

## Teacher Policy Follies: Ten Top Errors

By Chester Finn, Jr.



Chester Finn, Jr.

Every person in America wants every child in America to have a terrific teacher every year. That much we can assume. Why, then, is it so hard to craft sound policies yielding that universally sought result? Excellent

question. My answer is that we've made ten basic mistakes:

1. Out of deference to adult preferences rather than what's best for children, we've opted for quantity rather than quality, for hiring more teachers instead of demanding (and paying for) better ones. NEA data shows that, for every twenty additional students enrolled in American K-8 schools over the last ten years, we hired three more elementary school classroom teachers. Take a longer view and the numbers astound: Between 1955 and 2000, the number of K-12 teachers in the U.S. almost tripled while enrollments rose by half. Instead of paying a smaller number of people more money, we opted to pay lots more teachers a more-or-less constant wage. We surely could have found ways to place better educated and better compensated instructors in our classrooms if we hadn't set out to hire so many millions of them. Why did we do that?

There's a provocative economist's theory about changing labor markets, particularly for high-ability women (see, for example, Darius Lakdawalla's terrific piece in *Education Next*). But there's also a simpler explanation: Notwithstanding ambiguous evidence as to its efficacy, both teachers and parents tend to favor smaller classes. So classes keep shrinking—and that means hiring more teachers, able or no.

2. We use paper credentials as the gauge of who will be allowed to teach, rather than demanding evidence of subject-matter knowledge and/or the ability to handle a classroom. And we entrust control of entry to universities, many of which do no real screening for individual aptitude, energy, or knowledge, and almost all of which have an unquenchable self-interest in accepting large numbers of people into their teacher-credentialing programs. To be sure, any profession demands certain credentials, but they usually stand for some knowledge gained or skill acquired. In K-12 education, we count beans: tallying courses taken and hours spent in class, while exhibiting alarming indifference to ability or knowledge.

3. We sorely underestimate the importance of attracting intellectual talent into the profession, excusing this failure by saying there's more to teaching than being smart. That's true to a point, but that doesn't mean we oughtn't do our utmost to shape policies that draw exceptional people into the classroom, if only as short-termers. No other profession is as disdainful of academic performance—and what could be more ironic for a profession charged with educating people? Yet because ed schools and teacher prep programs are moneymakers for universities, we let them enroll students who would likely struggle with tougher courses. Is that really who we want teaching our kids?

4. In the name of fostering diversity in the teaching ranks, we avoid noticing the dire quality of many preparation programs that enroll lots of minority students. That oversight perpetuates a devastating cycle of underperformance and keeps the learning gap wide at the very time we should be directing at least as much energy to closing it for teachers as we're now doing for primary-secondary pupils.

5. Given higher education's stranglehold over teacher preparation these many decades, one might suppose that by now the preparation process would rest on a bounteous and sturdy research base. Wrong. Our understanding of the sources and attributes of teachers' classroom effectiveness sits upon a stunningly weak foundation, which, in turn, cripples efforts to improve teacher identification, preparation, and evaluation. Worse, where we have robust evidence as to what makes teachers effective (e.g. in beginning reading), our campuses often shun or deprecate it.

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 Instead of better salaries, we spend top dollar for generous benefits but often in dysfunctional ways.

6. We pay (and treat) teachers uniformly rather than distinguishing among them on the basis of (among other things) effectiveness, specialty, and work environment. And when we evaluate them at all, we base it on peer and supervisor impressions of their work rather than evidence of the value they add to children or the results they produce in class.
7. We don't do any quality control, except via paper credentials at the point of entry, and we make it extremely difficult to move (much less remove) bad teachers or reward good ones. We confer tenure on teachers prematurely and automatically, linking it to time on the job rather than effectiveness. Then we hold it inviolate.

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## Charter School Myths and Facts

Dear AAE,

Since the AAE has a reputation of publishing fair and objective reports on the charter school movement, I thought you would be interested in my critique of some of the latest reports that have been popping up in other educational circles.

Two recent events have caused charter schools to take some hits. By itself, that's ok. Public charter schools should be no more immune to criticism than anything else involving our public schools. But criticism is itself subject to critiquing and, in these cases, the critics comments invited, even mandated, responses.

One event was the issuance of a report by the American Federation of Teachers. Drawing upon data from the U.S. Department of Education, the AFT claimed charter school students do not do as well as students in traditional public schools. (Full disclosure: this writer spent several years as the Executive Director of the AFT's largest state-wide affiliate representing higher education faculty.)

One problem with this claim is that the data was based on very selective material, about 3 percent of the nation's charter schools. That is, less than 100 of 3,000 schools. Thus the data, and the AFT's conclusion based upon it, is certainly not definitive.

