

## Teaching Essential Knowledge

By David Warren Saxe, Ed.D.

### Editor's Note—

Over the summer we will be reprinting a number of articles that appeared in previous editions of Education Matters. Our newer members have not had the privilege of reading some of those "Golden Oldies." The articles selected received the most positive responses from our members. You may also want to revisit the newsletter section of our web-site and check out other selected articles from previous editions of Education Matters. **EM**



David Saxe

**W**hat knowledge is of most worth?" This question, posed by Herbert Spencer in 1859, has framed nearly every aspect of public schooling for the past 140 years. To Spencer the issue wasn't

simply to list discrete and unrelated pieces of knowledge or to insist upon demonstrating some arbitrary skills. The important task for society (parents, educators, and citizens all) was to identify with some precision just what children should know and be able to do as a result of their schooling.

Spencer's notion of deciding what is most important to teach children has currency in today's discussion on standards. It seems natural to call upon our teachers to present the sort of knowledge and skills necessary for competent citizenship. It seems natural to require students to provide evidence of what has been learned and to demonstrate certain levels of proficiency with skills. Yet, we all understand that what seems natural often doesn't match with the demands of teacher unions, overzealous professional teacher organizations, and incompetent government bureaucracies among other potential stumbling blocks.

There continues to be sufficient evidence that promoting essential knowledge and skills for every child in every grade remains a critical and important educational policy. Witness E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge

program used in more than 400 schools across the nation.

When E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and his associates developed the Core Knowledge sequence in the 1980s, he, too, was answering Spencer's question. Each Hirsch book begins with the positive statement "What your (fill in the grade) needs to know." The notion of fundamental knowledge and skills underscores Hirsch's program. To Hirsch, children must know certain identified information, and they must be able to perform certain tasks and skills.

The "core" knowledge and skills selected reflect the value of discriminating between the important and vital and the items of lesser importance. With precious resources and limited time, the act of deciding what's more important for children seems a very practical and sensible idea. Moreover, by teaching core knowledge, children learn an important collateral lesson: the ability to appreciate, recognize, and discriminate knowledge into valuable, less valuable, and worthless categories.

Clearly, the present standards movement sweeping the nation is closely allied to Hirsch's Core Knowledge. Standards are also directly tied to Spencer's 140-year-old question. In nearly every state, educational officials have developed (or are in the process of developing) standards that outline just "what knowledge is of most worth."

If Spencer has asked the right question, then what's the problem?

The problem emerges in the teaching. Identifying knowledge is one thing; teaching it to children is an altogether different matter. It is on this point that other competing educational ideas have emerged.

Namely, if all teaching is reduced to putting identified knowledge into the heads of children, as the use of repetition and memory skills become more important, the costs work against the developing sensibilities of

children. That is, the act of putting things into the heads of children overwhelms and defeats the notion of children acquiring essential knowledge: to drill is to kill the child's growing intellectual abilities. In the end, rather than moving the child forward, the child is left educationally stunted and deformed.

The answer to this problem is to give the child "ownership" over the knowledge, to let the child explore what is important on his own terms, to let him learn to construct his own realities, to build his own knowledge base independent of the imposition of others. In sum, to learn how to learn not by some external measure, but within his own abilities and talents. By reducing all knowledge to a relative state, not only is it impossible to "teach" essential knowledge, but also essential knowledge itself is non-existent.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
The "progressive"  
teacher's worst  
nightmare would be  
a program that  
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and be able to do.

In this context of children developing knowledge independently of what is perceived as "most important" by others, the teacher becomes a facilitator, not a master of knowledge. The effective teacher is someone who encourages the child to discover his or her own educational abilities. In this context, essentialists' educational standards are not only offensive to the child's abilities, and counter-productive to the educational enterprise, but also impossible to achieve in practice.

In this enlightened state of education spirituality and awareness, Spencer's question is turned on its head. The issue isn't what is of most value to society (as Spencer intended it to be), but what is of most value to the individual child. In this latter sense, there isn't any ranking or rating of knowledge; all things are held important or unimportant according to the sensibilities of the child. Any attempt to rank knowledge would be considered a wasted effort.

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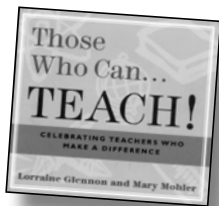
# Complex Roots and Other Mysteries

By Charles Haynie

The story below is one of many featured in *Those Who Can... Teach! Celebrating Teachers*

*Who Make a Difference*, by Lorraine Glennon and Mary Mohler.

To order copies of the book, call 1-800-247-8850.



