

Education Matters

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21st Century Retro

For all the emphasis on twenty-first-century skills, students still need the good ol'-fashioned skills first



Twenty-first-century learner

Nineteenth-century data processing skills needed

By Will Fitzhugh

John Robert Wooden, the revered UCLA basketball coach, used to tell his players: “If you fail to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” According to the *Diploma to Nowhere* report last summer from the Strong American Schools project, more than one million of our high school graduates are in remedial courses at college every year. Evidently we failed to prepare them to meet higher education’s academic expectations.

The 21st Century Skills movement celebrates computer literacy as one remedy for this failing. Now, I love my Macintosh, and I have typeset the first seventy-seven issues of *The Concord Review* on the computer, but I still have to read and understand each essay, and to proofread eleven papers in each issue twice, line by line, and the computer is no help at all with that. The new Kindle2 from Amazon is able to read books to you—a great technology, but it cannot tell you anything about what they mean.

In my view, the 19th (and prior) century skills of reading and writing are still a job for human beings, with little help from technology. Computers can check your grammar and take a look at your spelling, but they can’t read for you, and they can’t think

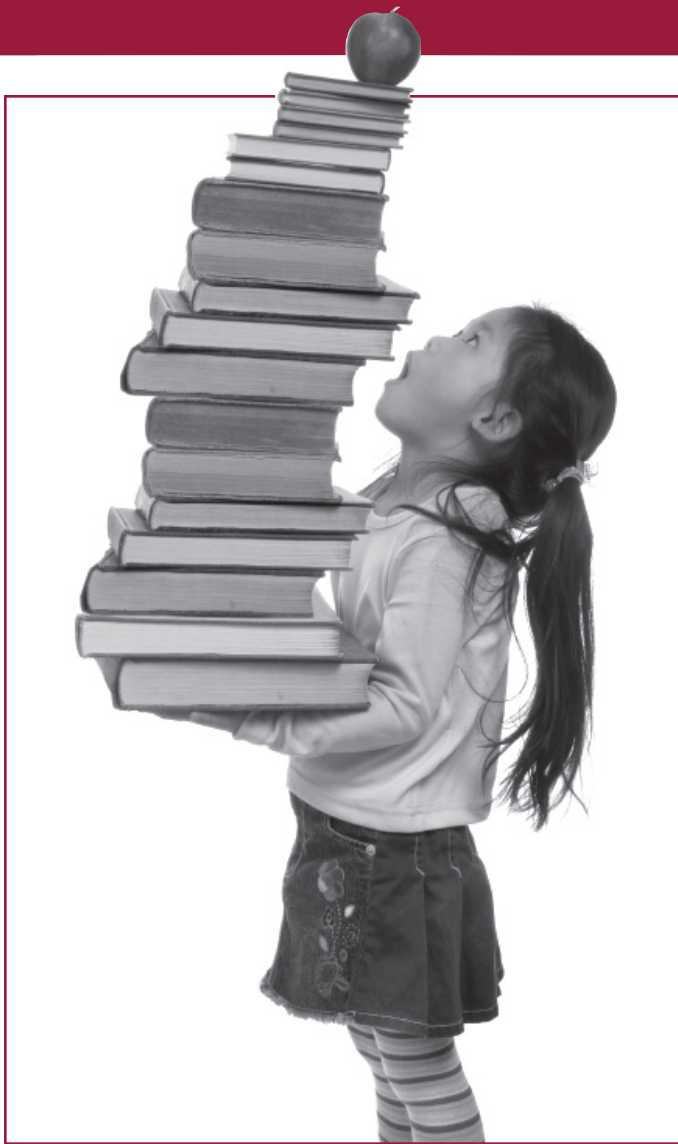
for you, and they really cannot take the tasks of academic reading and writing off the shoulders of the students in our schools.

There appears to be a philosophical gap between those who, in their desire to make our schools more accountable, focus on the acquisition and testing of academic knowledge and skills in basic reading and math, on the one hand, and those who, from talking to business people, now argue that this is not enough. This latter group is now calling for 21st century critical thinking, communication skills, collaborative problem solving, and global awareness.

Neither group gives much thought, in my view, to whether any of our high school students have read one complete nonfiction book or written one serious research paper before they are sent off to their college remedial courses.

