

# Education Matters

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## MAKING A GAME OF MATH

### AAE affiliate motivates Oklahoma students to achieve

Students are excelling in math while having fun, thanks to an engaging learning tool. The Association of Professional Oklahoma Educators (APOE) sponsors a math tournament around an innovative math game called TIVY.

TIVY is a math board game that resembles Chinese checkers. The game reinforces math skills ranging from basic addition and subtraction to algebra, and can be modified to meet curriculum needs for fourth- through ninth-grade students. Oklahoma City schools tested the game in the early 1990s and found that students who regularly played TIVY made higher scores in math on standardized tests.

#### Excited about Math

“This tournament proves that kids can get excited about school—and about math in particular,” APOE Executive Director Ginger Tinney said. “TIVY is a great resource for teachers who are looking for a creative solution to the problems they face in motivating students to tackle a difficult subject, like mathematics.”

Nearly 400 students in fourth through ninth grades from across Oklahoma converged on the Moore Community Center in Moore, Oklahoma, to compete in the



First-prize winners at the TIVY Math Tournament last fall.

tournament in early November.

Students from Dibble Middle School, coached by teachers Carla Courtney and Donna Dutton, competed at the sixth-through ninth-grade levels. The group collected four trophies at the event, including first and second place individual awards and first and second place team awards.

In addition to trophies, the first, second, and third place students from each grade level received a cash prize and a trophy

from the APOE Foundation. The teachers of each first, second, and third place student were awarded cash prizes as well.

“The awards ceremony is always a rewarding time for the teachers and APOE staff members who work so hard on this tournament each year,” Tinney said. “It is encouraging to see that these students are proud of their math achievements.”

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## About TIVY

TIVY is a teaching tool in the form of a motivational board game, available through the APOE. It requires students to learn basic math if they are to be successful in estimating the score value of moves and figuring the final tally of their scores to determine the winner.

TIVY focuses on eleven elements of math: addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, decimals, fractions, rounding, square root, powers, factors, and algebra.



Furthermore, TIVY features five very crucial elements of successful education: strategy, critical thinking, responsibility, attitude, and motivation.

It was designed for all students (below-average, average, and gifted). When students are in the same classroom, the instructor can easily select different skill levels for each group from the well-marked and defined 228 play combinations ranging from addition to algebra.

TIVY's score sheets are well organized and detailed to accommodate any skill level. Most students can practice, use the score sheet, and define the outcome with a minimum of instructional help.

The TIVY game box and playing parts are very durable. Thousands of games have been in schools since 1992, and most are still in good usable condition.

Teachers use TIVY at least two periods each week, plus they make the games available to their students during free periods and to take home. ■

*Association of Professional Oklahoma Educators is a statewide, nonprofit, and independent professional educators' association, serving thousands of Oklahoma educators. It is an affiliate of the Association of American Educators. More information about APOE and TIVY is available at [www.apoe.org](http://www.apoe.org).*

# Buzz over History Bee

## National Endowment for the Humanities' Pilot Project in American History Competition

By Peter Gibbon

The first year of the pilot project for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) American History Competition established that it is possible to develop for middle-school students a fair and comprehensive written test that measures recall and understanding, and an oral competition that is dramatic, fast-paced, and engaging, combining scholarship and suspense.

Similar in format to the National Geography Bee, a team of scholars and classroom teachers generated the test questions. They gave appropriate weight to each time period of American history; included political, economic, social, military, and cultural history; and test both knowledge of facts and historical understanding. The team reviewed each question carefully to reflect state standards and current scholarship, and to establish compatibility with the cognitive development of middle-school students. From a data bank of several hundred questions, they selected forty-four questions, covering the years 1492 to 1876 for Ohio and California, and the years 1492 to the present for New York. The years covered reflected standards in each state. Following the administration of the tests, an item analysis produced a sense of the level of difficulty of each question.