Another problem is that Harvard University economist Caroline Hoxby issued a study which found charter school students do outperform those in traditional public schools. The problem for the AFT is intensified because her study was based on findings from 99 percent of all charter schools.

Supportive of those who think the media is too liberal, or, in the case of schools, biased in favor of the establishment, is the fact that considerable attention was given to the AFT's claims, including major newspaper editorials. Hoxby's far more extensive study received much less coverage.

The second event was the closing of the 60-campus California Charter Academy (CCA), one of the nation's largest single charter school operations. This has reinforced suggestions that the charter school movement should face a moratorium if not abandonment. To be logically consistent, those making such claims should also say that when public schools fail anywhere there should be a moratorium or abandonment of the system everywhere.

More commonly, it is said charter schools are unregulated. Too often charter school advocates give this view credibility by default by letting it go unchallenged. The claim of no regulation simply isn't so.

That charter schools may be freed from many government regulations does not mean they are unregulated. By definition, they operate under a charter that dictates what they are to do. If they fail they face consequences ranging from criticism, as with CCA, to charter revocation and termination. It has been little noted that the great majority of CCA's students, who could have returned to the traditional public school system, have enrolled in other charter schools, demonstrating their preference for them.

Though fewer than 10 percent of charter schools have closed, the fact that it can happen is a strength of the movement. Even then, as with CCA, closings are usually due to financial and/or administrative reasons, not because of academic shortcomings.

It needs to be kept in mind that there were no charter schools a dozen years ago. Today there are more than 3,000. Since no one is required to attend one, they must be doing something right.

Traditional public schools have no charter, and, except for federal and state laws, no universally agreed upon procedures they must follow. So, however unsuccessful they may be, they do not face closure. With 3,000 charter schools and 87,000 public ones, guess which has more schools that *should* be closed.

—David W. Kirkpatrick  
Senior Education Fellow  
U.S. Freedom Foundation  
Washington, D.C.

## Letters To The Editor

### Are High Stakes Tests Necessary?

Dear AAE,

In your latest newsletter you had an article about a study that supposedly showed that "high-stakes tests" produced results very similar to those from nationally respected tests that have no consequences tied to the results.

If this is the case, why are we spending huge amounts of time and money having every state develop and implement high-stakes tests?

All I know, as a resources teacher, is that I lack the resources I truly need in my classroom, I am not seeing my salary keep up with the cost of living, and I am seeing more and more excellent teachers retire early due to pressure and inappropriate policies.

The study you cited is one more example in my mind of the ill-considered policies making classroom teaching increasingly difficult for the hard-working teachers on the front line.

Having taken time to write this, I'll now get back to correcting the pile of papers on my table here at home, which will take the rest of my Sunday "day off."

—Carol Fincham  
Mariposa, CA

### ADHD is Not a Myth

Dear AAE,

I was saddened to see the Letter to the Editor from Sharon Kientz (September edition) which opposed the use of medication for children and seemingly implied that ADHD is a myth. Based upon real life classroom situations, I cannot agree with her opinion. As a special education teacher, I witnessed several years ago a 6th grader who could not identify basic sight words or even beginning consonant sounds. After meeting with the parent and strongly suggesting a medical evaluation by a doctor, the child was placed on medication for ADHD. I did not make a diagnosis; I simply explained behaviors and requested help from a medical professional. Almost immediately after taking medication, this child was able to focus and assimilate basic phonics instruction. For the first time in his life, this pupil began to have success in a classroom environment. Over the previous 13 years, I can count on one hand the number of times that I have had a conversation stating that a parent should talk with a physician (because I am not qualified nor trained to discuss medical conditions). Medication does serve a purpose with a certain population of children, and ADHD is not a myth.

—Mark Lovvorn  
Chapel Hill, TN

### An Active Retiree!

Dear AAE,

I've been a member of the Association of American Educators for several years, and after some consideration, have recently extended my membership concurrent with my joining the ranks of the retired. I very much appreciate the alternative that AAE offers, and decided that I must continue my Association support in retirement.

Subsequent to receipt of my membership renewal notice, I got an AAE mailing containing the new brochure. Just reading the brochure affirmed my support of AAE. I gave those applications to two teachers at my "former" school (where I will continue working as a volunteer) who had previously expressed interest.

I thank you for being there as an advocate for children and for positive values.

—Harris W. Olson, Jr.  
Apple Valley, CA

# How “Optimistic Discontent” Moves Us to Endless Possibilities

By Pat Golding

*“The pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”*

—Winston Churchill

**O**ftentimes, we are so busy trying to keep up with the day-to-day challenges of our school that we don't take time to reflect. When I reflect on my path into the public charter school world,



Pat Golding with student

I realize how very difficult it is for me to put feelings to words. The charter movement reintroduced to public education the passion that possibilities bring, and the strong results that have accompanied these possibilities.