Of course, reading history books and writing term papers can seem so 19th century, but as long as higher education and good jobs require people to be able to read and understand quantities

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of nonfiction material, and to write fairly serious academic research papers, memos, legal opinions, status reports, legislation and the like, it might be a good idea to try to do a better job of preparing our students for those tasks.

Jokes and Feelings

The College Board's writing test is a joke (there are lots of prep services helping students write their essays in advance), and the colleges themselves, through their admissions offices, are asking students for 500-word personal statements about their lives and their feelings. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing test for 2011 (I was on the Steering Committee, but couldn't influence anyone) asks students for two 25-minute responses to prompts, perhaps on the level of "What is your opinion of school uniforms?" These efforts could hardly do more to convince high schools not to prepare students for actual academic writing tasks now or in their future.

The NAEP argument is that the college, business, and military worlds want people who can "write on demand." That is, sit down for 25 minutes and respond to some short shallow prompt, as this "skill" is to be tested. I was a division training manager for Polaroid, back in the day, and it is my understanding that even if a boss comes to an employee and asks on Friday for a report Monday, not only is it due in 25 minutes, for a start, but

also any such report will be based on lots of knowledge of the subject, coming from doing the job over a period of time and having had time to gather information and reflect on what should be in the report. An impromptu skit may be just what the Second City ordered, but it is no recipe for critical thinking or academic (or business/military) expository writing.

Several problems arise with trying to persuade high schools to assign complete nonfiction books and serious research papers. Many teachers, if they graduated from teacher education programs, may not have read that many books and may not have been asked to do research papers themselves, so they have little idea how to coach students to do them. But even those teachers who know enough and would be willing to assign serious papers, have no time to assign, guide, or assess them. While almost all high schools would say they want students to be able to do academic essays, they set aside no time for teachers to work on them. More time is available in most high schools for tackling practice on the football field and layup drills on the basketball court than for working on term papers in English and history classes.

A Meeting of the Minds

The supporters of 21st Century Skills and the supporters of Core Knowledge could get together, and agree, perhaps, that students need more knowledge than can appear on multiple-choice tests, and that they need to be able to write more than 500 words about themselves. Standardized testing will not prepare students for college, even if it provides some accountability for basic reading and math skills. And mooning over technology and industry will not raise standards for academic reading and writing, nor will it prepare students to skip remedial work at the college level.

Having published 846 history research papers by high school students from 36 countries since 1987, and having received thousands more as submissions, I know that high school students will rise to the challenge of real preparation for further education. Many of our authors have even been inspired to do long serious (8,000-13,000-word) papers on their own as independent studies, much as high school basketball players and other athletes spend long hours practicing on their own, because they are aware of the high standards that are out there.

If students are willing to meet higher standards, as so many have told Achieve and the National Governors' Association and the Great City Schools that they are, we should be willing to set them, if only to leave fewer of them condemned to remedial courses when they move on. ■



Will Fitzhugh is the founder and president of The Concord Review. Its goal is to find and acknowledge exemplary history research papers by high school students, and to distribute them in a quarterly journal to inspire more reading of history and more work on history research papers by other high school students. For information, visit www.tcr.org; or email fitzhugh@tcr.org.

New Direction

Resisting the hype about school turnarounds

By Frederick M. Hess
and Thomas Gift

Today, the notion that turnarounds constitute a new, better way to solve the countless problems facing America's schools is gaining immense popularity among reformers of all stripes. Roughly 3,300 schools are estimated to be in turnaround mode in 2008-2009, and approximately 4,900 are projected to be in 2009-2010. Approximately 90 percent of these schools are in large urban districts.

Scholars and practitioners are seeking to answer this demand—and, in some cases, helping to fuel expectations. For instance, the University of Virginia's (UVA) Curry School of Education has developed a co-curricular program designed to instruct experts charged with turning around consistently low-performing schools. The Chicago International Charter School, which operates eleven campuses in Chicago, has launched a new turnaround initiative called ChicagoRise. It holds out the promise that specialized teaching staffs and dynamic management practices are the keys to turning around that city's chronically low-performing public schools. The Louisiana School Turnaround Specialist Program recruits

and grooms a cadre of school leaders prepared to turn around failing schools. The New York-based Rensselaerville Institute's School Turnaround contracts with turnaround experts nationwide and even offers a "money-back guarantee" for partner schools that fail to reach their achievement goals.