Classroom teachers administered approximately 1,000 written tests to eighth-grade public school students in New York, Ohio, and California. Each middle school selected had heterogeneous populations and offered the potential for producing able finalists for the second round.

In the schools in Ohio and New York, NEH simulated a national competition. From the written test, NEH picked the



A scene from the movie *Akeelah and the Bee* (Lions Gate Films, 2006). A young girl from Los Angeles tries to win the national spelling bee.

top ten scorers in each school and those ten students competed against each other in a bee-like format based on a PowerPoint presentation developed by the team. In the oral competition, NEH experimented with asking different questions within the same time period and also with asking questions in common, where students would write their answers on boards and show them to the judges. Data banks of easy, hard, and very hard questions were gradually accelerated until there was a winner and a runner-up in each school.

All finalists received a Certificate of Achievement from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a copy of Albert Marrin's *George Washington and the Founding of a Nation*. The winners and runners-up in each school additionally received checks for \$100 and \$50, respectively. Parents of many of the finalists attended the competition, along with other students, who cheered on their classmates. ■



Washington



Anthony



Douglass



Grant

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# Misdirected Energy

Schools get an ‘A’ in resisting reform

By Mike Petrilli

**H**ow is it that a system can simultaneously master the art of resisting reform and stick to the path of least resistance? Such is the conundrum facing public education.

## Games People Play

That our schools are impervious to fundamental change (fads-of-the-month notwithstanding) is well established. Joe Williams, in his article “Games Charter Opponents Play,” recounts the imaginative means school districts find to strangle promising reforms, in this case charter schools. Can’t defeat them in the legislature? Then bleed them with a thousand little cuts. Can’t halt them with a state-mandated cap? File a frivolous lawsuit. Can’t persuade parents that they aren’t worth choosing? Ground their buses so students can’t get to the schools. Though twisted, many of these actions are inventive and energetic, some even entrepreneurial.

However, push the education system to address its own widespread problems and suddenly it becomes limper than a lunchroom Tater Tot. Consider teacher quality. Virtually every school district in the nation possesses the authority to fire ineffective teachers within their first year or two on the job, without much difficulty. Thomas Kane and his colleagues, in their article “Photo Finish,” argue that the effectiveness of a teacher can be predicted early on. Letting the weakest ones go makes perfect sense and requires no change in law or collective bargaining agreements. Why, then, don’t districts routinely dismiss those rookie teachers who don’t have the right stuff? Secure on the path of least resistance, administrators typically find it is just too much work to fire someone and find a replacement. In-

**Why, then, don’t districts routinely dismiss those rookie teachers who don’t have the right stuff?**

stead, they keep them all—good, bad, and indifferent. Later on, their hands are tied. They are “stuck” with poor performers.

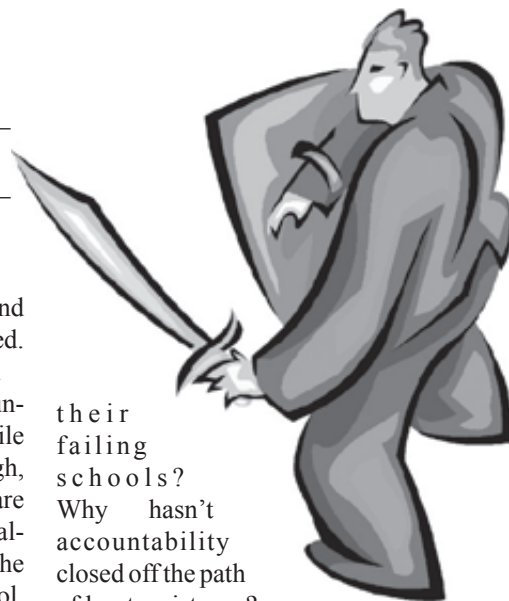
Consider the fate of failing schools under the No Child Left Behind Act. While the law’s rhetoric is John Wayne tough, its reality is Tiny Tim timid. Districts are expected to “restructure” their chronically low-performing schools by firing the entire staff, reopening as a charter school, or contracting with private managers.