After being a part of the traditional public school system for 26 years, I joined the charter school world in 1994. I helped found Hickman Charter School (Hickman, CA) as a response to parents who were looking for high-quality options for their children. Hickman was also created as a response to teachers like me who recognized that the traditional system often did not meet the needs of all children. We realized that a system that forced us to spend so much time jumping through bureaucratic hoops rather than with our students was ultimately detrimental to the students we served. The charter school movement provided a mechanism whereby we no longer had to go solely to the stifling Education Code for permission to do what we as educators knew was in the best interest of our students.

In January 1995, the local newspaper featured our new school on the front page of the Sunday edition. We were the first charter school in our area and our “university” model, which blends study at home with on-site classes and on-line programs, drew a great deal of attention. Once the word was out, it became very evident how desperate parents were for options. Hickman has never since been the same.

It was challenging being the first charter school in our area. In fact, a friend and longtime public school colleague accused me of “giving up on the children of California” by going the charter school route. He has since apologized and is now teaching in a charter school himself. By watching the success of our students and the positive power of our staff, I believe he and others came to acknowledge that one size does not fit all and that better options are possible if we are brave enough to question and confident enough to act.

In the beginning there were few rules and little structure. We had to rely on good instincts and social conscience, while maintaining a constant focus on what was best for the student. There were critics who greatly resented our innovative use of public school funds. Thus, we held ourselves to an even higher standard, and made, and still make, our spending decisions based on the “blush test.” Are we using public funds in a way that will pass the test with taxpayers, legislators, and others in the broader public education community? Choice and freedom must go hand in hand with public responsibility.

Hickman's program began at the request of parents. I believe the strength of our continuing partnership has come about because the parents trust us to listen and respond to their needs. While good instincts are irreplaceable, I also now realize that we must constantly analyze and adjust to what students need to succeed, what parents want for their children, what staff needs to make it work, and what evidence we need to prove we are an ongoing vital option.

Charter law has given us the opportunity to create a school where each student's program can be tailor-made to fit his or her needs. As a result our students are excited about learning, and the one-on-one instruction helps them succeed at a level beyond what would be possible in a large group setting. Our API has improved steadily, and the flexible nature of our program allows students to excel in areas of their specific interests that go beyond just the standardized measures. For example, our team won first place in County Science Olympiad, eight students were selected for County Honor Band, several students received county and state awards in a writing contest, and our special education students achieve success far beyond our expectations. Our parents continue to be grateful for a public education system that makes such a choice possible.

Being on the cutting edge of reform, however, has more recently been a tough road to travel. We have faced additional challenges with SB 740 and other restrictive legislation, but we have worked hard to see the opportunities in these difficulties. We are finding the power of our voice and now, even more, understand the need to tell our stories to the broader public. It is our responsibility to show how our charter freedoms lead to improved student achievement.

Today is a new day. We have a governor who is supportive of charter schools. This year's favorable Legislative Analyst's Office report showed that charter schools are now not only proven but also a vital part of our public school system. The recent creation of the CDE's Charter School Division, led by respected charter school leader Marta Reyes, is helping us take this movement to a new level of public education reform. Today the legislature seems more willing to listen to our successes and not overreact when an occasional problem comes to light. And, we charter veterans are taking more time to mentor and monitor others who are joining this powerful movement.

A couple of years ago, who would have thought that we would see our governor, education secretary and state superintendent all standing side-by-side at a press conference with charter school supporters to embrace this movement as they did just this summer? Who would have believed that they all would be discussing how we can share what is working in charter schools with the broader public school system? Who would have dreamed that we would have so quickly achieved a rollback of some of the most punitive aspects of SB 740? Today, nonclassroom-based programs have a way to mitigate our facilities expenses in a manner that allows us to continue focusing our resources on our students. Again, the power of our voice!

We now have a united charter community that is committed to diversity in how education is delivered, with the goal of improving student achievement for all of California's school children. After the “Teacher Day” at this past Eleventh Annual California Charter Schools Conference, one of our teachers said, “I knew I was part of a great school, but I now realize I am also part of a greater movement.”

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There were critics who greatly resented our innovative use of public school funds.

*Continued on page 7, See... “Optimistic Discontent”*



## Louisiana Eyes Linking Pupil Results, Teacher Training

Louisiana could become the first state to hold its teacher preparation programs accountable for their graduates' ability to improve student achievement.

A recent pilot test there compared the gains in test scores made by children taught by educators who completed preservice training at three different universities.

Once further analyses with more data can be carried out, Louisiana officials plan to use the results in determining which preparation programs meet state approval and which are in need of restructuring.