I had always been a good math student in high school, and in my last semester I signed up for advanced algebra, hoping to be challenged by some hard stuff. However, my favorite math teacher, Mr. Cohen, barely got started in the semester when he fell ill and the class was taken over by a substitute—the gym teacher. She was a perfectly nice person, but she knew nothing about algebra, advanced or otherwise. She would come in to class every day in her gym outfit and call for volunteers to go to the blackboard and write out the answers to the homework assignment. Then she'd ask the rest of us if we disagreed with what was on the board. It was pretty clear that she was just stalling for time until Mr. Cohen returned. So were we all.

But he didn't come back, and pretty soon I was the only one volunteering. This was fine with the teacher, and it simplified things for the rest of us. In effect, I was teaching the class. One day the vice-principal summoned me to his office. I went with trepidation, but all he wanted to tell me was that Mr. Cohen's wife had called to say that he was very sick and to ask if I would like to visit him in their apartment.

That afternoon, I took a series of buses to Mr. Cohen's home in Flushing. My family had moved from this Queens neighborhood—with its overcrowded working-class apartment houses, its loud overhead subway trains coming and going all day and night, its street-floor stores and its slums—around the time I was born, relocating to the comparatively luxurious area of Douglaston Manor.

When I finally buzzed the doorbell of the old apartment house atop a row of shabby stores, Mrs. Cohen pulled me aside to warn me about her husband's condition. "He can't talk yet. The doctors say he'll get his voice back, but right now..." She brightened. "It will just make his day that you're here. He's mentioned you as one of his best students."

I barely recognized him. Propped in a large overstuffed chair with a blanket covering his lap, he looked old, shriveled up,

diminished. His shaking hands tried to smooth the pages of *The New York Times*.

We sat there. He stared at me. I had no idea what to do. Finally, he picked up a pad and wrote a message, slowly and unsteadily: "Tell me about the algebra class." So I did, explaining how I came to be teaching the class. I would say a few things, and then he would slowly write a question on his pad, tear off the note, and hand it to me. I would respond. Slowly we managed to communicate.

After a while his wife reappeared. "We don't want to tire Charles out on his first day, Aaron." She winked at me. "Come into the kitchen." She pulled a plate of cakes out of her oven. I ate one, and then another. Boy, were they delicious! She scurried happily around her tiny kitchen—much smaller than the one we had at home, the one Mom was always complaining about. Wait till I tell her about this one, I thought. Then I realized I wasn't going to tell Mom or anybody about these people's kitchen, or even this visit. I figured I'd just say I had to stay after school for something. As it turned out, nobody asked.

I returned to the Cohens' apartment later that week. Mr. Cohen had our advanced algebra text on his lapboard. "What page are you up to?" he wrote. I showed him. Another note: "State the root theorem." I did: Whenever  $x=r$  solves the polynomial, then  $(x-r)$  divides the polynomial. "Prove it," he scribbled. I did. I stared at the book; the author was Aaron Cohen. He'd written our textbook! Why had I never noticed?

And so we continued. He would ask me about equations; when I was puzzled, he'd give me a hint. And always, Mrs. Cohen would eventually interrupt to take me into the kitchen for some of her exquisite cakes. She never sent me off without a bundle of them for the trip back.

My visits became a regular pattern. As sick as he was, and unable to talk, you would have thought that Mr. Cohen would be unable to explain anything to anybody. But he would scribble his short questions and show me the key ideas in his book, step by step. In this way, he taught me about imaginary numbers, how to graph complex numbers, and what happens to these complex numbers when you multiply them together.

One day, he wasn't there. "He's back in Flushing Hospital, for tests," Mrs. Cohen said. "He's getting better, though, day by day. Can't you tell?" Not knowing what to say, I nodded. I could see she was anxious. She went back to her baking in the kitchen, while I looked around their small living

room, cluttered with books from floor to ceiling. All kinds of books, mostly in German (I could tell by the old-fashioned script). But one shelf was in a strange language—I guessed it was Hebrew. Lots of Bibles, in different languages. Philosophy books. Art books. A whole section on astronomy. And, of course, math books, really advanced ones on topics I had never heard of before. It had never occurred to me that a high-school teacher could be so smart.

I noticed, in some, inscriptions that noted where and when he had bought the book. "Heidelberg, August 1935." Wasn't that during the time of Hitler? Wouldn't that have been a hard time for a Jewish math teacher? Another book: "Berlin, October 1937." God, did he stay in Germany? "Leipzig, January 1938." How did he ever get out of Hitler's clutches? I searched the books for more inscriptions, trying to piece together the details of his life. January 1939 was the last date. He must have left soon after that. I couldn't see any signs that the Cohens had children. Might they have—only the children didn't make it to America?

