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## FROM THE PRESIDENT

This is the full version of the *SQE Forum* to read on your monitor. To download the print-friendly version, click [here](#)

Highlights in this month's newsletter include a list of **resources for teaching children to spell**, **campus squirrel listings**, the lowdown on how and why **certain Ontario students are being neglected**, and a review of a book that shows why **gifted students should be accelerated**.

If you know someone who would enjoy reading our newsletter, please forward it to him or her. If there is a topic you would like me to address in a future newsletter, please click [here](#). Best regards, Malkin

## YOUR VOTE IS IMPORTANT TO US

Last month, we asked whether you thought Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" should be shown in classrooms. The results are as follows: 59% thought the film should be shown; 32% thought it should not be shown; and 9% weren't sure. Several people responded that it all depended on the age of the students and how the film was presented to them. As promised, we put the names of those who posted a comment into a hat and pulled out the name of Solette Gelberg. Congratulations, Solette – enjoy your spree at Chapters!

This month, we want to learn about your use of our reading program, Stairway to Reading. We would be particularly interested in particulars about the children involved – their ages, their progress, and so forth. Please help us by clicking on [vote](#). We will print some of your comments in the next newsletter.

## SQE ACTIVITIES

- SQE is currently planning a visit to Toronto from Dr. Howard Fuller, a former school superintendent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Milwaukee introduced the first school choice program in North America. Now almost 15 years old, school choice has revolutionized education in Milwaukee. Dr. Fuller is a riveting speaker: click [here](#) for an example of his speaking style. Further details will be supplied in the next newsletter.

## EVERYONE CAN BE A GOOD SPELLER

### *Sites/Articles of note*

[www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american\\_educator/issues/winter05-06/Moats.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/winter05-06/Moats.pdf)

Dr. Louisa Moats: "How Spelling Supports Reading (and why it is more regular and predictable than you may think)" is an excellent, very current article with something for everyone, from a leader in the field.

[www.resourceroom.net/readspell/index.asp](http://www.resourceroom.net/readspell/index.asp)

This is a useful site with articles, activities and resources for parents, tutors and teachers. It uses a structured phonics approach aimed mainly at students from Grade 3 and up.

### *Resources*

[www.soundfoundationsbooks.co.uk/](http://www.soundfoundationsbooks.co.uk/)

A mastery-based approach to spelling, successful with even the most challenged learners, and with simple instructions easy for parents to implement at home (takes about 15 minutes daily). Fast-paced and interactive. Program developers, Tom and Hilary Burkard, are experienced tutors and instructional designers. Tom became committed to developing good instructional materials after seeing what a difference it made to his own son who was struggling in school until systematic phonics turned him into a superior reader in a matter of months.

[www.spelling.org](http://www.spelling.org)

Don McCabe's site targets older learners (Grade 4 and up) with deficits in reading and written language. There are a number of helpful materials and booklets here, some of which are free and others are very inexpensive. Don will also problem-solve on the phone or via email correspondence. Your best bet is to start on this page: <http://spelling.org/homeschooling.htm>

[www.spellzone.com](http://www.spellzone.com)

An inexpensive, self-paced online instructional program in basic English spelling for the secondary, adult or ESL student. Try the first few units for free.

[www.candocubes.com/synthetic-phonics-products.php](http://www.candocubes.com/synthetic-phonics-products.php)

Sets of tactile, hardwood cubes, each cube being laser engraved with six letters, or combination of letters, representing different sounds of speech. Sets include a DVD for pronunciation guidance, word charts and an instruction book. Very high quality.

<http://edhelper.com/spelling.htm>

Subscription site for teachers – worth the fee, many useful and customizable resources

[www.geocities.com/learningcenters2003/words.html](http://www.geocities.com/learningcenters2003/words.html)

Lots of suggestions for spelling activities (note that these do not replace instruction but may make extra practice more fun for the student)

## ***Free Online Activities and Downloadables***

[www.literative.com](http://www.literative.com)

You need to register for this site, but it is free. There are a variety of pre-reading and early literacy skill stories and activities, many of which support beginning spelling skills. Children especially love the "Snakes and Ladders" game that can be played either solo or with 2 players and requires them to spell simple consonant-vowel-consonant words (bed, rug, etc.)

