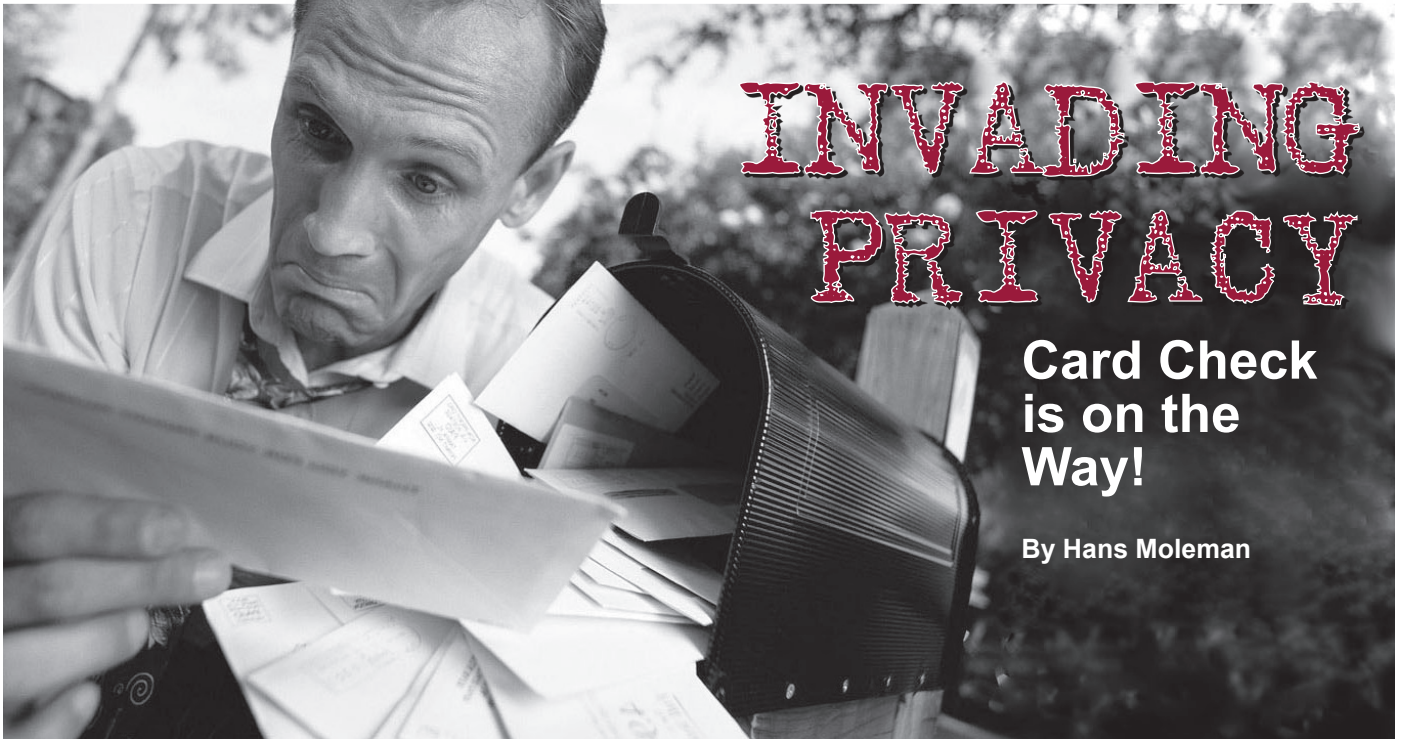


# Education Matters

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I am a lifelong union man—an organizer, negotiator, staffer, and leader. I believe in unions and their importance for our society. That’s why I think HR 800, the Orwellian-titled “Employee Free Choice Act” (EFCA), is an abomination. And more than that, it is not good for unions.

Unions function effectively when they can build a mandate of support from their members. EFCA would make it possible to organize unions without such a mandate, and thereby destroy the basic legitimacy of a union’s claim to represent a majority.

HR 800 has passed the House and is waiting in the Senate for a filibuster-proof Democratic majority to pass it and President Obama to sign it.

## Big Changes

EFCA contains four changes to long-standing labor law. The one receiving most attention would require the National Labor Relations Board to certify unions

without elections, solely on the basis of a “card check” (more on this below).