Most instead opt for soft reforms like sending in an instructional “coach” or tweaking the curriculum. As both Sara Mead (in her article, “The Easy Way Out”) and Nelson Smith (in his article, “Charters as Solutions?”) lament, it is a tragically lost opportunity. How can one explain the actions of school districts? They are on the path of least resistance. It is just too hard to close down a school and launch a “fresh start.”

## What’s Wrong

To be sure, such bumbling behavior has long been associated with bureaucracies. Shielded from the free market’s incentives, public sector officials learn to “make nice” rather than make unpopular decisions. However, in K–12 education, “accountability” was supposed to change all that. The new system of rewards for strong performance and tough sanctions for failure was meant to motivate officials to do the difficult work, make the hard choices, and upset the applecart.

So why isn’t it working? Why don’t newly accountable principals, driven to raise student achievement, dismiss their ineffective rookie teachers? Why don’t newly accountable superintendents, committed to “leaving no child behind,” shut down



their failing schools? Why hasn’t accountability closed off the path of least resistance?

There are two obvious explanations. First, accountability as we know it is still too weak-kneed. Sure, there is plenty of sunlight and shame, with schools labeled “in need of improvement” and editorial writers wringing their hands. Yet, very few public school employees—from the superintendent to the soup server—ever lose their jobs for poor performance. We need more head rolling, and less eye rolling.

Second, accountability is not enough. Competition via school choice is the other weapon in the “tough love” arsenal, and until it is wielded at large scale, we are unlikely to see real results.

Which brings us back to charter schools. Through the eyes of change-resistant bureaucrats, they present a mortal threat to the very culture of the public education system. Were they to grab significant market share, they might “tip” K–12 education into an age of real accountability. Consequently, that is a path the system can be expected to blockade with all the entrepreneurial zest it can muster. One only wishes all that energy could be put to a better purpose. ■

*Mike Petrilli is Vice President for National Programs and Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. He served in the U.S. Department of Education, as Associate Assistant Deputy Secretary in the Office of Innovation and Improvement.*



# *Fresh Wind of Tea*

## *New Orleans finds better teachers to re*

By Ted O'Neil

**A**mong the hundreds of thousands of people forced to flee the New Orleans area in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina were some 4,000 public school teachers. Now that schools are reopening and reform-minded leaders are set to lead the schools out of both physical and fiscal destruction, how many of those teachers will be rehired is yet to be determined.

About twenty-five of the area's 128 schools had reopened by last May, with plans to open another fifteen for the 2006-2007 school year, depending on how many students return. About 12,000 of what had been a 60,000-student population had returned to classes last spring, and that could reach as high as 34,000.

Robin Jarvis, superintendent of the Recovery School District (RSD), said about 500 more teachers will need to be hired, in addition to the roughly ninety already on board. The Recovery School District was set up in early 2005, before Katrina, after the state took control of 112 schools

in New Orleans due to poor academic and fiscal performance.

Because almost all the schools that have reopened since November 2005 have been charters, the administration has a great deal more flexibility in who it hires and how it hires. With no students and no revenue, the schools were unable to pay teachers and ended up laying them off, in effect gutting the local union and getting rid of the collective bargaining contract.

Jimmy Farenholtz, an Orleans Parish School Board member, told a group of education writers at a conference in New Orleans recently that the move was necessary so that teachers did not pass up offers for other jobs while waiting to see what the future of New Orleans schools held.

### **One-Year Contracts**

"A lot of people were leaving, moving to other cities and other states, looking for work," he said. "The teachers were in the same situation. They had to move on."

Each school now sets its own salary and benefits schedule, and employees work on one-year contracts.

"Our goal is outcomes," Jarvis said. "We let them (schools) handle the input."

The staff at Martin Luther King, Jr.