To my surprise, Mr. Cohen did get better. He could get up from his chair, and he even began to talk, quietly at first, then with more energy. One day, as we were discussing complex roots of polynomials, he began to look through his bookshelf; he took down a very slim leather-bound book and handed it to me. "Here. Galois's theory of equations. Amazing for a young man to write on his twenty-first birthday. I feel I owe you something precious. You can learn this on your own."

I assured him he didn't owe me anything, but he insisted. I couldn't understand much, because it was in French, but in the weeks ahead, I managed to plow through it, with the help of a French-English dictionary that Mr. Cohen gave me. It turned out that mathematical French is simple. The Galois theorems, on the other hand, are not.

I ended up teaching the entire semester's course. We even covered more of the syllabus than was required. I say "we" because it really was a joint effort, in spite of the fact that Mr. Cohen never actually appeared in the classroom.

After five years of studying engineering physics and later, theoretical physics, I entered Cornell graduate school to study abstract mathematics. I finally learned Galois theory, and a lot more field theory besides. And I worked on my thesis in Lie algebra, which drew on materials that were solely in French. It is possible, of course, that I would have done all this had I never met Aaron Cohen. But I don't think so. **EM**

# Educational Ownership – Roadmap to an “A”

By John Bishop



John Bishop

**A**s responsible adults our legacy to our children consists of three things: giving them clear, positive character development traits; an ability to set and achieve goals; and an understanding of how they can take personal ownership for their education.

In an ideal world, students would go to school in a safe neighborhood where the school is filled with affirming, positive people and where the parents and other caregivers are fully involved in their child's education. Unfortunately, many of our children do not live in the ideal world. They live in the real world where, in far too many cases, they do not get enough constructive, loving, encouraging adult interaction.

This quote from a seventh-grade girl in her essay entitled “The Night,” may be enlightening. “I’m not afraid of the night. I’m not even afraid when the bullets start. I take my brother and we lay down in the bathtub until the shooting stops.” This highlights a significant urban issue, but there are other issues that negatively impact all children—rural, suburban, urban, rich and poor. These issues include drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancy, single-parent homes, physical abuse, and so many more. How can we help our children navigate through these negative influences? How do we give them a “roadmap” for success?

Negative influences translate into lower school attendance, reduced class participation, mediocre test results, increased discipline issues, and poor personal decision-making. Teachers spend valuable class time trying to “pull” lower performing students through their class. Individually, we cannot solve many of these negative influences, but we can give our children a way to effectively deal with them. Providing character education, goal setting, and educational ownership, we can help our children make sense of difficult situations and give them a roadmap to a better life. We can help them develop an “*I’ll Make It Happen*” attitude.

Our children live in a rapid-paced MTV world where they are bombarded with media messages that define success as “bigger, better, faster” and “you can have it now – and not have to work hard to get it.” All too often the messages they see are that you can lose weight with a pill, flatten your stomach muscles in only five minutes a day, or learn how to play soccer

from a 45-minute video. Many of our children are growing up in the world of instant gratification, and shortly they will be entering the world of hard knocks.

It is essential that students learn that *success* takes time, planning, and a strong desire. *Success* takes action. *Success* takes commitment. *Success* is setting and achieving goals. *Success* is helping others. With effective goal setting, character education, and educational ownership programs, students learn they have a personal responsibility for their success. They learn to minimize excuses and take positive action for their lives.

Parents, teachers, and other caregivers want young people to grow up to be healthy, productive, caring adults with a good self-image and a positive outlook toward their future. Young people want the same thing but in many cases do not know how to get it. It is our responsibility to help them “learn the ropes.” When students take educational ownership, they take personal responsibility to do something meaningful and positive to change *their* lives. As they gain more dignity and self-respect, students who develop educational ownership realize that, while there may be challenges on their paths, they will not allow them to become insurmountable roadblocks to their future.

In order for students to take more educational ownership, they need three things. First, they need a sense of purpose—to know that what they are doing is important and worthwhile. Second, they need a sense of belonging. They will develop a sense of belonging when they have affirming, constructive adult role models, positive peer influences, and when they are engaged in school activities. Third, they need a sense of direction. Students will develop a sense of direction when they learn how to segment large, seemingly impossible, tasks into smaller, manageable parts and then take action toward meeting these new challenges. With educational ownership, students will embrace *your* efforts to help them succeed!

Why is goal setting so important? By learning about goal setting, how to overcome challenges, the importance of being positive, and how to measure their progress, students learn how to take education ownership. If we teach students how to set and achieve goals and how to apply those principles in the classroom, they will learn that they play a significant role in *their*

education and in *their* future.

How can goal setting help your class or school? Recently, we had a class of twenty-four urban middle-school students start an eight-part goal-setting program. They entered the class with an attitude of “I’m cool and I don’t want to be here.” After three sessions, all were actively participating in the classroom discussion on goal setting and how to take more positive control of their lives. Importantly, they were learning how to use these principles today, in the classroom.