The second change would require interest arbitration—having an arbitrator set the terms and conditions of employment—for first contracts that are not bargained within four months. Such arbitration tends to distort and atrophy real negotiations, and result in an “arbitrator’s award” rather than

a mutually-agreed-upon contract. The essence of all labor law on enforcement of agreements flows from contract law; without a contract, enforcement becomes arbitrary indeed. It’s like having judges create the law.

The other changes would expedite investigation into unfair labor charges made during a certification process, and increase penalties for employer violations. These are good changes, exactly what is needed to make election campaigns more fair; they ought to be passed.

**Under current law, unions can only be certified by majority vote in a secret-ballot election**

But eliminating elections amounts to delegitimizing unions even where they exist. It may look like a kind of affirmative action but, in fact, is far worse.

Under current law, unions can only be certified by majority vote in a secret-ballot election (unless the employer agrees to a card check). Existing unions can also be decertified through the same process. EFCA would upset this balance, making it easier to bring a union into a workplace than it would be to throw one out.

## Union Decertification

Currently, union decertifications are rare (although unhappy union members talking about it are more common). When a group of workers get cards signed to decertify their union, they then have to go through an election campaign, and the union has a chance to defend itself. This is only fair, and it promotes stability.

If unions could be decertified by card-check alone, labor officials would be in for some rude surprises, as antiunion organizers might be able to run stealth campaigns and get cards signed (through fair or dubious methods), and, Bingo! You’re out!

That is, of course, why the union-drafted EFCA has no provision for decertification by card check. But how likely is it that labor would be able to hold off a push, sooner or later, to re-even the scales by including it?

And even if the Democratic sweep is big enough today to get EFCA passed as it stands, the loss in legitimacy for unions will be devastating. Most Americans think of labor unions as legitimate voices for workers, even though few belong to unions. That level of legitimacy will be lost if the House of Labor becomes a kind of Roach Motel where workers can check in but they can't check out.

The underlying problem is that unions have shrunk almost to the point of no return in the private sector. Union leaders admit that they pursue EFCA because they cannot organize under the present regime of effective employer campaigns and interminable legal delays. It is an act of desperation.

### Another Path

There is another path labor could take. It could ask itself why so many workers find unions so unattractive, and it could make changes to become more attractive. But they are unwilling to face the central fact of their difficulties: workers have come to see unions as political organizations for which Democratic Party victory is more important than workplace gains.

In the 1930s when the AFL proved unable to organize industrial workers, far-sighted union leaders built a new type of union for the purpose: the CIO. We could use some similarly far-sighted leaders today. EFCA will just delay the day.

Labor's best hope is that it be denied the kind of protection it seeks. The law should be changed to make elections more fair, not to eliminate them. ■

*Hans Moleman is a National Education Association employee and lifelong Democrat who prefers to remain anonymous. He has no relation to the Simpsons character by the same name. Any similarities are purely coincidental.*



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# Acting Lessons for Teachers

## Using Performance Skills in the Classroom

By Cathy Sargent Mester  
and Robert T. Tauber

Who among us has not come back from a class or two (usually around mid-semester) and sighed, “My students just didn’t seem with it today?” It is very disheartening because we feel at a loss to remedy the situation. The good news is that not only is this situation not terminal, but also you and I as teachers do have options—the class can be saved! The key to doing so often lies in the craft of the actor.

### Student Motivation

We are right to be concerned about student motivation for certainly no one can learn if not motivated to attend to the subject matter. Remember, Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy puts valuing information after attending to it. The factors affecting student motivation include both elements specific to each particular student as well as elements of classroom climate. It is the latter over which the teacher has some control. We cannot change the students’ family situation, personal goals, intelligence, diet or sleep habits, but we can change the atmosphere for learning that is created in our classrooms. We can accomplish that by using a tool proven successful by so many hard-working faculty members—teacher enthusiasm.

### The Pedagogy of Teacher Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm as a teaching tool has often been questioned by educators who perceive enthusiasm to smack of insincerity or a lack of seriousness about one’s academic endeavor. If you think of enthusiasm as disingenuous clowning, then you are right to conclude it does not belong in the classroom. But that’s not what we mean by enthusiasm; rather, we refer to allowing yourself to convey the true zest





for learning that you feel. You are fascinated by your subject matter or you wouldn't be teaching it! To help unlock that fascination and zest, a few expressive, creative devices (learned from the world of acting) can be used, and in so doing, will catch your students' attention and facilitate learning.