Popular media accounts portray a glowing image of these projects. A LexisNexis search of major U.S. newspapers found 149 articles that included the phrase "school turnaround" in the last two years. In a systematic evaluation, we found that about half of those articles depicted turnarounds in a positive light, and just one in ten stories were skeptical or negative.

What We Know

Given turnaround reformers' good intentions, it is hard not to root for them and shower them with support. Yet, while this approach is doubtless an appealing idea, making it work is far more complicated. Although the phrase "turnaround" may be relatively new to education, the practice has been around for decades in other sectors. Its track record suggests

a need for tempered claims and steely-eyed realism. Even in the business world, where management enjoys many more degrees of freedom and where competition can create a sense of profound urgency, turnarounds are an iffy proposition. Peter Senge, director of the Center for Organizational Learning at the MIT Sloan School of Management, has observed starkly, "Failure to sustain significant change recurs again and again despite substantial resources committed to the change effort (many are bankrolled by top management), talented and committed people 'driving the change,' and high stakes. . . . There is little to suggest that schools, healthcare institutions, governmental, and nonprofit institutions fare any better."

Four Key Lessons

Turnarounds have the potential to be a valuable tool for improving underperforming schools. However, the hope that we can systematically turn around all troubled schools—or even a majority of them—is at odds with much of what we know from similar efforts in the private



sector. This is why it is sensible to look outside education to learn how the odds of staging a successful turnaround might be improved. Our research suggests that experiences in the private sector offer four key lessons for making turnarounds work.

Autonomy to Act

First, school leaders must have autonomy, flexibility, and urgency if they are to have a fighting chance at staging a turnaround. This includes the ability to hold employees accountable within an accelerated time frame and allocate resources swiftly and optimally with few external restrictions. In a 2001 study from the *Journal of Operations Management*, researchers examined 435 nationally recognized companies to see how their efforts were affected by firm size, the capital intensity of the firm, firm diversification, and turnaround implementation.

The researchers concluded that smaller firms, which tended to have fewer layers of management and

more decentralized decision-making, averaged 52 percent higher increases in yearly operating income than larger firms undergoing the same methods of reform. While size may be a factor by itself, the more useful lesson is that small firms tend to operate with higher degrees of freedom and less institutional rigidity. For school reformers, staging a successful turnaround entails setting high expectations and then being flexible with regard to how principals, teachers, and staff go about meeting them. Successful turnarounds are most likely in districts that unravel bureaucratic constraints and permit educators great freedom in solving problems.

Leadership Changes

Second, reformers should not hesitate to change principals and school leaders to jump-start the turnaround process. Some researchers have estimated that school leadership may explain almost a quarter of differences in student performance. Experience in the corporate realm suggests that the quality of top management teams may be even more significant when pursuing dramatic organizational change. In a 2001 study published in the *Journal of Management Studies*, researchers scrutinized twenty-nine once profitable but declining publicly traded firms to exam-

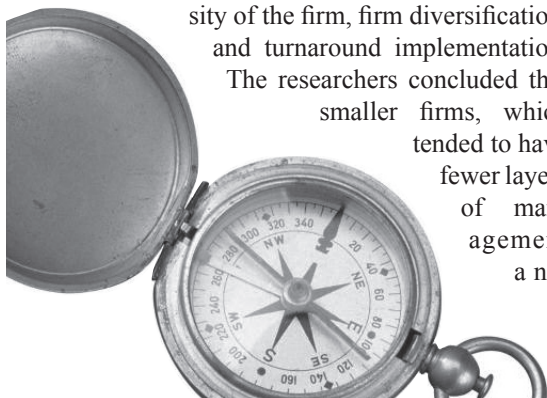
ine how leadership changes affected their organizational performance. Employing CEO survey responses and archival financial data, it concluded that “higher levels of top management team replacement are associated with greater changes in firm competitive strategy and firm structure and controls during turnaround attempts.” In a turnaround situation, despite the K-12 preference for professional development rather than termination, new leadership can yield both symbolic and substantive benefits. It can help convey a commitment to wholesale change and provide skills appropriate to the challenges at hand.