[www.funbrain.com/spell/index.html](http://www.funbrain.com/spell/index.html)

[www.funbrain.com/spellroo/index.html](http://www.funbrain.com/spellroo/index.html)

[www.manythings.org/cts](http://www.manythings.org/cts)

Spelling games for children. A variety of levels.

[www.carlscorner.us](http://www.carlscorner.us)

A wealth of resources for teachers, for reading, writing and spelling. K-4.

[www.eduplace.com/kids/hmsv/smg](http://www.eduplace.com/kids/hmsv/smg)

Spelling Match – online game for Grades 1-8

## **MAIL BAG**

*Our readers' comments are always interesting and insightful. Here is some of the feedback we've received on departmental examinations, well-paid bureaucrats, school board monopolies, special education, and much more.*

### ***Comments on "An Inconvenient Truth" in Classrooms***

- No film should be shown unless it is appropriate for the age/grade level. Students must have the skills and knowledge to find a film's strengths and weaknesses. Films in classrooms should almost never be shown in their entirety, as they are teaching tools, not entertainment. It should never be just a question of what to show, but rather how to use it. *Toronto, ON*
- This film should not be shown unless other views are being presented at the same time for discussion. It's a lovely movie, but there is too much of a fear factor attached. *Lucan, ON*
- I personally loved this film and have encouraged many others to view it. Although the content could be upsetting to some young students, it is necessary that they know the truth. *Shelburne, ON*
- This movie was fascinating and informative. That being said, I would suggest that one of the Canadian documentaries (maybe hosted by David Suzuki) would be better for Canadian classrooms.
- I don't believe that any film, video, or book containing a strong political message and many factual errors and contested facts should be shown in a school except in a context where opposing ideas and commentary are given reasonable prominence. *Port Hope, ON*

- Elementary schoolchildren have been exposed to much moralizing and politics. Environmental issues contain both. High-school students are in a better position to think about the messages, check their validity, and take action. *Mississauga, ON*
- Twenty years from now, Gore's film will be discussed in honest film studies courses as the piece of propaganda that it is, and people will be shocked at how its shoddy research and alarmism were propagated in public schools to young children. *Toronto, ON*
- I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in August 1965 when it had a thin snow cap as shown in Gore's film. The snow cap varies with the time of year. Gore is not a scientist and probably merits the trust accorded to politicians – and folks like Bertrand Russell. *Toronto, ON*
- My son first saw the movie in a university geology class. The professor explained the problems with the “science” during the presentation. The earliest it should be shown is in high school, as long as debate is involved. *Crysler, ON*
- I agree that a Canadian documentary, perhaps hosted by David Suzuki, would be better for Canadian classrooms. *Sunderland, ON*
- Al Gore's film has little basis in fact or science and might be shown in a high school media class as an example of modern propaganda. Valid scientific information should be the basis for teaching students about protection of our environment. *King City, ON*

### ***Ontario's Discriminatory School Funding***

There are several ways in which the Ontario government could reduce the inequities associated with its current policy of funding Catholic schools but those of no other faith. One way, as you have noted, would be to follow the lead of Alberta and introduce fully-funded alternative schools *within* the public system. Another would be to follow the lead of the five Canadian provinces that provide some funding to private religious schools. Saskatchewan, for example, has fully funded its private religious high schools since 2001, and the Regina public board gives some support to two religious schools, one Muslim and one Christian. Ontario's Liberal government is surely capable of framing its own and improved policy of public funding for private schools. To do so would indicate not only its commitment to principles of fairness but also its determination to stare down the predictable and erroneous humbug about the detrimental effects of public funding for independent schools. *Regina, SK*

### ***High School Victory Laps in Ontario***

In Ontario, decade after decade and study after study saw repeated recommendations that the province abolish grade 13. Finally, after a failed attempt in the 80's, in 1999 Ontario finally moved to a four-year secondary school program. At least in theory. For whatever reason, many Ontario stu-

dents are still taking five years to complete high school. In the Avon Maitland School Board, for example, last year more than half of its high school students returned for a fifth year. The board's director has reassured local parents that the board will not prevent students from returning for a victory lap, and there has been no indication from the ministry that the board would incur financial penalties for continuing the practice. This phenomenon begs the question as to why Ontario students are the only students in North America who can't manage without an extra year of high school.  
*Goderich, ON*