### **Vocal Animation**

First among these expressive tools is vocal animation. A teacher's personal infatuation with his/her subject matter will be evident in natural variations in vocal tone: volume, pitch, rate, and quality. If you have developed a habit of allowing only minimal variation in your voice, it is more difficult for the students to realize how much you value your subject matter and, therefore, less likely that they will value it. Greater overall vocal vigor then invites students to tune in to this very exciting material to be learned.

In addition to attracting student attention, changes in your vocal tone can serve as signposts drawing the students to the most important elements in your commentary. Particular vocal devices in the "signpost" category include:

- Setting off a phrase or word with strategic pauses;
- Slowing down the articulation of the most important word or phrase;

- Speaking the most important words at a markedly lower pitch;
- Using rising inflection to signal the climactic point; or
- Speaking in a noticeably quieter tone to make the students listen more closely.

A teacher can develop greater vocal vigor and come to use it naturally by the same means you would develop physical vigor—by exercise! Our voices are a resource that can be perpetually ready to serve our needs if we practice stretching our expressiveness through taped vocal exercises such as those used by professional singers. Such exercises need not consume much time since they can be done while doing something else like driving, vacuuming, watching television, or playing with your dog. For instance, try reciting a memorized poem or song lyrics in a James Earl Jones or Vanessa Redgrave style or to a different beat. By regularly stretching your vocal expression, it will become more naturally varied and strong, allowing you to develop a classroom tone that can help to hold and focus your students' attention.

### **Physical Animation**

Similarly, a physically dynamic teacher using the tools of eye contact, facial expression, gestures, and postural changes commands the class' attention. With eye contact, for instance, teachers establish that they have something important to say and trust the students to attend to it. Gestures and expressions that reinforce, emphasize, encourage, and clarify are tools that any teacher can benefit from using.

In this respect, our profession can learn from that of the stage actor who realizes that the playwright's written words alone convey only part of the intended message—the message is completed by gestures and facial expressions that add the all-important connotation. For instance, when asking a question of the class, you should have a look of positive expectation on your face and your gestures should be open, signaling to the students that you really want to hear their answers. The teacher whose arms are crossed while awaiting an answer is perceived by the students as intimidating, not encouraging.

The most beneficial step you can take to improve your physical animation is to videotape yourself teaching. Set the recorder up and just let it run so that you capture a full class without the intimidation of having a cameraperson following your every move. Then look at the tape and ask yourself if you could stay alert and interested during this class. If not, try one of the following:

- Stretching exercises before going to the class;
- Minimizing the extent of any lecture notes to which you may refer;
- Using visual aids and referencing them with appropriate gestures; and
- Most importantly, concentrating mentally on the intrigue of the subject matter, allowing your natural exuberance to reach out to the students.

If your tape revealed yourself as a dynamic speaker, Bravo!

## Using the Classroom Space

One of the easiest things we can do to revitalize our students' attention is to use the entire space of the classroom as our stage, rather than just the lectern or the front of the room. Some students like to melt anonymously into the back wall or hide behind the football lineman so that they don't have to feel involved in your communication. We can't let that happen!

Our choices are two: move the students by rearranging their seating periodically or move ourselves. The latter is easier! Think of the whole classroom as space you can use. The instructor, for instance, who explained the concept of right-brained versus left-brained by first standing in the middle of one side of the room and then walking across to the middle of the opposite side not only reinforced the concept visually but also held the students' attention by moving into their space.

As you respond to student comments, move toward the area of the room where the speaker is. Such movement conveys that you are mentally engaging the speaker and captures the visual attention of all the other students in that section of the room. Regular movement of this sort is particularly important in larger classes when we need to work harder to relate to all of the students, encouraging them to feel a personal involvement and responsibility in the class—a motivation to learn!

## Props

For many instructors of psychology, the use of props may be second nature. It's a good thing it is because props are great attention-getters! Of course, they also clarify and make messages memorable. A colleague distributes modeling clay to her students so they can build models of the brain rather than just talk about its anatomy; another uses mag-

azine ads to illustrate gender stereotyping in society; and yet a third involves small children in the class on developmental stages. These are all great devices and we have all experienced their positive benefits in capturing student attention and opening their minds to learning.