What type of goal-setting program can help students take more ownership? Students want a discussion-stimulating goal-setting program that answers three questions: Why is this important? How do I do it? How and where can I start? They want a program where they can voice their opinions and have them validated. The program should emphasize the importance of helping others and should

include parents and other caregivers in a collaborative experience with the teacher.

An effective goal-setting program should be organized, give students samples and practice, show them how to stay focused and positive, and give them realistic ways to measure their progress toward reaching their goals. The program should identify potential roadblocks to their success and how to overcome them. It should have opened-ended discussion—stimulating questions, and give students meaningful real-world examples they can relate to and talk about in class and in home discussions. An effective goal-setting program should teach students how to use these principles right now—in this class.

Character education is a large and important movement in education. Progressive schools are reinforcing family efforts to instill important character development traits. Some examples of these traits include honesty, fairness, caring, respect, responsibility, and self-discipline. Interestingly, you can “feel” a school’s level of acceptance. You can go into a school and almost instantly tell whether the school honors the character education concepts and lives by them. There is a positive energy in schools where the teachers, administration, and caring adults live and breathe positive, affirming traits and effectively model these behaviors for their students.

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## Signs of the Times



### “Redistribution of Wealth” or “Sin-Tax”?

Texas Governor Rick Perry has convened a special legislative session with the aim to change the way public education is financed in the Lone Star State. The current system, nick-named Robin Hood funding, uses property tax revenues from a number of districts with high property values and redistributes the revenue to property tax-poor districts. Gov. Perry is seeking a fundamental change in the tax burden on Lone Star State residents with a proposal that would lower property taxes as much as 17 percent—\$6 billion a year. To make up the lost revenue, the Governor is proposing to increase taxes on “sins” like cigarettes and liquor, and he’d add taxes to some forms of legalized gambling, and increase taxes on adult entertainment. **EM**

Source—The CER Newswire is published by The Center for Education Reform, [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com).

### Enrollment Figures Spell Big Trouble for Public School Teachers

The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) regularly reviews enrollment figures, comparing past years with expectations for the future. Its most recent report shows clearly that the fat years of teacher employment are over, and the lean years may last much longer than anyone has previously predicted.

NCES compared the period 1988-2001 with its projections for 2001-2013. The differences are stark. While public school enrollment increased 19 percent between 1988 and 2001, it is expected to grow only 4 percent between 2001 and 2013. During the period 1988-2001, the number of public school teachers grew by an astonishing 29 percent. The forecast for 2001-2013 is growth of only 5 percent – or less than 0.4 percent annually.

Regional enrollment forecasts are even more intriguing. All of the states that will have enrollment growth of 12 percent or more from 2001-2013 will be west of the Rockies. Among the nineteen states that will experience a loss in enrollment during that same time are West Virginia, Kentucky, New York, Vermont, Ohio, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

The final bit of news is that private school enrollment, which at 18 percent just about kept pace with public school enrollment from 1998-2001, is expected to grow at a 7 percent rate from 2001-2013, exceeding that of public school enrollment.

Projections of Education Statistics to 2013 is available on the NCES web-site at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/projections/index.asp>. **EM**

Source—The Education Intelligence Agency’s (EIA) Communiqué.

You may find more information about EIA at [www.eiaonline.com](http://www.eiaonline.com).

### New Study Finds Exit Exams Don’t Reduce Graduation Rates

A new study released by Manhattan Institute researchers Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters finds, contrary to claims of some test critics, that requiring high school students to pass an exit exam to receive a diploma does not reduce graduation rates. The authors also find no relationship between graduation rates and higher levels of per-pupil spending or smaller class sizes. The report, “Pushed Out or Pulled Up? Exit Exams and Dropout Rates in Public High Schools,” examines the effect of high school exit exams using two highly respected methods of calculating graduation rates.

To ensure that students who receive high school diplomas meet basic thresholds of academic proficiency, twenty-four states have adopted exit exams that students must pass to graduate. Opponents of these exams argue that they drive already low graduation rates downward. However, the Manhattan Institute study finds that exit exams have not been a factor in lowering graduation rates. The authors suggest that exit exams may not be a significant barrier to graduation, that many students unable to pass the exams are students who would have dropped out anyway, and that exit exams may inspire improvements in school performance that counterbalance the small number of students for whom the exit exam is in fact a barrier to graduation.