Louisiana officials say they are able to make the link between student achievement and teacher preparation because the state has established an extensive system for tracking performance data. **EM**

Source—*Edweek.org*, a link to information on Louisiana's Value-Added Teacher Preparation Program Assessment Model, is on-line at [www.edweek.org/links](http://www.edweek.org/links).

## How Not to Appease Your Critics

A new National Board study authored by Leslie Vandervoort, Audrey Amrein-Beardsley, and David Berliner was released last month, claiming that Board-certified teachers produce higher student achievement gains than nonBoard-certified teachers. Unlike Dan Goldhaber's study last spring that found Board-certified teachers to be more effective, studies like this one do little to appease National Board critics. This study is unlikely to convince anyone of anything except that education research continues to suffer from embarrassingly low standards.

Where did this study go wrong? Apparently on day one, when the research team sent a letter out to the eighty Board-certified teachers residing in Arizona. These teachers were asked if they would participate in a study of the effectiveness of Board-certified teachers, which would require that they share their student achievement data. Thirty-five teachers signed up; forty-five

didn't. Onward went the study. Principles such as self-selection bias and random assignment didn't appear to bother the researchers, who produced a 116-page study that drips with the authors' resentment over the necessity of documenting the effectiveness of Board-certified teachers when that's not what doctors have to do.

Nevertheless, the study passed muster with Gene Glass's *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, earned itself some play in *Ed Week*, and will no doubt be a frequent cite among the "ever-increasing body of new and developing research studies" linking Board certification with student achievement. **EM**

Source—*Teacher Quality Bulletin*, a publication of National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ). Web-site: [www.nctq.org](http://www.nctq.org).

## Internal Logic Not a Teacher Union Strong Suit

Teacher union advocates are trumpeting the release of a new report by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) titled *How Does Teacher Pay Compare? Methodological Challenges and Answers*. The report's major findings include:

- \* Teachers earn significantly less than comparable workers, and this wage disadvantage has grown considerably over the last ten years.
- \* Increases to teachers' wages have fallen behind those of other college graduates and all workers since 1996.
- \* The superior fringe benefits of teachers do not offset the wage disadvantage.

The report is susceptible to the same criticisms of similar past studies of teacher wages. However, Mike Antonucci, of Education Intelligence Agency, approaches the report from a different angle, inspired by the fact that the EPI board of directors reads like a Who's Who of Big Labor—including former AFT President Sandra Feldman.

Instead of arguing about EPI's conclusions, Mike suggests taking them entirely at face value. He says, "Let's agree that teachers earn less than the comparable professionals EPI identifies: accountants, auditors, underwriters, architects, forestry scientists, registered nurses, physical therapists, archivists, clergy, editors and reporters, computer programmers, and a handful of others. Let's also agree that teachers' wages are not keeping pace with those of college-educated workers or those of all workers as a whole.

What does this tell us?

Well, EPI and the teacher unions hope it tells us to raise teacher salaries. However, if all those professions are comparable, they undeniably differ in one absolutely crucial

way: union membership.

The "average" public school teacher is a union member; that is, a substantial majority of public school teachers belong to NEA and/or AFT. A substantial majority of accountants belong to no union. A substantial majority of architects belong to no union. A substantial majority of computer programmers belong to no union. A substantial majority of college-educated workers belong to no union. A substantial majority of all workers (roughly 87 percent at last check) belong to no union.

What sense does it make for unions to tout a study that suggests teachers can earn more money by taking their comparable skill sets out of one of our nation's most heavily unionized professions into a non-union one—and just about any one at that?

What sense does it make for teacher unions—in an election year—to applaud a study that shows teachers' weekly wages improved by 5.7 percent in the first two years of the Bush administration, compared to 5 percent in the last two years of the Clinton administration?

Finally, what sense does it make for teacher unions to declare—whatever the justification might be—that they aren't getting the compensation job done for their members? **EM**

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

## New International Report

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's "Education at a Glance," which tracks 30 industrialized nations, the U.S.'s "lead" in education is rapidly eroding. For example, while the U.S. ranks first among adults ages 45-64 with a high school diploma, it falls to fifth among adults ages 35-44 and tenth among adults ages 25-34. Likewise, although the U.S. still has the top college graduation rate among adults ages 35-64, it slips to second—behind Norway—among adults ages 25-34, and America's college dropout rate is above the international average (six times higher than Japan's). Indeed, the average American adult now has 12.7 years of schooling, less than one year in front of the average international adult with 11.8 years. "In this dynamic global economy, it's extremely important that we measure ourselves against our friends and competitors," Secretary Paige said in response. "The 30 nations measured...account for about 80 percent of world trade. If we are less competitive educationally, we will soon become less competitive economically. It's just a fact." Some other key findings: internationally, the benefits of a college education (e.g.,

salary) far exceed the cost of the additional education; the U.S. spends more per student on all levels of education (\$10,871) than any nation; and the U.S. reports the highest number of teaching hours per year in elementary and high school and the second-highest number in middle school. For more information go to <http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2004/>. **EM**

## New Web-site to counter NEA-MoveOn.org with Facts about NCLB

U.S. House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Boehner unveiled a new web-site that he says will help, teachers, school administrators, members of Congress, and other education reform supporters counter an anticipated special-interest assault in October on *No Child Left Behind* education reforms. The address for the new webpage is <http://edworkforce.house.gov/nclb.htm>.