These are a few reminders of the do's and don'ts of using props. The criterion in every instance is to select and use props that enhance the lesson, not detract from it.

- Do select props large enough for all to see at once;
- Do keep the prop simple enough so that students clearly realize its intent;
- Do rehearse with the prop to make sure it works as intended; and
- Do make sure the prop is clearly pertinent to the lesson.
- Don't use props that have to be passed among the students to be appreciated;
- Don't show the prop any earlier than or any longer than when you are talking about it;
- Don't use live animals unless absolutely necessary; and
- Don't use props that require significant darkening of the room for full visibility.

That last don't is specifically applicable to overhead transparencies, slides, and computer graphics. You should never transfer all of your notes to slides and just talk through them for an entire class period. In doing so, you lose that vital direct relationship with the students and create a nonresponsive environment, both of which are highly demotivating. Instead, if you want to use transparencies or Power Point slides, use just a few to highlight the most important points of the lesson, each with just a few words per slide to encourage the students to interact with you as you explain instead of just focusing their entire concentration on copying the notes. Again, the goal of using slides, or any prop, is to stimulate the students' attention and motivation for learning.

## Humor

Another reflection of our enthusiasm for the active process of learning is the occasional use of humor. In the form of a pun, joke, anecdote, or cartoon, supportive humor can enliven a lesson. One award-winning psychology professor explains that he often makes reference to his imaginary family (all of whom have funny names and even funnier occupations) as examples of particular concepts. His experience has been that the students remember the concept longer if illustrated by the antics of his imaginary cousin Orval, the tuba tuner, than the same antics of his sister Nancy, a pediatrician.

If you are not comfortable with your skill as a humorist, it's best not to go out too far on this limb. You can, however, very safely begin a file of humorous stories or cartoons you find pertinent to your field for use on transparencies or to begin a particular day's lesson. To be effective, the humor need only be pertinent, brief, tasteful, and nonhostile. My quick retelling of our dog's misadventures as a chaser of chipmunks never fails





to strike a chord with the students. They can relate to the incident, find it easy to stay tuned to a funny dog story, and easily internalize its point about the dangers of mistaking illusion for reality. Thus, the humor motivates their attention and stimulates their learning.

## Suspense and Surprise

A surefire way to avoid student boredom is to keep them in suspense. Like the cliffhanger endings on Friday afternoon soap operas, a suspenseful or surprising classroom condition makes the students eagerly anticipate its resolution. Students wanting to hear more is motivation personified.

Suspense can be accomplished by simple things like:

- Keeping a particular day's activities secret;
- Asking students to do an assignment seemingly irrelevant to the class;
- Announcing a pop quiz; or
- Masking the props set up as class begins.

Any one of these will make the class curious enough to stay tuned. The suspense and surprise could, however, be a more elaborate concoction such as the instructor who taught almost a full class period on the topic of fear, giving the students fifteen minutes of free time and then, after only five minutes, looking up angrily and yelling "Shut up!" He then proceeded to debrief their reactions to his surprising outburst as representative of the body's natural emotional and physical fear response. This example of enthusiastic teaching was shared by a student three years after the event—its vividness in his memory is testimony to its strategic impact as a motivating device.

## Role-Playing

The most dramatic of the devices discovered in our research of enthusiastic teaching was that of role-playing by the teacher. Involving students in role-play exercises is fairly common, particularly in the social sciences; but role-playing by the teacher is less frequent and quite powerful in motivating student attention.

Role-playing requires fairly extensive planning potentially involving costuming, makeup, staging, and scripting. The result can be quite riveting as students see a leading figure in their field of study coming alive before them, perhaps even engaging them in dialogue. Costuming can be as easy as wearing a special hat or as elaborate as coming to class in full Elizabethan or colonial dress. Psychology instructors have been known to portray Skinner, Rogers, or Maslow, all to the memorable impact on students.

While this strategy may be suited especially well to a limited number of classes, there is one role we can all try to develop for the benefit of our students—the role of an enthusiastic teacher.