To receive a copy of the report, contact Greg Forster at 954-680-8083 or by email at [gforster@manhattan-institute.org](mailto:gforster@manhattan-institute.org). **EM**

### Only in California—We Hope!

The State of California’s redefined antidiscrimination policies actually allow individual students in public schools to choose their own gender. Silly us for thinking that physical gender is an objective, not a subjective, matter. No wonder the rest of the nation thinks Californians are indeed nuts! **EM**

### Out-of-School Time

A new report from the Department’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) presents a broad overview of the out-of-school time of kindergarten through eighth-grade children in 2001. Results suggest that children’s experiences before and after school were quite varied. Some children were in the care of their parents, but 20 percent had regularly scheduled nonparental arrangements before school, and 50 percent had nonparental arrangements after school. Moreover, differences exist across racial/ ethnic lines: black children were more likely than white and Hispanic children to be cared for by a relative and to be in self-care before and after school. They were also more likely to participate in center- or school-based programs after school. Intrigued? The report’s data include children’s activities within their nonparental arrangements, the location and costs of arrangements, characteristics of relative and nonrelative providers, and the number of children and adults present in different arrangement “types.” For more information, go to <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2004008>. **EM**

### Textbook on Arabs Removes Blunder

A North American Indian tribe has forced distributors of an Arab studies guide for U.S. teachers to remove an inaccurate passage that says Muslim explorers preceded Christopher Columbus to North America and became Algonquin chiefs.

Peter DiGangi, director of Canada’s Algonquin Nation Secretariat in Quebec, called claims in the book, the *Arab World Studies Notebook*, “preposterous” and “outlandish,” saying nothing in the tribe’s

written or oral history support them.

The 540-page book says the Muslim explorers married into the Algonquin tribe, resulting in 17th-century tribal chiefs named Abdul-Rahim and Abdallah Ibn Malik.

Mr. DiGangi said the guide's author and editor, Audrey Shabbas, and the Middle East Policy Council (MEPC), a Washington advocacy group that promoted the curriculum to school districts in 155 U.S. cities, have been unresponsive to his concerns since November.

However, Ms. Shabbas said last month the passage was removed immediately from subsequent copies, and that she was "giving careful and thoughtful attention" on how to notify the 1,200 teachers who have been given copies of the book in the past five years. **EM**

Source—George Archibald of The Washington Times.

## The Buck Stops Where?

A federal judge in Washington, D.C., has ruled that a District teacher can hold the Washington Teachers Union (WTU) executive board and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) responsible for their failure to stop the embezzlement of nearly \$5 million from union coffers by a former WTU president and assorted cronies. WTU's president pled guilty to her role in the scheme and has been sentenced to prison, while charges against others

are still pending. The AFT (which did not demand required audits of the union for years) and the WTU leadership (which also provided little or no oversight of union expenditures) argued that they were not at fault for failing to detect the fraud and had asked the court to dismiss the charges brought against them. **EM**

## Teacher Salaries and Education Spending

"Total spending on public K-12 education reached \$437.0 billion in the 2002-03 school year—more than \$9,100 per pupil nationwide. Less than a third of this money ended up in teachers' paychecks whose average salary was \$45,930 in 2002-03—up 3.2 percent from the average salary of \$44,999 reported last year for 2001-02. With spending of \$16,740 per pupil, the District of Columbia had the nation's most expensive public school system." **EM**

Source—School Reform News

## NEA Tries End Run around IRS

Faced with Internal Revenue Service and U.S. Department of Labor investigations concerning its political activities and reporting, the National Education Association has created yet another advocacy organi-

zation that will be able to use both dues money and state PAC money to advance the union's goals. Called "Communities for Quality Education (CQE)," the new group is a "social welfare organization," as defined by the Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(4). The ACLU and the NRA are examples of 501(c)(4) organizations. Such groups are allowed to lobby, provided it isn't their primary activity. They may not participate directly or indirectly in political campaigns.

The new organization's primary focus will be on "spreading the word about the misguided NCLB law, and how to fix it." Any doubt that CQE will be controlled by NEA was erased by the identity of its board of directors. Anne Davis, president of the Illinois Education Association, will chair the board. The other two members are Robert Bonazzi, executive director of the New Jersey Education Association, and Maurice Joseph, NEA's deputy general counsel. The executive director is John Hein, most recently the associate executive director of government relations for the California Teachers Association.

NEA is asking its state affiliates to "voluntarily" contribute a minimum of \$1 per member to CQE, which can come from the union's general fund, PAC fund, or outside donations – though these are not tax deductible. **EM**

Source—The Education Intelligence Agency's (EIA) Communiqué. You may find more information about EIA at [www.eiaonline.com](http://www.eiaonline.com).

# NAS President Urges Rethinking of Academic Governance in the Humanities and Social Sciences

**In** an important essay in the *Chronicle Review* of 23 April 2004 that is likely to spark extended debate, National Association of Scholars (NAS) president Stephen H. Balch makes the case for a thorough rethinking of the structure of academic governance in the humanities and social sciences.