Boehner says, "Despite growing evidence that the *No Child Left Behind* law is working, a collection of liberal political organizations—including MoveOn.org (which posted ads on its website comparing President Bush to Adolf Hitler) and the NEA—is pouring massive resources into an anti-NCLB smear campaign."

Highlights of the new website include:

- **State-by-State Implementation Guide**—The new web-site includes a 50-state map with information on the progress being made in implementing NCLB in each state. Web-site users can click on any state to find a link to a U.S. Department of Education fact sheet providing some of the latest news about progress being made in boosting student achievement in each state.
- **No Child Left Behind Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)**—The web-site features a detailed guide created by the House Education and the Workforce Committee majority staff answering "frequently asked questions" about the law.
- **State-by-State Federal Funding Information**—States are receiving record levels of federal education funding as a result of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. The state-by-state federal funding guide shows how much money individual states are receiving overall, specifically for NCLB and for other federal education programs. **EM**

## Performance Pay Easier Said than Done

Maryland: *The Baltimore Sun* reports that schools termed "challenging" in the Anne

Arundel School District in Maryland—those that missed their targets on the Maryland School Assessment last year—will offer teachers incentives both to stay at their schools and to get their students to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets. Any teacher who completes the school year (which we thought was a contractual obligation, but then again we're probably too legalistic) will receive a bonus of \$1,500 with an additional \$1,500 bonus if the school manages to reach the fairly lofty state AYP targets.

While the bonus program may play well politically, the bonuses rewarding student achievement are most likely out of reach of struggling schools. Teachers who make heroic progress with their students will still be ineligible for the bonuses if the entire school fails to leap forward with gains that, in some cases, most testing experts would claim are outside the realm of possibility to expect in a year. If the district is truly serious about making gains, it might take a more patient approach and reward teachers for steady but significant growth over several years. Schoolwide awards may be fine as well but there ought to be some allowance for rewarding exceptional individual teachers. **EM**

Source—"Teacher Bonuses Tied to Dedication" by Liz F. Kay, *The Baltimore Sun*, September 13, 2004

## Court



## Watch

### Federal Appeals Court Rules That Public School Teacher May Participate in a Christian After-School Program for Elementary Students

**M**inneapolis, MN—The Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Barbara Wigg, a public school teacher in Sioux Falls, SD, may participate in a Christian after-school Good News Club for elementary students. This ruling is the first of its kind in the country.

Good News Clubs are sponsored by Child Evangelism Fellowship. These meetings are for elementary students

who attend with parental permission. Children who attend the club meetings sing Christian songs, read the Bible, memorize Scripture, and learn about morals and character development. The Sioux Falls School District policy allowed both religious and secular groups to use school facilities for after-school meetings. Mrs. Wigg, who teaches at Anderson Elementary School, has participated in many after-school secular meetings, including Girl Scouts. Mrs. Wigg has been recognized as an outstanding teacher for many years. However, the district prohibited her from participating in the Good News Club. The district argued that allowing a public school teacher to participate in a religious club and teach Christian viewpoints to elementary students after school would violate the Establishment Clause.

Liberty Counsel filed suit on behalf of Mrs. Wigg. On July 3, 2003, a Sioux Falls lower federal court ruled that the district could not ban teachers like Mrs. Wigg from participating in the Club at a school other than where she teaches during the day, but the district could prohibit such participation in the school where

she teaches during the day. The lower court reasoned that students and parents who know Mrs. Wigg would not understand that she changed hats from being a teacher to a private citizen, and thus might conclude that the school endorsed religion. However, the Court of Appeals disagreed, and ruled that Mrs. Wigg has the right to teach and participate in the Good News Club immediately after school on the same campus where she teaches during the day, as well as on any other campus in the district.

The Court of Appeals ruled that the district's policy banning teachers from participating in religious club meetings designed for elementary students immediately after school is "viewpoint discriminatory and, thus, per se unconstitutional." The Court ruled that Mrs. Wigg's "participation in the after-school Club constitutes private speech ... [and that her] private speech does not put the [district] at risk of violating the Establishment Clause." **EM**

For more information contact Mathew D. Staver, Esq., Liberty Counsel, P.O. Box 540774, Orlando, FL 32854, 800-671-1776.