## The Lesson of Enthusiasm

To get started on the path to achieving a more productively enthusiastic teaching persona, you need to analyze your present teaching style. This can be accomplished either by asking a trusted colleague to observe your teaching or by videotaping yourself. If the analysis suggests room for improvement, the best and easiest place to begin is with the exercises suggested



earlier to enhance vocal and physical expressiveness since these tools can be used in any teaching situation. Stretch your voice! Work with Cyrano de Bergerac's soliloquy "Call that a nose," for instance. It is also appropriate to begin to incorporate movement about the room early in your efforts as that tool can also be used anywhere and requires a comfortably small change in your current teaching habits. As you develop ease with these more enthusiastic strategies, work your way up to experimenting with props, surprises, humor, and role-playing.

Many of us, through either being so new to the profession that we lack confidence or so experienced that we lack sustained energy, can benefit from mastering the role of a motivating persona in the classroom. Today's generation of college students is not as strongly motivated by the sheer excitement of learning as previous generations—we have to "win them over." Winners of teaching awards at large and small colleges and universities have testified again and again that what works for them is accompanying their mastery of content with a set of dramatic devices that convey sufficient enthusiasm to establish themselves as credible and their subject matter as fascinating. As one award-winning instructor put it, "I use these strategies because I choose to make the learning environment come alive and make the lessons learned last beyond the next test!" ■



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**T**oday's American high school students are far more likely than those in the 1970s to believe they'll make outstanding spouses, parents, and workers, new research shows.

They're also much more likely to claim they are "A" students with high IQs—even though other research shows that today's students do less homework than their counterparts did in the 1970s.

The findings, published in the November issue of *Psychological Science*, support the idea that the "self-esteem" movement popular among today's parents and teachers may have gone too far, the study's co-author said.

### What Dreams Are Made Of

"What this shows is that confidence has crossed over into overconfidence," said Jean Twenge, an associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University.

She believes that decades of relentless, uncritical boosterism by parents and school systems may be producing a generation of kids with expectations that are out of sync with the challenges of the real world.

"High school students' responses have crossed over into a really unrealistic realm, with three-fourths of them expecting performance that's effectively in the top 20 percent," Twenge said.

For the study, she and co-researcher W. Keith Campbell, of the University of Georgia, pored over data from the *Monitoring the Future* study, a large national survey of thousands of U.S. high school students conducted periodically over the past three decades.

The researchers compared the answers kids gave in 1975 and 2006 to thirteen questions centered on students' "self-views." These questions solicited students' opinions on how smart they thought they were, or how likely they were to be successful as adults.

"When we look at the responses of the students in the 1970s, they are certainly confident that they are going to perform well, but their responses are more modest, a little more realistic" than teens in 2006, Twenge said.

For example, in 1975, less than 37 percent of teens thought they'd be "very good" spouses, compared to more than 56 percent of those surveyed in 2006. Like-

# U.S. Teens Brimmin

By E.J. Mundell



wise, the number of students who thought they'd become "very good" parents rose from less than 36 percent in 1975 to more than 54 percent in 2006. And almost two-thirds of teens in 2006 thought they'd be exemplary workers, compared to about half of those polled in 1975.

As for self-reported academic achievement, twice as many students in 2006 than in 1976 said they earned an "A" average in high school—15.6 percent versus 7.7

percent, the report found.

Compared to their counterparts from the 1970s, today's youth also tended to rate themselves as more intelligent and were more likely to say they were "completely satisfied" with themselves.

There was one exception—measures of "self-competency" (i.e., agreeing with statements such as, "I am able to do things as well as most other people") did not rise between 1976 and 2006. Accord-



# g With Self-Esteem



ing to Twenge, that may mean that young people continue to feel great self-worth even as they remain unsure of their competence in specific tasks.

Twenge stressed that youthful confidence isn't necessarily bad. "Young people have always had some degree of starry-eyed optimism, and that's probably a good thing," she said. "And setting goals for yourself is a good thing. It's just when those goals are wildly unrealistic, then

that can cause trouble for everyone."

For example, young people entering the work force may score well in job interviews if they exude self-confidence, she said, but that can quickly sour if a new employer doesn't provide them with the perks or promotions they feel they deserve. "They don't set the right goals for themselves because they are overconfident—and that's when it blows up in their face," Twenge said.

The blame for all this may lie with well-intentioned adults, she suggested.

"These kids didn't raise themselves, they got these ideas from somewhere," Twenge said. With Mom and Dad handing out endless praise, kids today readily believe they are somehow superior, she said. And teachers aren't blameless, either: According to Twenge, research shows that high school teachers now give out an "A" grade more easily than their counterparts did in the 1970s, even though today's high school students report doing less homework than students from that era.