### ***After-schooling Andrew***

Without SQE, it would have taken me a long time to understand that my son had a weak teacher in grade 1, and in any case I probably wouldn't have had the courage to act on this knowledge. Although Andrew was already a pretty good reader, thanks to his Montessori kindergarten, he still needed to work on the more advanced letter-sound correspondences and solidify his spelling. We used your Stairway to Reading program, with very good results – by the end of the year he was reading one or two chapter books (150 pages each) per week, and his spelling was almost flawless. Now he reads four or five chapter books a week and is a very informed eight-year-old. The funny thing is that people tell me how lucky I am to have such a smart boy. It's not easy being a parent in Ontario – I feel I constantly have to swim against the current and be regarded with suspicion by a lot of parents when they find out we are sending Andrew to a private school. We are not rich. We are first-generation immigrants who were allowed to come to Canada and then found good jobs – because we had a good education! *Toronto, ON*

### ***Special Education in Ontario***

The [Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat](#) is a branch of the Ministry of Education you should know about. The Secretariat's mission is "to help boost student achievement". Any good mission has a goal, or two. [The primary goal of the Secretariat](#) is to have "75% of 12-year-olds ... reach the provincial standard on reading, writing and math tests by 2008". The tests, of course, are those administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Goals are rarely met without a strategy. The Secretariat's strategy for the 75% goal is outlined in [Inspire, The Journal of Literacy and Numeracy for Ontario](#). EQAO assessments are represented to measure to tenths of a Level. Students performing at Level 2.7 through Level 2.9 are described as being at the "margin of success". This performance segment is a mother-lode of potential Level 3s (the provincial standard), and is to be targeted. If each of these students made the marginal shift to level 3 or higher, and we retained our current group of students at Levels 3 and 4 in Grade 6 Reading, we would have reached our provincial

target of 75 per cent for Grade 6 reading! You might readily imagine which students in a Grade 6 classroom have their teachers' special attention, and which teachers might have their principals' special attention, and which principals might have their superintendents' special attention, and so on. Clearly, the heat is on. Teachers, principals and superintendents are not un-armed in tackling this segment of grade 6 students, those on the "margin of success". The Secretariat has provided or coordinated an immense amount of [professional development](#) since its formation in 2004. The success of this investment in strategy will manifest itself in the 2008 EQAO assessment results, or not. I predict the annual public romp in the data will be more heated and sustained than usual. Here's to accountability! *Belleville, ON*

### ***Wasted University Money***

In the eight years from 1997-98 to 2005-06, the operating expenditures for the University of Manitoba increased from \$216,809,900 to \$323,820,200, an increase of 49 per cent, while the consumer price index increased by 20 per cent. Over the same period, the total number of degrees awarded increased by only 20 per cent, from 6476 to 4702 degrees. As a curmudgeon with over 30 years of experience teaching in universities, I find it obvious that the increased funding has not been entirely directed into educating more students. Where has the money gone? Good question. Another curmudgeon, Thomas Sowell, answers this question in the following words: "It is the amount of money that colleges and universities can get – from tuition, endowment income, donations, etc. – which determines how much their spending or costs will go up, not the other way around." *Winnipeg, MB*

### **WEB-SITE OF THE MONTH**

This month, we feature Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), the province's testing body. On its [home page](#) are links to several years' actual tests (grade 3, grade 6, grade 9 math, and grade 10 literacy) and in some cases examples of student work at the various marking levels. The site also includes the results of [several national and international assessments](#) since 2000.

### **ASK AUNT MALKIN**

*A veteran of the school wars herself, with the scars to prove it, Malkin Dare has all kinds of advice to offer. If you would like some been-there-done-that advice from Aunt Malkin, call her at 519-884-3166 or [e-mail](#) her. This month, Aunt Malkin answers George's question on the importance of Standard English.*

## QUESTION

**I'm seeing a deterioration of language skill in the workplace and in everyday communication. But how big a problem is this really? Are we just being snobs and old fuddy-duddies by complaining?**

**Signed, George**

## ANSWER

If the deterioration of language skill George is complaining about involves superficial things like the tendency to use neologisms or to turn nouns into verbs or to split infinitives, then George *is* being an old fuddy-duddy. We all need to realize that language evolves and there will inevitably be intergenerational differences. The older generation just has to go with the flow.

On the other hand, correct and precise language is never out of date. If George is talking about deterioration in vocabulary, spelling and grammar, then he is right to be concerned. Many people think that the outward form of communication doesn't really matter as long as it gets the message across. However, there are three good reasons to insist on communication that follows standard rules.