Dr. Balch contends that the history of American higher education over the last few decades has demonstrated the error of believing that the humanities and social sciences can be left to regulate themselves in the same manner as the natural sciences. He argues that the

former inevitably have an adversarial quality that the latter lack. This is so, he maintains, because they are inescapably enveloped in global, value-laden controversies, and because their subject matter is inherently more complex. Because of the majoritarian decision-making processes that generally operate within college and university faculties, the result has been a sharp narrowing of the range of academic discourse, with dominant intellectual factions working to exclude their rivals.

This is one major reason why intellectual diversity is so much less evident in academe than it is in politics, journalism,

and other nonacademic arenas of debate. As a remedy, Dr. Balch urges an infusion of "Madisonian imagination" into prevailing conceptions of how the humane disciplines should be organized. Concretely, he urges that attention be given to designing academic niches within which minority, intellectual viewpoints can sustain themselves in situations of partial programmatic autonomy.

A link to the full text of this significant *Chronicle (of Higher Education) Review* article, entitled "The Antidote to Academic Orthodoxy," can be found at [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org). **EM**

# Getting the Teaching Position You Want

## Prospective Teachers Should Ask about Training and Curriculum

**T**eachers looking for new jobs can determine more easily if a prospective employer is right for them by asking a few simple questions, according to an article on Teachers.net monthly Gazette. Since how school districts train and support teachers plays such an important role in retaining employees, say Harry and Rosemary Wong in their two-part article “Applying for a Teaching Job in a Tight Market,” interviewing teachers should be sure to ask about issues that will be important if they accept a job. The Wongs are themselves veteran teachers and authors of the best-selling book, *The First Days of School*, a guide for managing classrooms.

The Wongs recommended that job seekers ask if the school district has a teacher induction program and if it has a curriculum guide.

### Teacher Induction Program

Induction programs provide the training and support that teachers need to be successful in their jobs. Districts with induction programs demonstrate that they hope to retain teachers that they hire—an important consideration since as many as 17 percent of new teachers in urban schools leave the profession in the first year, and as many as 50 percent of new teachers change careers within five years. Induction programs should not be confused with peer mentoring programs, which are helpful but are no substitute for formal training.

If the district does have an induction program, prospective teachers should ask:

- **Is the program formal?** An informal program will not have set procedures for preparing new teachers to succeed in the classroom, so success may be haphazard.
- **How long does it last?** A brief period of training won't give new teachers the support they need to develop good teaching skills and to overcome challenges in the classroom.
- **What is the teacher attrition rate at the school and/or district?** A high attrition rate is an indication that the induction program is not providing teachers with the tools and support they need. Low attrition means the teachers are staying. If teachers are staying, that means they are succeeding in the classroom!

### Curriculum Guide

New teachers usually step into a space left by a departing teacher who has taken all materials and lesson plans with him or her. That leaves new teachers to discover what students learned in the previous year and to build an entire lesson plan that's appropriate for the grade level. A formal school district curriculum guide can make this task much less challenging.

If the district does have a curriculum guide, prospective teachers should ask:

- **Does the plan follow state standards?** States increasingly set and enforce expectations as to what students are supposed to learn in each grade. Students must periodically submit to standardized tests that measure what they have learned, and schools and teachers are held accountable for meeting the results.
- **Are there lesson plans and activities for each teacher's use?** For new teachers in particular, formal lesson plans, resource lists, and activities make it possible for teachers to “align” with state standards by giving students the knowledge and skills expected at their grade level.

A district without a set of curriculum guides for each grade level and subject is like a restaurant with no cookbooks or an airline with no flight plans.

The Wongs emphasize that as teachers gain experience and become more skilled in their profession, they'll be able to take initiative with lessons within the framework of curriculum plans and state standards: “Creativity can and will come later.” **EM**

Source—“For Teachers” section of the Internet Education Exchange, [www.iedx.org](http://www.iedx.org).



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## USDOE Announces New Flexibility in 95 Percent Participation Rate Requirement

**L**ast month the USDOE announced a small but important policy change which allows some new flexibility when a school calculates its 95 percent minimum Testing Participation Rate. The NCLB law currently requires schools to maintain a 95 percent testing participation rate (95 percent of the total school population and 95 percent of all demographic subgroups) in order to meet the definition of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

However, because of the absence of just a few students on testing days, it is possible for only one or two students in a subgroup to put the entire school in a “Needs Improvement” status. This is especially true when dealing with some of



The AAE supports all such common-sense policy changes to NCLB that provide schools and teachers with the greatest flexibility possible under the law.

the smaller subgroups of students. (These subgroups include ethnicity, poverty, disability, or English language proficiency, if the school has a sufficient number of students in each subgroup.)