## Another Viewpoint

Not everyone interpreted the new findings in the same way, however. Jennifer Crocker is a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan and a long-time researcher in self-esteem. She said that by selecting data from 1975 and 2006, Twenge and Campbell have only presented two moments in time and have not shown evidence of any decades-long trend.

And based on available academic data, today's young Americans might be right to be more self-confident, Crocker argued.

"The fact is that we are all getting smarter—IQ is going up quite dramatically over this same period of time," Crocker noted. "Students may believe that they are getting trained better than they used to, that they are learning skills that they didn't use to have. So, maybe their predictions aren't unreasonable."

But Twenge, who is the author of a book on young people's self-views called *Generation Me*, isn't convinced. In fact, she believes that today's parents may be sending another crop of young Americans down the same path.

"I have a 2-year-old daughter," she said. "I see the parenting of kids around her age, and I haven't seen this changing. Look around—about a fourth of the clothing available to her says 'Little Princess' on it." ■

*E.J. Mundell is a reporter for HealthDay News. This article first appeared in HealthDay News, November 12, 2008; © HealthDay News.*

*There's more on kids and healthy self-esteem at [www.nemours.org](http://www.nemours.org).*

# Tiny TIMSS

## New Report Makes Us Ask Important Questions

By Mike Petrilli and Amber Winkler

Like a comet, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) comes around every four years to offer insights into America's progress (or lack thereof) in these two critical domains. And, as others have noticed too, these exams serve not just as tests of children's skills and nation's self-images but also as Rorschach tests of policy pundits' views. Hate No Child Left Behind? You can find data in TIMSS that "prove" this law is maligning the nation's schools. Love NCLB? No problem. Plenty of evidence supports your point of view, too. Think we're falling behind in the global competitiveness arena? There's something for you in there. How about we're doing OK in preparing for the world economy? Got it.

### Findings

Weary from reading the bushel of cherry-picked translations, we were perked up by a simple and straightforward statement from Brookings Institution scholar (and TIMSS advisor) Tom Loveless. Referring to TIMSS, NAEP, etc., he told the *Associated Press*, "Now all of our major tests are telling us the same things." That's right—and significant—because replicated findings on multiple assessments are the ones that should hold the most sway. So what do we know, not just from TIMSS but also from NAEP?

Math performance is up since the mid-1990s. Progress was particularly strong

around the turn of the century but has continued (at a slower pace) through the NCLB years. Achievement gaps are narrowing, as the lowest-performing students make big gains and the top students make smaller gains or stagnate (though the picture changes somewhat by subject). But we're not seeing much progress in science; in fact, on TIMSS, average science achievement in fourth grade dipped during the past decade. (TIMSS doesn't address reading; for that you must await its cousin PIRLS, the next round of which is coming in 2011.)

### Impressive Gains

Perhaps the most interesting lessons from TIMSS (or NAEP) can be gleaned from countries and states that are making particularly impressive gains. This study offers several. Massachusetts and Minnesota each participated as "nations," and each received news worth crowing about. The Bay State's eighth graders tied for the highest score with four top Asian countries (Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Japan, and Korea) in science; its fourth graders had the second highest scores (outperformed only by Singapore). We already knew that Massachusetts was the highest-performing U.S. state; this latest news should give pause to anyone thinking about tinkering with its decades-old standards and education reform strategy.

Equally impressive were the gains posted by Minnesota. Governors take note. These 4th grade math students made nearly three times the progress of the country as a whole after the state adopted a rigorous curriculum designed by Michigan State scholar Bill Schmidt and benchmarked against the best countries in the world (and under the direction of former Minnesota State Education Secretary Cheri Yecke).

And then there's England. The Queen's fourth graders made a 57-point jump from 1995 to 2007—five times the gains of American students. And you wonder why Sir Michael Barber, a leading architect of the UK's reforms, is in such high demand?

### Important Questions

This information is incredibly valuable—and validates many of the reform efforts underway. Let's hope that it inspires policymakers to ask good questions, such as: When and how are we going to give science its due? How can we accelerate our students' progress in mathematics? How can we maintain the gains among low-achievers while kick-starting gains among high-achievers? What can we learn from high-flying Massachusetts and Minnesota? And how can we make sure that all subjects in the core curriculum get the attention that they deserve? ■



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