Elementary School has picked up on the idea, and will open a charter school in a different location for the new academic year. It has plans for a new curriculum and a 20:1 teacher-student ratio.

"We look at it as a rebirth, a renewal, and a rebuilding," Joseph Recasner, a fourth-grade teacher at King, told *USA Today*. Jarvis said teachers hired by the RSD are

### { HIRING PHILOSOPHY }

"We're looking for people who really want to be here."

*Robin Jarvis*

# Teachers

## hire



employees of the district, which is conducting a nationwide recruiting drive.

“We want quality teachers,” Jarvis said. “If they happen to be former New Orleans teachers, we’ll be happy to have them back, if they’re quality teachers.”

Another option for hiring new teachers is an alternative certification method, whereby a person with a bachelor’s degree is hired to teach the content of their degree, then placed in a practitioner certification program, earning a teaching certificate in eighteen months.

“We’re looking for people who really want to be here,” Jarvis said.

The RSD also is making use of competitive contracting, having hired private companies to handle busing, janitorial, food service, and even construction management services.

### Passing the Test

Brian Riedlinger, a retired New Orleans school principal who was brought in to run the Algiers Charter School Association, told the *Times-Picayune* that

500 former teachers applied when the schools reopened. The list was cut in half after interviews, and the remaining 250 had to take a test made up of five math questions found on an eighth-grade assessment test, as well as a one-paragraph essay about why the candidate became a teacher. Some 50 teachers failed the math portion of the test, and the list was cut down to 100 based on answers to the essay question.

Carol Christen, principal of Ben Franklin High School, said the new system gives her much more responsibility in the decision-making process. Each school is given a certain dollar amount from which to pay staff, then an additional amount that can be used at the school’s discretion, depending on its needs, such as an extra foreign language teacher or science teacher.

Ben Franklin, located on the campus of the University of New Orleans, was academically one of the highest performing public schools in the state before Katrina. It admitted students based on test scores,

and had a heavy math and science focus, having opened shortly after Russia launched Sputnik during the space race. Today, it has 540 students, down from the 935 that began school last August, and is, like the rest of the charters, an open enrollment school.

When asked how many former teachers were rehired at Ben Franklin, Christen said, “Those I wanted back, if you want to be blunt about it.” ■

*Ted O’Neil is an education research associate with the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. He writes for Michigan Education Report, the Mackinac Center’s quarterly education policy journal, and for the Michigan Education Digest.*





## Bill Gates Supports Flexible Pay for Teachers

In a recent Associated Press interview, Microsoft Corp. Chairman Bill Gates said that the U.S. higher education system is the envy of the world but primary and secondary schools are failing to adequately prepare students for college.

Gates said the experience of being a parent of three kids—ages 10, 7, and 4—has led him to spend more time thinking about schools.

“Real accountability means more than having goals; it also means having clear consequences for not meeting the goals,” he said in a recent speech to Washington state educators who came to hear the results of an education task force.

Gates said schools should also be able to pay the best teachers better and offer incentives to attract people with rare abilities.

“It’s astonishing to me to have a system that doesn’t allow us to pay more for someone with scarce abilities, that doesn’t allow us to pay more to reward strong performance,” he said. “That is tantamount to saying teacher talent and performance don’t matter and that’s basically saying students don’t matter.”

He also spoke of some creative school programs—particularly charter schools run by private companies—that should be a model for innovation in the nation’s schools.

Gates believes every state should require students to take three or four years of math and science to graduate from high school—twenty-five states currently have such requirements. He wants states to have the power to intervene at low-performing schools.

Source—Associated Press

## Double Take

### Two studies: teacher prep not as important as teacher quality

There is little difference in teaching quality between educators who graduate from traditional education programs and those who enter the profession through alternative routes. That is the conclusion of two independent studies examining data from New York City’s school system.