**First, non-standard language slows down the communication process and invites misunderstandings.** It's already hard enough to say exactly what you mean using Standard English, especially in writing where you can't reinforce your message with intonation and gestures. The crossing of wires resulting from informal e-mail messages is a well-known example of this phenomenon. The more precise and unambiguous your language is, the more likely it will be correctly interpreted.

**Second, deviations from Standard English may be poorly received by your audience.** For example, many employers begin the process of sorting out job applications by discarding those with spelling and grammar errors. A prospective son-in-law is unlikely to impress his intended's parents if he expresses himself poorly. Businesses run the risk of alienating some potential customers if they make mistakes in their communications. As Marshall McLuhan famously said, the medium is the message.

**Third, sloppy language is incompatible with overall excellence.** According to the broken windows theory, small problems such as broken windows show that no one cares very much and so it is safe to break more windows or even break into a building with broken windows. Similarly, if a company tolerates broken language, it shows that no one cares very much and so it is safe to let other things slide. A company that insists on excellent communications sends an important message to its employees and to its customers about its overall high standards.

I hope I have made myself clear.

## **FEATURE ARTICLES**

### **Put OUR Money where Your Mouth Is**

**By Charles Cirtwell**

*(This article was written in response to a local controversy. The main point of the article is to challenge the public school monopoly, which claims to be offering a good service, to forgo its monopoly and prove its worth in a competitive environment where if it fails, the students get to go elsewhere.)*

HURRAY for Dawn Henwood! Not only has she made the sacrifices necessary to ensure her children get the best education, she isn't afraid to talk about them publicly. Too many people take the step of moving their children into private schools and then forget about their old schools, doing exactly what they are accused of: turning their backs on those they leave behind.

Hurray for the proponents of public-sector schools! They swiftly and fiercely came to the defence of their schools. Their assertion that high-quality education is to be found in individual classrooms throughout their system is unassailable. Hard-working, well-trained, effective teachers can be found in just about any school in our province.

Regrettably, just about everything else they had to say was dead wrong. It is incorrect to suggest that international assessments consistently show Nova Scotia public-sector schools as delivering the best results in the world. Such a conclusion is only possible if you ignore all, or almost all, of the other Canadian provinces and every sub-national region in every other country around the globe.

As for their statements about private schools, the level of error leads me to suspect that none of them has ever darkened the door of one of Nova Scotia's 40 private institutions. They certainly do not demonstrate any familiarity with the huge body of research into private schools. Nor do their assertions reflect the attitudes of the 4,000 children and their parents who opted out of public-sector education in this province last year (a number that has grown 55 per cent in the last 10 years and shows no signs of slowing down).

As a general rule, private schools spend less per student than public-sector schools. Most research demonstrates that their population mix is either as heterogeneous as, or in fact even more representative of what is traditionally considered "at risk" kids, than public-sector schools are. Private schools CAN ensure a level of consistency in teacher and teaching quality that is simply not possible in the rules-entrapped public-sector education system; in fact, this is one of their primary selling points for parents and staff alike.

Furthermore, there is no evidence of which I am aware supporting the assertion that teachers in private schools have lower qualifications on

average than their public-sector counterparts. More to the point, even if there were such evidence, it would be irrelevant because the research has clearly demonstrated no direct connection between the effectiveness of a teacher and his or her level of professional qualifications. Similarly, the suggestion that public-sector schools offer a richer, more diverse extracurricular program is totally inconsistent with the evidence I have seen in my 33 years as a student, parent and researcher; if anything, the evidence would support the reverse assertion and place private schools at the pinnacle of extracurricular options.

That said, if the defenders of public-sector schools are so confident in their product and its demonstrable value to all students, I say, "Put our money where your mouth is." The only region of Canada that has no form of publicly-funded choice is Atlantic Canada. If our public-sector schools can indeed educate every child in every circumstance, then they should have no problem with the concept of forgoing their monopoly and simply proving their worth in an environment where if they fail, the students get to go elsewhere.

I am not even advocating for a level playing field; let's copy the biased models that are in effect elsewhere. That would mean fully-funded choice among every public-sector school, partially-funded choice if you move to a charter school (really a public-sector school with just a little more independence), and an even lower percentage if you move to a purely-private school.