# The Teachability Index: Can Disadvantaged Students Learn?

By Jay P. Greene, Ph.D. and Greg Forster, Ph.D.

**S**tudent “teachability”—the personal advantages and disadvantages that students bring to school with them—plays an important role in public discussion of education policy. Huge increases in resources are producing little improvements in student achievement: inflation-adjusted spending per pupil has doubled in the last thirty years while academic outcomes are flat. Defenders of the status quo claim the reason is that students are less teachable than they used to be; problems like poverty and social dysfunction have made the schools’ job harder. They also claim that systematic reforms like school choice and accountability testing won’t help because students with low teachability levels can’t be expected to learn better even with reforms unless the disadvantages that students bring to school are also addressed.

These claims are rarely subjected to serious scrutiny. Our study, the first of its kind, systematically measures the teachability of students by examining sixteen social factors that researchers agree affect student teachability. Combining these factors into a single Teachability Index provides the first-ever valid measurement of whether schools are facing a student population with greater challenges to learning.

The Teachability Index shows that students today are actually somewhat easier to teach than they were thirty years ago. Overall, student disadvantages that pose challenges to learning have declined 8.7 percent since 1970. Children’s physical health and economic security have substantially improved, and preschool enrollment has grown dramatically. While other factors have presented increased challenges—broken homes and students whose native language isn’t English are more common—these changes have been more than offset by ongoing improvements in children’s well-being. This means that student teachability cannot be a valid excuse for the failure of vastly increased spending to produce better results.

The states with the highest scores on the Teachability Index were North Dakota, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and South Dakota. These states had student populations with the lowest levels of disadvantages that present obstacles to learning, as well as the highest levels of advantages. The states with the lowest scores on the Teachability Index were Louisiana, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and the District of Columbia.

We also compare the teachability levels of students in each state with their academic outcomes. The School Performance Index gives the level of student achievement in each state expressed as a percentage of the level that would be predicted by the teachability of its students. We find that some states with low student teachability perform much better than their students’ problems would lead us to expect, while other states do not rise to this challenge. This indicates that what schools do still matters even when students are facing obstacles to learning.

In particular, states with more school choice or stronger accountability testing demonstrate better school performance. Our statistical analyses find significant relationships between both of these reforms and the School Performance Index, meaning that these reforms produce higher levels of student achievement relative to student teachability.

The states with the highest scores on the School Performance Index were Montana, Colorado, Kansas, Texas, and North Carolina. Students in these states had the highest levels of academic achievement relative to their teachability—that is, these states had actual achievement levels that were the furthest above the levels we would expect to see, given the disadvantages that students faced. The states with the lowest scores on the School Performance Index were California, Alabama, Mississippi, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia.

Finally, we calculate a School Efficiency Index to determine which states are getting the best results for their education dollars. This index gives the level of student achievement in each state expressed as a percentage of the level that would be predicted by the teachability of its students and its level of education spending. We find that some states get substantially more education for each dollar they spend.

The states with the highest scores on the School Efficiency Index were Utah, Idaho, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arkansas. Students in these states had the highest levels of academic performance relative to their teachability and the states’ education spending—that is, these states had actual achievement levels that were the furthest above

the levels we would expect to see, based on their students’ teachability and their spending. The states with the lowest scores on the School Efficiency Index were Alaska, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
“This study... provides evidence that student disadvantages are not destiny: some schools do much better than others at educating students with low levels of teachability.”

This study indicates that teachability cannot serve as an excuse for the education system’s failure to perform at higher standards, and it provides evidence that student disadvantages are not destiny: some schools do much better than others at educating students with low levels of teachability. **EM**

**Jay P. Greene** is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute’s Education Research Office, where he conducts research and writes about education policy. He has also recently published research on high school graduation rates, charter schools, and special education. His research has been cited in U.S. Supreme Court opinions.

**Greg Forster** is a senior research associate at the Manhattan Institute’s Education Research Office. He has also published op-ed articles in the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and other newspapers. He received a Ph.D. with Distinction in political science from Yale University.

For a copy of the full report go to [www.manhattan-institute.org](http://www.manhattan-institute.org).

★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
Defenders of the status quo claim... that students are less teachable than they used to be.

## ACT Scores Up

**F**or the first time since 1997, the national average score for the ACT exam increased, from 20.8 (on a scale of 1 through 36), the average each of the past two years, to 20.9, a statistically significant gain. English, math, reading, and science scores also rose one-tenth of a point over last year.

