personal essays, grades, and applications were sufficiently impressive, they might be accepted at the college of their choice, but, of course, they would receive no special welcome as a result of their outstanding performance on the high school athletic fields.



This is all fiction, of course, in our country at present. Outstanding athletes do receive letters from interested colleges, and even visits from coaches if they are good enough, and it is then up to the athlete to decide which college sports program they will “commit to” or “sign with,” as the process is actually described in the media. Full scholarships are often available to the best high school athletes, so that they may contribute to their college teams without worrying about paying for tuition or accumulating student debt.

In turn, high school coaches with very good athletes in fact do receive attention from college coaches, who keep in touch to find out the statistics on their most promising athletes, and to get recommendations for which ones are most worth pursuing and most worth offering scholarships to.

These high school coaches are an important agent in helping their promising athletes decide who to “commit to” or who to “sign with” when they are making their higher education plans.

On the other hand, if high school teachers have outstanding students of history, there are no scholarships available for them, no media recognition, and certainly no interest from college professors of history. For their work in identifying and nurturing the most diligent, the brightest, and the highest-achieving students of history, these academic coaches (teachers) are essentially ignored.

Those high school students of history, no matter whether they write first-class 15,000-word history research papers, like Colin Rhys Hill of Atlanta, Georgia (published in the Fall 2008 issue of *The Concord Review*), or a first-class 13,000-word history research paper, like Amalia Skilton of Tempe, Arizona (published in the Spring 2009 issue of *The Concord Review*), they will hear from no one offering them a full college scholarship for their outstanding high school academic work in history.

College professors of history will not write or call them, and they will not visit their homes to try to persuade them to “commit to” or “sign with” a particular college or university. The local media will ignore their academic achievements because they limit their high school coverage to the athletes.

To anyone who believes the primary mission of the high schools is academic, and who pays their taxes mainly to promote that mission, this bizarre imbalance in the mechanics of recognition and support may seem strange, if he stops to think about it. But this is our culture when it comes to promoting academic achievement at the high school level. If we would like to see higher levels of academic achievement by our high school students, just as we like to see higher levels of athletic achievement by our students at the high school level, perhaps we might give some thought to changing this culture (soon). ■



For more information about how your students may enter their work for publication in *The Concord Review*, contact Will Fitzhugh, at fitzhugh@tcr.org; call 800-331-5007; or visit www.tcr.org.