As to the likely concern that only the "rich" would be able to take advantage of this program, let's make it income contingent in the first instance, and target it at only families making less than some arbitrary figure that a faceless bureaucrat considers "poor." Better still, let's encourage the "rich" to put together pools of capital to support the "poor" through transportation and tuition scholarships by making contributions to such scholarship funds tax-deductible.

Surely the "poor" who, according to the passionate and articulate defenders of our public-sector schools, are well served right now, will not leave in droves and we can end this debate once and for all. But at least, if they do leave, the public will be getting what it pays for – high quality education that supports every Nova Scotian child to achieve to their maximum potential in an environment that is safe, healthy and supportive of their particular special needs and skills.

After all, to paraphrase that wonderful bank ad, "it is OUR money." (*Charles Cirtwill is the acting president of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, a non-partisan public policy think tank based in Halifax. As the father of four, he has been a parent in both the public and private school systems in this province. Reprinted with permission from the Chronicle-Herald, June 19, 2007*)

## **You Will Be Tested on This**

**Researchers are dusting off an old insight: To maximize classroom learning, quiz early and often**

**By David Glenn**

In the late 1930s, an ambitious graduate student named Herbert F. Spitzer asked thousands of Iowa sixth graders to read a short article about bamboo - an article he later described as "highly factual, authentic, of the proper difficulty, and similar in type to the material that children read in their regular school work."

He divided the students into 10 groups and gave them long multiple-choice quizzes ("What usually happens to a bamboo plant after the flowering period?") at varying intervals. One group, for example, was quizzed immediately after reading the article, then again the next day, and then a final time three weeks later. Another group was quizzed only once, three weeks after reading the article. The students did not know when they would be quizzed, and they did not keep the article, so they had no chance to study on their own.

The results were striking: On tests three or nine weeks later, students performed far better if they had previously been quizzed within 24 hours after first reading the article. When Mr. Spitzer wrote up his work in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* in 1939, he made a recommendation that might have made millions of students - and their teachers - groan: "Immediate recall in the form of a test is an effective method of aiding the retention of learning and should, therefore, be employed more frequently in the elementary school."

Suggestions like Mr. Spitzer's have been made for many decades, but they have never gained much traction. Now, however, a high-profile group of memory researchers at Washington University in St. Louis is working to rekindle interest in the "testing effect," as it is known. If teachers want to maximize their students' long-term learning, these scholars say, they should quiz them during every class session. And that emphatically includes college classes.

The purpose of this quizzing is not to motivate students to pay attention and to study more; if those things happen, the researchers say, they are nice side effects. The real point is that quizzing, if done correctly, is a uniquely powerful method for implanting facts in students' memory.

"In education today, people tend to think of tests as dipstick devices," says Henry L. (Roddy) Roediger III, a professor of psychology at Washington. "You stick it in to measure what people know. But every time you test someone, you change what they know."

With the help of a large federal grant, Mr. Roediger and his colleagues are scrutinizing the testing effect at a middle school in Illinois and in college classrooms at the University of New Mexico. They want to provide practical guidance for educators, and they also hope to shed light on several longstanding questions about how memory operates.

### **Making an Effort**

The basic premise of the testing effect is easy to grasp. Just take the advice that your overbearing 10th-grade French teacher gave - "If you really want to learn the language, stop staring at your textbook and have a conversation in French" - and apply it to every domain of learning.

When a novice student strains to apply her fledgling knowledge of French in a conversation, she engages in what scholars of memory call "effortful retrieval," a process that sharply improves long-term retention of unfamiliar knowledge. But the power of effortful retrieval extends far beyond language learning: A student who has just read a complex article full of unfamiliar facts about 17th-century Poland will retain that information much better if he is quizzed - thus forcing him to retrieve the data from memory - than if he simply rereads the article two or three times.

"The testing effect cuts against the lay understanding of memory," says Jeffrey D. Karpicke, who recently completed a doctorate at Washington University and will become an assistant professor of psychology at Purdue University this fall. "People usually imagine memory as a storage space, as a space where we put things, as if they were books in a library. But the act of retrieval is not neutral. It affects the system."

In a long series of recent studies, Mr. Roediger and his colleagues have examined the testing effect from several different angles: Is it better to use short-answer quizzes or multiple choice? Is it crucial to give students immediate feedback on their quiz performance? Does quizzing improve students' long-term learning of related material?