The USDOE will now allow a multi-year “averaging” of the participation rate to count

towards the 95 percent determination. For example, if a school finds that its participation rate dropped to 94 percent for one year, but in the previous two years the rates were 95 percent and 96 percent, then the school may average these three years to meet the 95 percent participation rate requirement. In other words, the USDOE is now allowing a two-year or three-year “average” to count, instead of only a “single-year snapshot.” Furthermore, legitimate medical absences that prevent a student from participating in the testing program will NOT be counted against the school.

The AAE supports all such common-sense policy changes to NCLB that provide schools and teachers with the greatest flexibility possible under the law. **EM**

# Teaching Essential Knowledge

(Continued from page 1)

Any attempt to teach a child from a base of knowledge developed outside the child would be considered an act of gross oppression.

The “progressive” teacher’s worst nightmare would be a program that identifies what every child should know and be able to do. E.D. Hirsch’s “what every (fill in the grade) needs to know” or rigorous educational standards would constitute the epitome of educational abuse. To the enlightened, the only real educational standards possible are those that support teachers as “facilitators” of knowledge and those standards that encourage children to focus on learning how to learn (metacognition). All else is an unwarranted intrusion on the educational act.

The clever deception here is that the present educational establishment, while tacitly rejecting the notion of essential knowledge under the guise of such suspect theories as “bilingualism,” “constructivism,” “cooperative learning,” “diversity,” “metacognition,” “multiculturalism,” and “whole language,” do, in fact, argue for the imposition of essential values and dispositions for every child. Thus, on one hand, the principle of imparting essential knowledge is rejected (children should construct their own knowledge-realities); yet, in contradiction, as children are exploring and experimenting, they MUST come to accept the essentialists’ worldview of their teachers.

As educational policymakers struggle with such important issues as standards, student assessments, and teacher testing, we must first come to grips with prevailing education theories and practices. If essential knowledge makes sense as educational policy, then we must first defeat and overcome the various educational theories that have taken root in our schools; just as I would support groups that trumpet religious freedom, I would also support those groups that believe in furthering the cause of social justice.

However, the context of this support must be confined to efforts maintained by private, not public, monies. That is, just as educational officials should be barred from permitting the preaching of particular religions in our public schools, the proselytizing of so-called social causes in schools must also be banned.

In our democratic-republic, the founders triumphed the notion of diverse factions, but they also provided for guards against the known abuse of powerful factions. There is nothing wrong with individuals

supporting environmental causes, just as there is nothing wrong with individuals actively witnessing for Christ. What is misplaced in both and other related cases is that the founders did not intend that public institutions should be agents of churches OR domains of special interest groups.

What has gone unchecked for all too long has been the amalgamation of suspect educational theories and social justice causes within public settings. Ultimately, these emperors have revealed to us that they have no clothes. Hirsch’s recent book, *The Schools We Need*, among many others, has documented the flaws all too well.

For example, demonstrating the ability to read and do simple math is easily assessed. Such tests can not only identify student achievement, but also reveal failed educational theories and applications. However fun and engaging constructivist math may be, if a child cannot demonstrate certain math knowledge and abilities, the theory is suspect. In bilingual settings, if children do not demonstrate the ability to read and speak English with mastery, the theory is suspect. In the act of “constructing” their own realities of spelling and reading, by learning words in their whole context as opposed to phonics, if, in such contexts, children cannot demonstrate the ability to actually read unfamiliar works, the theory is suspect. If indirect teaching through cooperative learning fails to ensure that every child within such groupings is learning, the theory is suspect.

The prevailing educational theories have ruled the day. The theories have been tried and tested. The results of the failures are well known. Armies of proponents have populated our educational institutions in a massive self-perpetuating system, closing ranks to repel all that question the suspect and failed theories and practices. Rather than taking on skeptics and opponents, putting the results of the past forty years up to open and unfettered scrutiny, the ensconced have retreated to a “monkey see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” defense.

If Hirsch and other courageous civic leaders are right (as I now believe), the rescue of the next generation of American children must begin with essential knowledge. In brief, essential knowledge and skills must be taught, learned, and tested.