At the same time, the scores indicate that an alarming number of graduates are not ready for college math and science courses. In fact, only 26 percent earned a score of 24 or higher on the science test, while just four in ten earned a score of 22 or higher on the math test. This data is unchanged from 2003. For more information go to <http://www.act.org/news/releases/2004/8-18-04.html>. **EM**

# Teaching Reading Tips from Two Special Teachers

**A**nn Edwards is a first-grade teacher at Litel Elementary School in Chino, California. She has had twenty-four years of experience teaching everything from kindergarten through ninth grade, and says while her mission in life is teaching, her passion in life is teaching reading.

Ann was chosen as this year's National Right to Read Foundation's Teacher of the Year, and she uses Phonics Pathways and Pyramid in her classroom.

Ann begins teaching her students to sound out the letters right away. She also teaches them penmanship using graph paper—they see, say, hear, and write each letter in their "Little Book of Dictation."

She meets with the parents at the beginning of the school year to explain what she is doing and to tell them what she expects of them as well. Every child gets a packet of homework to take home, which has the same pages from Phonics Pathways that she is using in class. Parents reinforce what Ann is doing, and record what they have done in their child's homework log sheet.

Ann tests the students four or five times a year with the Slossen Oral Reading test, and she keeps a running record of the results. Most of her first graders are reading well into second or third grade by the end of the year.

**P**am Barrett is a first-grade elementary school teacher at Tovashal School in Murrietta, California, and received the National Right to Read Foundation's Teacher of the Year award in 1998. As with Ann, Pam uses Phonics Pathways and Pyramid in her classroom.

In 1998, after using Phonics Pathways for only four months, Pam put on a Literature Evening for Parents. Her students poured hot chocolate for them and piped in classical music. Then all of her eager little first-graders went up on stage and read selections from William Bennett's *Book of Virtues* to the astonishment and delight of everyone in the audience.

Then it was Pam's turn to be astonished—she was presented with the National Right to Read Foundation's Teacher of the Year award. It was a surprise to her, and was followed by many testimonials from those who know, love, and respect her for all she has accomplished and her great love for children.

Soon, all kindergarten and first-grade teachers at Tovashal School decided to use Phonics Pathways. This school's kindergar-



teners are all reading three-letter words, and a few of them have actually finished the entire book.

At the beginning of the year Pam has her students sit on a rug with the first page in Phonics Pathways, and they learn that letter. She writes it on the chalkboard and shows the page on an overhead as well. She sends the page home with the students so parents can reinforce that day's classwork. Parents must sign off that the work was done.

She hands out tickets for things well done: trying hard, improvement, being on time, reading first sentence, etc. At some predetermined time tickets are traded for prizes, frequently donated by local merchants: food, crayons, pencils, drinks, bowling, etc.

After students know the short-vowel sounds, they peel off and begin working in small groups. They frequently practice round robin reading, and Pam likes to use Collections for Young Scholars for the kindergarteners once they are reading. (She uses SRA Open Court Anthology 2002 for her first graders.) She pairs good readers with mediocre ones.

Pam feels nonsense words are a great aid to reading accuracy and blending automaticity. Her students practice with nonsense words on a regular basis, sometimes having relay races. Another game is to see how many words they can read in thirty seconds.

Pam uses a portable microphone to great advantage—students turn to the same page in Phonics Pathways, and she takes turns handing the microphone to students randomly, saying "You're on the air!" As they read the passage out loud, the others must follow with their fingers on the page. Great fun for all!

But aren't there some students who just "don't get it," and need extra help?

Yes, of course. And here's what Pam does: She has formed the TLC Club—Tovashal Literacy Club—for all students needing help with reading. Pam meets these students at

school a half hour early three days a week, along with older students from the school and parents from the community who volunteer to help tutor reading.

These students are not only reading by the end of the year, but some of them also finish Phonics Pathways. Every student in the TLC Club who completes Phonics Pathways gets a huge six-hour lollipop.

There is a sign in front of Tovashal Elementary School: "School impacted, not accepting any transfers at this time." Small wonder it's impacted with results such as those! **EM**

*For more information about Phonics Pathways and Pyramid, contact Dolores G. Hiskes, President of Dorbooks, Inc., at [www.dorbooks.com](http://www.dorbooks.com) or call 925-449-6983.*

## "Optimistic Discontent"

*(Continued from page 3)*

It is time for us to broaden our base of leadership and encourage our teachers to help us take the next steps. Who better knows the needs of our students, the power of sharing success and brainstorming needs, than our teachers?

There is such truth in the statement "License to Dream." Charter status gives us that license. Choice is the cornerstone of democracy and we need to continue to boldly exercise it. We must give ourselves permission to ask not what has been done but what can be done. A member of our staff recently shared a song by Carolyn Arends that asks, "Does my optimism offend your sense of realism?" My answer is, "I hope so!" I hope all of us continue to have **optimistic discontent**: never settling but always seeking a better way to serve our students.