All or Nothing

Third, reformers need to view school turnarounds as an all-or-nothing proposition to avoid the pitfalls caused by unclear or conflicting objectives. It is not a time to cherry-pick the more popular or painless components of reform or pursue them incrementally. Evidence from the private sector suggests that incomplete or partial turnaround attempts leave organizations floundering. As John Lock, CEO of the Charter School Growth Fund and a former private investor in turnarounds and leveraged buyouts, notes, “Schools must create a culture in which employees have two options: we either turn it around or we lose our jobs. Sometimes, burning the employee manual, making everyone re-apply for their jobs, and then axing those structures that created the problem is the only way to convey that you’re serious about turning the organization around.”

Avoid Top-Down Mandates

Finally, once the decision is made to go forward with a turnaround, reformers should avoid forcing change on the school through organization-wide, top-down mandates. Instead, they should pursue continuous improvement by establishing high goals for individual teachers and staff, while giving them the tools and flexibility they need to be successful. In a study published in *Organization Science* in 2000, researchers investigated the extent to which individual workers at eight plants of a global paper and plastic manufacturer responded to the challenges of a turnaround by either embracing or shirking their newfound responsibilities. Based on supervisor interviews and worker sur-



veys, they observed that plants with line employees who integrated standardized production and continuous improvement into their daily routines delivered better outcomes than those that did not. In particular, they found that a significant boost in productivity was achieved in plants where at least 75 percent of workers reported coming up with new ideas for the organization and presenting them to management. For school reformers, the implication is that for all their technical specifications, turnarounds require each individual employee to buy in and commit to his role. Teachers and staff cannot be content merely to take marching orders from administrators but must be ready, willing, and trained to drive the educational innovations that make a turnaround possible.

Where to Go from Here

As evidenced by the nearly 11,000 schools deemed in need of improvement under No Child Left Behind, many states and districts need expert assistance to fix their troubled schools. Most lack such capacity. This is not just an education problem, of course. Yet we know of no sector—public or private—in which thousands of entities are each capable



The hope that we can systematically turn around all troubled schools—or even a majority of them—is at odds with much of what we know from similar efforts in the private sector.

of assembling the know-how, talent, and organizational machinery to fix troubled operations. Instead, such capabilities tend to be concentrated in a handful of organizations with specialists and niche consultants.

If revitalizing low-performing schools is to occur on a large scale with any consistency, the nation will need to develop a set of effective operators capable of contracting with multiple districts or states to provide the oversight, leadership, knowledge, and personnel to drive restructuring. Operating on that scale permits specialization and cooperation, while allowing providers to build deep expertise.

Ultimately, whether it is in schools or

private firms, a successful turnaround requires transforming culture, expectations, and routines. That may not always be possible in organizations burdened by anachronistic contract provisions, rickety external

support, and years of accrued administrative incompetence. As Bryan Hassel, co-director of Public Impact, argues, “[W]hile turnarounds are difficult in the private sector,

they may be even more challenging in schools. [No] factors are complete barriers to success, but they indicate a high bar for the district and school leaders effecting turnarounds.”

Kirk Kramer of the Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit consultancy agency, has echoed the sentiment, claiming “turnarounds in the public education space are far harder than any turnaround I’ve ever seen in the for-profit space.” In this light, the best bet is sometimes to allow a failing concern to go dark. This may require shutting down a school; moving out administrators, faculty, and curricula; and “vacuum-sealing” it—then allowing an accomplished opera-

tor to start fresh. Meanwhile, new organizations—freed from old rules and rigidities—can emerge, take advantage of new opportunities, and tackle looming challenges. This also speaks to the importance of tending to “supply side” considerations and to reformers cultivating the talent, capital, tools, and infrastructure that enable successful new schools to step in for the old. Acknowledging that thousands of schools are profoundly, and perhaps irrevocably, broken is a vital start. But it will amount to little unless education reformers embrace fresh thinking and show a willingness to challenge old nostrums. ■



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Taking New Courses

States use increased flexibility under NCLB law to refine assistance to low-performing schools



Three new reports released in April by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) find that states are taking advantage of new flexibility under the existing No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law to adjust strategies for helping their low-achieving schools. The reports document policy refinements in California, Maryland, and Michigan that affect schools in “improvement” under NCLB—those that have fallen short of the law’s achievement targets for two or more years. These new approaches to accountability and assistance will help other states to refine their approaches and provide valuable information to the Congress and the Obama Administration as they revise NCLB in the coming months.