To accomplish the rescue of public schooling, state educational policymakers must establish viable sets of essential

knowledge through rigorous standards and assessments. Next, teacher education programs must be aligned to essential knowledge and skills. Practicing teachers must also be trained to teach essential knowledge and skills as well as to stand ready and willing to be tested periodically to ensure competence. Finally, while there is room for educational research and explorations, public education institutions must be cleaned of suspect theories and failed practice. In addition, school administrators must end the all too common practice of covering classes with merely certified teachers in place of qualified and competent content specialists. The stakes are too high both in financial terms and human costs to openly permit continued failure in our schools. From the standards needed, to student and teacher exams that hold each accountable, we must and can do better. If Spencer

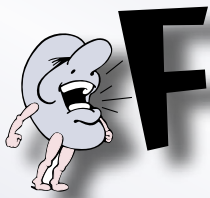
asked the right question, then we must work with purpose and diligence to deliver and assure our answer.

When Spencer first posed his question, the question wasn’t framed to develop a list of knowledge for all time, but a list of knowledge for our time, for the society in question. The standards of today might include some (or many) things important to past societies (that we might call universal knowledge), but they might also include things important locally. Our own lists of what’s important may be in constant revision, but it remains a framework of what is considered important for our children to know and be able to do.

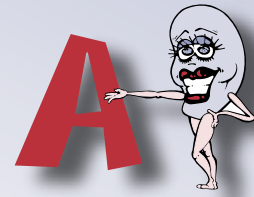
The act of putting into terms what knowledge is of most worth first implies that possessing certain knowledge and skills is important. Several states have taken the enormous step of putting educational standards on paper. Next, they must ensure that these standards are what is indeed taught and learned. Such tasks are arguably the most important a society can undertake. We must encourage more politicians, educational officials, teachers, and parents to take up the cause for high-quality standards in our schools. **EM**

*David Warren Saxe is an Associate Professor of Education, Penn State University. He was a public school teacher in Illinois for eleven years. Dr. Saxe teaches courses in social studies methods K-12. He serves as editor for the Journal of the Middle States Council for the Social Studies, and co-edited the Handbook on Teaching Social Issues. His specialty areas include historical foundations of social studies and democratic education.*

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# Tough versus Easy Graders



**A** new study out of Florida backs up teachers who are tough graders. A study by David N. Figlio and Maurice E. Lucas published in the spring issue of *Education Next* looks at an interesting question: Are elementary students more likely to make real gains when assigned to a teacher who makes it harder to get an A than to squeeze blood out of a turnip?

The study concludes that, overall, tough grading policies benefit all students academically and high-ability

Overall, tough grading policies benefit all students academically.

students more so than low-ability students.

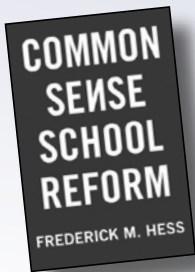
The impact, however, differed dramatically depending on the ability of the student and the average ability of the class as a whole.

High-ability students

did best with teachers with high grading standards when the overall class performance was low. Low-ability students, on the other hand, reacted better to tougher grading standards when the overall class performance was high.

While these findings contribute to an area of study for which the literature is surprisingly thin, the authors acknowledge that critical questions remain regarding how to best implement policies for raising grading standards across the board and how such a change would impact student achievement at all grade and ability levels. **EM**

Source—Teacher Quality Bulletin, a weekly publication of the National Council on Teacher Quality. For more information, visit [www.nctq.org](http://www.nctq.org).



## BOOK REVIEW

### Common Sense School Reform

**N**ever one to shy away from controversy, Fred Hess provides some very interesting ideas about how to best reform America's school system. He cuts through the "can't" sentiment and obfuscation characterizing the current school reform debate, and lacerates the conventional "status quo" reform efforts.

"*Common Sense School Reform* prescribes with unblinking realism what must happen for public education to give children the education they need instead of adults the employment they want. Hess details deftly how our public schools can succeed by embracing accountability, incentives, flexibility, and competition. This is a book no one concerned with American education should miss. Absent commonsense reforms, public education as we know it today is bound to disappear."

—Alan D. Bersin, Superintendent of Public Education, San Diego City Schools

Order a copy for thought-provoking summer reading! **EM**

Publisher—Palgrave Macmillan, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010; or order through Amazon.com.

## Educational Ownership - Roadmap to an "A"

(Continued from page 3)

If we want our students to take more educational ownership, then we must show them the way. As parents, teachers, and caring adults, we should model the character development traits and goal-setting principles we want to instill into our children. This means we become solution oriented rather than simply pointing to problems. We take positive action rather than simply making excuses or passing responsibility to others. Students should see adults who are honest, self-disciplined, using the goal-setting principles, communicating positively to each other, and helping others achieve their goals. An effective way to change young people's habits is to model the behavior we want them to follow.

As responsible adults, our legacy and our "life vests" for our children are programs promoting character education, goal setting, and educational ownership. **EM**

John Bishop is the Executive Director of *Accent on Success™* and author of the *Goal Setting for Students®* program.

For more information, please visit <http://www.AccentOnSuccess.com>.



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