Donald Boyd and his team of researchers found that:

*“When compared to teachers who completed a university-based teacher education program, teachers with reduced coursework prior to entry often provide smaller initial gains in both mathematics and English language arts. Most differences disappear as the cohort matures, and many of the differences are not large in magnitude, typically 2 to 5 percent of a standard deviation.”*

Both studies also concluded that the greatest differences in students’ success came from the quality differences of teachers regardless of their training.

Thomas Kane and his team of researchers concluded:

*“The results of our study of New York City public school teachers confirm a simple truth: some teachers are consider-*

*ably better than others at helping students learn. For example, elementary-school students who have a teacher who performs in the top quartile of all elementary-school teachers learn 33 percent of a standard deviation more (substantially more) in math in a year than students who have a teacher who performs in the bottom quartile. Yet as we embrace this piece of conventional wisdom, we must discard another: the widespread sentiment that there are large differences in effectiveness between traditionally certified teachers and uncertified or alternatively certified teachers. The greatest potential for school districts to improve student achievement seems to rest not in regulating minimum qualifications for new teachers but in selectively retaining those teachers who are most effective during their first years of teaching.”*

Source—“Photo Finish: Certification doesn’t guarantee a winner” by Thomas J. Kane, Jonah E. Rockoff, and Douglas O. Staiger (Education Next, Winter 2007; [www.educationnext.org](http://www.educationnext.org))

## Power to Hire

Common sense says principals should be able to hire the teachers they want and need. But in the realm of public education, where common sense is scant, school leaders, entangled in webs of collective bargaining and union-created staffing rules, are often forced to hire teachers that other schools reject.

California is the first state to do something about it. Last fall, under the leadership of Democrat Jack Scott, it passed SB1655 (despite predictable union opposition), which mandates that principals at low-performing schools cannot be forced to accept teacher transfers they don’t want and gives them more leeway to hire the best teachers. The bill cleared the state Senate 33-1, and the legislature’s lower house 59-12.

If such a thing can happen in Sacramento, perhaps it can happen anywhere. Every other industry knows that success is a product of finding, hiring, and retaining the best human capital available. It’s time that public education embraced such common sense notions, too.

Source—Education Gadfly

## Getting Smart about Technology

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) recently released the latest edition of its third annual technology survey. The e-mail survey asked almost 1,200 school technology specialists, teachers, administrators, and school board members about the state of technology in classrooms.

Major highlights include:

- Technology funding and integrating technology into the classroom remained at the top of the list as the two biggest challenges facing school districts in the area of technology.
- Almost 94 percent of survey respondents said that technology in the classroom increases educational opportunities for students.
- An overwhelming 92 percent said that technology helps students become more engaged in learning.

Consistent with results in the last two years, these responses indicate the impor-

ance of integrating technology into classrooms in a low-cost, uncomplicated way to boost student interest and aptitude. However, many standard solutions—including recent initiatives that introduce expensive computers without proper teacher training—have proven ineffective.

The AlphaSmart Neo, the better laptop for schools, provides an inexpensive solution for schools lagging in technology programs. Small, lightweight, and rugged, the \$250 product proves to be an effective classroom tool used in 60 percent of school districts across the U.S. — translating to more than 1 million devices being used.

The AlphaSmart Neo is designed specifically for classroom use. Products like the Neo meet the three principal criteria for technology adoption in schools: 1)



simplicity and ease of use, 2) no distractions, and 3) affordability so schools don't have to ration technology.

Additional benefits of the AlphaSmart devices are the large screens, USB ports, and impressive storage capacities. It also promises 700 hours of use on three AA batteries, with an easy on and off and automatic save function.

To review Renaissance Learning's AlphaSmart Neo ([www.AlphaSmart.com](http://www.AlphaSmart.com)), or to find a local school using this product, contact Glenda Luft at (212) 584-4317 or [gluft@5wpr.com](mailto:gluft@5wpr.com).

## Singing to Success

A unique new classroom technology program claims it has produced a full year of reading comprehension progress—in just nine weeks. What started out as a popular learn-to-sing computer software tool is now creating new harmony in other areas of education in some pilot school programs.