Where do we go from here? We go forward with determination and energy. We support each other and value the diversity of choice. We dream, we question, we listen, we speak. We celebrate our optimism and we use our voice. Above all, we care about the children of California. **EM**

*Pat Golding is the founder and director of Hickman Charter School, a model nonclassroom-based charter school and one of three schools in the Hickman Community Charter District, located in Hickman. Visit Hickman Charter School at [www.hickman.k12.ca.us](http://www.hickman.k12.ca.us)*

# The Importance of Arts Education

The arts are essential to every child's education, which is why the arts are one of the core academic subjects in the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). Some schools, facing tight local budgets, are cutting arts programs and blaming the cuts on NCLB. In a letter to state and local superintendents, Secretary of Education Rod Paige said that cutting arts is "disturbing and just plain wrong."

Similar to English, math, science and the other core subjects, the arts (dance, music, theater, and visual arts) are challenging subjects with rigorous content and achievement standards at the state and national levels. They require highly qualified teachers who challenge all students, not just those who are considered artistically talented, to *perform* works of art, *create* their own works, and *respond* to works of art and the ideas they impart.

In addition to studying the arts for their own sake, experiencing and making works of art benefit students in their intellectual, personal, and social development, and can be particularly beneficial for students from economically disadvantaged circumstances and those who are at risk of not succeeding in school. Research studies point to strong relationships between learning in the arts and fundamental cognitive skills and capacities used to master other core subjects, including reading, writing, and mathematics.

The AAE urges schools facing budget cuts to look first at the superfluous layers of administrative bureaucracy before even thinking about cutting arts programs!

## Tools for Teachers:

**The Arts Education Partnership** (AEP) is a national coalition of arts, education, business, philanthropic, and



government organizations that demonstrates and promotes the essential role of the arts in the learning and development of every child and in the improvement of America's schools. With support from the

Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts, AEP maintains a comprehensive web-site ([www.aep-arts.org](http://www.aep-arts.org)) of its reports, including:

**Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development**, which is a research compendium that reviews sixty-two studies of arts learning in dance, drama, music, multiple arts, and visual arts. Interpretive essays examine the implications of the body of studies in each of these areas, and an overview essay explores the issue of the transfer of learning in the arts to other academic and social skills. A *Critical Links Tool Kit* is available at [www.aep-arts.org/CLtoolkitpage.htm](http://www.aep-arts.org/CLtoolkitpage.htm).\*

**No Subject Left Behind: A Guide to Arts Education Opportunities in the 2001 NCLB Act**, which is a guide for state and local arts and education leaders to learn more about the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* and the multiple opportunities for arts education. It provides a brief overview of the legislation, including where to find specific references to the arts, descriptions of individual programs with arts-specific examples that have received funding, and links to web-sites for additional information. *No Subject Left Behind* is available at [www.aep-arts.org/Funding.html](http://www.aep-arts.org/Funding.html).\*

The AEP web-site also provides linkages to its more-than-100-member organizations and state- and local-level arts education partnerships, and offers a free electronic newsletter and listserv. **EM**

## Teacher Policy Follies

(Continued from page 1)

8. We treat teaching's "short-termers" as system failures rather than human assets. Public education's personnel norms still assume that a person should spend his/her entire career in the classroom, notwithstanding evidence that today's young people in every field are career hoppers. In other words, a system designed for the "lifers" of our parents' generation has not been updated. (Hence we also have no proper career path for long-termers except out of the classroom and into administration.)
9. We don't make key teacher hiring, assignment, and retention decisions where they should be made—at the building level—even though that's where critical judgments can be made about a person's suitability for teaching specific content to particular children. Nearly everything about a teacher that's important and that cannot be gauged through objective means is best gauged by that teacher's future colleagues and immediate superiors. Yet we deploy teachers to schools via downtown personnel offices that are constrained by union contracts, seniority, tenure, and state credentialing. Worse, school principals who ought to demand full personnel authority often decline to do so, seemingly preferring the impersonal safety of having someone else make these decisions.
10. Instead of better salaries, we spend top dollar for generous benefits but often in dysfunctional ways, such as not letting teacher pensions be portable. Rather than paying teachers better and letting them control their own benefits and shape their own pensions, we allocate huge percentages of school budgets for old-fashioned retirement systems that relatively few teachers ever benefit from.

Are these errors fixable? I don't know. But I'm sure that the starting place is to recognize mistakes we're making now—and have made for so long that we take them for granted rather than as problems searching for solutions. **EM**

*Chester E. Finn, Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C., and a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education.*



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