During the last term of the Bush Administration, the U.S. Department of Education gave states greater flexibility in complying with some of the requirements of NCLB. For the past several years, CEP has been evaluating how California, Maryland, and Michigan assist schools in “restructuring” persistently low-performing schools in the last stage of NCLB

improvement. As part of its work in 2008-09, CEP examined how these three states took advantage of the Department of Education pilot programs and existing flexibility to fashion accountability and assistance programs to meet their specific needs. CEP gathered data by conducting interviews with state and district officials, reviewing restructuring documents, and analyzing state test data in each of the three states.

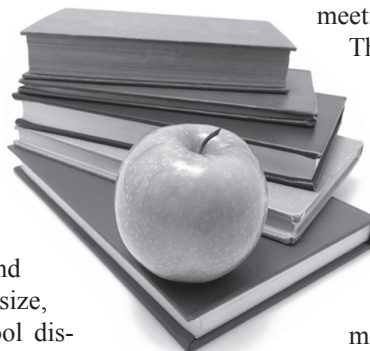
“Michigan shows the effects of using a growth model. Maryland will adjust its state intervention depending on the needs of each struggling school. And California, due to its huge size, is focusing on helping school districts instead of individual schools,” said Jack Jennings, CEP’s president and CEO. “These three states are serving as laboratories as the nation experiments with various approaches to improving schools.”

Maryland

Maryland began using a differentiated accountability pilot (DAP) program at the beginning of the 2008-09 school year to more clearly identify schools with comprehensive needs that require greater state intervention and support. Through the DAP program, schools are classified based on how close they are to meeting the goals of NCLB.

The program also refines state interventions and support for these schools, requires earlier supports and intervention for struggling schools, and provides additional monitoring and technical assistance.

The DAP is the latest in a series of efforts that Maryland has taken to become more actively involved over time in managing restructuring schools. Although the DAP introduces major modifications to the statewide strategy for working with



restructuring schools, there have been few major changes at the district level to support schools in the implementation stage of restructuring. Overall, in the past year, Maryland schools identified for restructuring implementation have not been especially successful in meeting rising achievement targets and far more schools have entered restructuring implementation than have exited.

Michigan

Michigan began using the growth model pilot in 2007-08 to determine which schools made adequate yearly progress (AYP) in raising achievement. Under the growth model pilot, students are counted as meeting achievement targets when they make significant progress, even if they do not meet the actual NCLB targets set by the state. As a result, 111 schools, or 3 percent, of all Michigan schools, made AYP when they otherwise would not have without the growth model.

Michigan has also added supports for restructuring schools that go beyond NCLB. These supports include:

- audits of restructuring schools
- process mentor teams made up of district, state, and regional representatives who help the school implement the findings of the audit
- a leadership coach who assists the principal
- a principal fellowship that provides extra professional development for the principal and coach

This approach has been successful with many elementary and middle schools. Based on 2007-08 testing, however, more high schools have entered restructuring and none have improved achievement enough to exit. High schools cannot benefit from the growth model pilot since students are only tested once in high school.

California

While California has not used either pilot program used in Michigan and Maryland, it is taking advantage of the flexibility under NCLB to change the way it offers assistance to struggling districts and schools. With the largest number of schools identified for restructuring in the nation, California began focusing intervention on its 145 school districts that



have failed to make AYP for four consecutive years or more. Support for these districts has been backed by the consolidation of almost all of the state's \$112 million in federal school improvement funds, which are allocated to districts based on the severity and pervasiveness of their problems.

CEP's case studies of districts and schools also found that as AYP targets have risen, some California districts and school leaders have set their sights on making AYP through NCLB's safe harbor provision, which allows schools to make AYP if they decrease the percentage of students scoring below the proficient level by 10 percent or more from the previous year. Perhaps as a result of the state's overall efforts, the number of California schools entering restructuring slowed in 2008-09 but is still overwhelming.

"We can't say yet which approaches do the most to help schools improve, but this experimentation is good before the law is reauthorized," Jennings said.