The *Tune In to Reading* program uses concepts of a successful learn-to-sing technology from Singing Coach software and applies it to reading—allowing students to improve reading skills significantly, essentially while singing songs on the computer. Based on two years of research, the *Tune In to Reading* singing software program from Electronic



Learning Products (ELP) helps students improve in all five areas of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. ELP is a software platform company that uses its real time pitch tracking and speech recognition technology to create products for an increasing wide range of educational purposes.

After the initial study,

the Florida Department of Education sponsored a wide-scale replication of a University of South Florida pilot study across 500 students in the state. The results report similarly remarkable results at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Three complete abstracts detailing the *Tune In to Reading* program are available at <http://www.elpcorp.com/research.html> (Click on the Research Abstract links I, II, or III)

For more information go to <http://www.elpcorp.com/literacy.html> or call Electronic Learning Products: (813) 886-1955.

## Happy Teachers

**Survey finds teachers satisfied with jobs**

The 2006 MetLife *Survey of the American Teacher* provides a very different picture of teacher retention and job satisfaction from what we are all used to seeing in the press.

The lead finding was that 90 percent of America's teachers were satisfied with teaching as a career—56 percent calling themselves “very satisfied.” It stands to reason that people who are very satisfied with their careers would be unlikely to leave them, and the survey bears that out. Only 27 percent say they are likely to leave within the next five years. The average experience of all teachers surveyed was 17 years, but the average experience of those who planned to leave was 22 years, suggesting it is the older teachers who plan to leave, rather than the much-ballyhooed “fifty percent of teachers in the first five years.”

Source—*The Education Intelligence Agency's Communiqué*.

# Protect Yourself

## Five ways to guard against accusations of sexual misconduct

By La Rae G. Munk

The news of teachers and sexual misconduct continues to grab headlines across the country. While there are clearly problems with teacher misconduct, it is also becoming clear that some students have learned to use false allegations of sexual misconduct as a weapon of revenge against teachers.

All too frequently, administrators are accepting the student's version of events. In too many situations, administrators are not even bothering to properly investigate an allegation before issuing a reprimand or placing a teacher on suspension. This is true whether the allegation is sexual misconduct, physical abuse, or even just using a word that a student does not appreciate. The result is that teachers are experiencing unnecessary discipline and damage to their reputation under a theory of "guilty before proven innocent."

How should you protect yourself from false accusations? Here are five practical steps you can take to limit the opportunities for false accusations of sexual misconduct.

1. Never be alone in a private area with a student. If a student comes into the classroom and you happen to be alone, immediately step into a public area such as the hallway. When a student wants to speak about a confidential matter, you can



do this while in a public area by speaking in a quiet voice.

2. Do not give students your home phone number. Should it be necessary for you to call a student at home, insist that

**All too frequently, administrators are accepting the student's version of events. In too many situations, administrators are not even bothering to properly investigate an allegation before issuing a reprimand or placing a teacher on suspension.**

a parent be on the phone during the conversation.

3. If it becomes necessary to give a student a ride in your vehicle, you should do this only if you have another adult to accompany you, and you have notified the parent or an administrator that you are doing so.

4. Keep detailed notes of daily activities in class. This is particularly important for those comments by students that

might be open to different interpretations. For example, a student's question about human anatomy in a science class should be documented.

Teachers have faced situations where those "innocent" questions and the subsequent answers resulted in a reprimand because of the different interpretations that were passed along to others.

5. Teachers have learned the hard way that they must keep a professional perspective and style in talking with students. You shouldn't talk with students in the same manner as a parent.

Should you have any concern regarding your conduct towards students, remember the old adage, "When in doubt, don't." Act with caution and seek guidance and approval from administrators before taking unilateral action that might be open to unintended interpretations. ■

*La Rae G. Munk is Director of Legal Services for the Association of American Educators.*