Future CEP restructuring reports will revisit these issues. Ohio and Georgia, two other states studied by CEP, are also

participating in the DAP program, and Ohio is participating in the growth model pilot. In addition, this year CEP will issue its first report on how New York is assisting schools in restructuring. This report will also highlight New York's approach to differentiated accountability.

These and other findings are explained in more detail in three reports:

- *Expanding Restructuring and Taking on High Schools: An NCLB Follow-up Report in Michigan*
- *Top Down, Bottom Up: California Districts in Corrective Action and Schools in Restructuring under NCLB*
- *Looking for New Ways to Make Progress: School Restructuring in Maryland, 2008-09 Follow-Up Report*

Individual state restructuring reports and other CEP publications on NCLB are available at www.cep-dc.org. ■

Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools.

Teacher Preparation

Defending what can't be defended?

Nobody has ever claimed it would be easy to close down ed schools, no matter how much evidence there is that they're consistently churning out bad teachers. The feisty new president at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), Allen Sessoms, is finding out how hard it is just to revamp his education school, no matter that it fails to graduate most of its aspiring teachers.

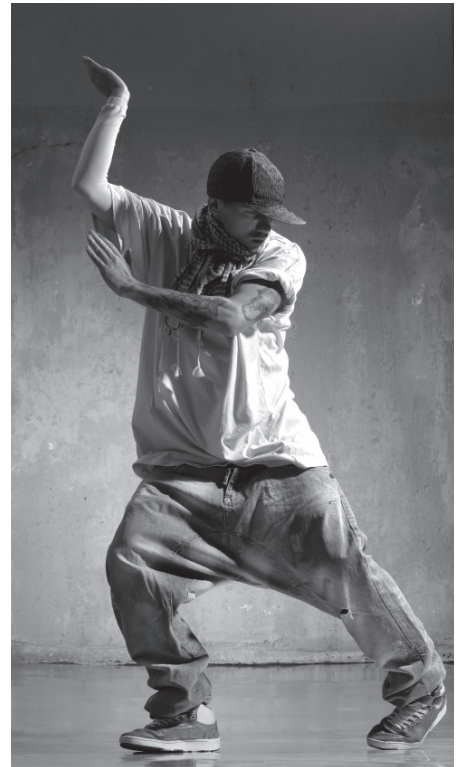
The UDC undergraduate education department has no particular problem attracting wannabe teachers, posting 380 students last year, but only 8 percent of those students actually manage to graduate within six years. Why? Because the vast majority of them cannot pass a basic 3Rs skills test.

One would think defenders of such a record would be in short supply. But no, many of the department's faculty members are decrying the planned closure. One professor explained away the incredible failure rate with this choice quote: "We're not math educators." If the ed school accepts students with no math skills, and is then unwilling to remediate, just whose job is it?

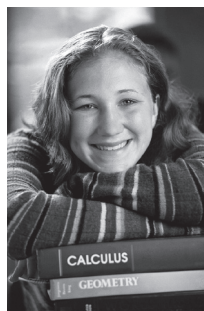
Sessom's opinion on the school's graduation statistic—"it's scary"—applies on many fronts, including the fact that the UDC program has met all the standards for NCATE accreditation. ■

Baggy Exposure

Got sagging pants? Not if you go to Plantation High School in Broward County, Florida. That's because two teachers, inspired by President Barack Obama's comment last year that "brothers should pull up their pants," have launched a crusade against baggy offenders. The school recently held a "Pull up your Pants" day; a local Wal-Mart donated 200 belts to help in the effort. "If your pants are saggin' and you want to adopt a jailhouse mentality, that will show in your attitude toward everything," explained Diana Carter, a ninth-grade teacher who helped organize the event. "We're not trying to take their individuality away, but there's a time and a place for everything." The trend apparently has its roots in some unseemly places, not the least of which is jail, where prisoners' belts are confiscated so they won't be used as weapons or to commit suicide. Some celebrities also set a bad example when it comes to undergear exposure. For the most part, Plantation High's students acquiesced. One even claimed he'd given up the baggy look for good. Why? "I asked a girl if she liked it and she said not no more [sic]." Let's hope Carter's next crusade is pulling up some sagging grammar. ■



Source—*The Education Gadfly*, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.



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