Andrew C. Butler, a graduate student at Washington, recently designed an experiment in which students watched videotaped lectures on consecutive days about three Impressionist artists: Berthe Morisot, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Edgar Degas. (None of the participating students had taken art-history classes, so this was unfamiliar territory.) Immediately after each lecture, a computer screen would train the students in one of three ways: by displaying facts from the lecture, which the students would simply read; by giving the students a multiple-choice quiz; or by giving them a short-answer quiz.

The students were randomly assigned into various sequences, and they all experienced each study method exactly once. For example, a student might see the Renoir lecture on Day 1 and take a short-answer quiz, see the Morisot lecture on Day 2 and simply read the facts, and see the Degas lecture on Day 3 and take a multiple-choice quiz. Another student

might see the Morisot lecture on Day 1 and take a quiz, and so on; there were 27 different pathways in all.

A month later, the students were brought back to take a 90-item short-answer test that covered all three artists. This final test included some facts that the students had not reviewed at all. On those items, the students answered only 20 percent correct, on average. On the items that had been studied through rereading or through multiple-choice quizzes, the students averaged 36 percent correct. And on the items that had been studied through short-answer quizzes, the students averaged 47 percent correct.

For Mr. Butler, the implications are clear: Instructors should take a few minutes to give quizzes, preferably in short-answer format, at the beginning or end of each class session. "A lot of educators don't make the connection between their teaching tasks and their evaluation tasks," he says.

When given regular quizzes, Mr. Butler says, students are forced to retrieve facts from memory repeatedly, and they develop much deeper fluency in the material. Instructors might consider it a nuisance to construct and grade the quizzes, he says, but it's far worse to allow students to go 12 weeks between hearing a lecture and coughing up facts on a final exam. Students who wait to cram for a final exam rarely retain the material over the long term, even if they perform reasonably well on the final, he says. "The way that we typically do things in education," Mr. Butler says, "seems almost reverse-engineered to produce the least possible learning."

### **Testing Effects**

Tightly constructed experiments like Mr. Butler's are one thing. But Mr. Roediger and his colleagues are also looking at the testing effect in real-world classrooms.

A \$3-million, five-year grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, an arm of the U.S. Education Department, supports the team's research on social-studies and English classes at a middle school in Columbia, Ill., not far from St. Louis, and in Psychology 101 classes at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque.

At the middle school, the Washington University researchers have worked with teachers to identify roughly 30 key facts in each of the students' textbook chapters. For half of those facts, the students are given daily quizzes, which the students answer using handheld "clicker" devices manufactured by eInstruction Corporation. The devices allow the students to receive instant feedback on their answers. On the final tests at the end of each unit, the students demonstrate significantly better recall of the quizzed facts than the unquizzed facts.

"We've produced a nice testing effect at Columbia Middle School," says Kathleen B. McDermott, an associate professor of psychology at Washington University. "You can see it very clearly in the data. What we

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want to do next year is to go back and say, Well, of all of the things that we did, what's crucial? What if they don't get that immediate feedback?" she asks. "What if we don't give them a prequiz at the beginning of the unit, to show them what they don't know?" Tweaking the procedure, Ms. McDermott says, should help to illuminate how the testing effect operates.

At New Mexico, Gordon K. Hodge, an associate professor of psychology, is experimenting with the testing effect in his large introductory courses. Every other week, he requires his students to take daily online quizzes on their own time, as homework. The federally financed study will compare his students' end-of-semester retention of facts from the quizzes with their retention of facts they learned during the nonquiz weeks.

"Several years ago, our dean identified Psychology 101 as a 'killer course,'" Mr. Hodge says. "Some administrators were very concerned about how many students were failing. But we in the department didn't want to mend the problem by just making things easier. So we started to look for ways to help students improve their learning."

Contrary to the general wisdom of testing-effect research, Mr. Hodge's online quizzes are in multiple-choice rather than short-answer format. Creating and scoring short-answer quizzes for such large classes would be too difficult and time-consuming for the instructor, says Mark A. McDaniel, a professor of psychology at Washington who is working closely with Mr. Hodge on the project. "Maybe we're not that far away from the day when computers can score short-answer tests," Mr. McDaniel says, "but we're not there yet."

At Washington University, Ms. McDermott gives four-question short-answer quizzes at the end of every meeting of her 300-level course on human learning and memory. These classes tend to be small - around 20 students - so it is easy to give quizzes at every meeting, she says.

"Sometimes colleagues here will ask me about the quizzes," Ms. McDermott says, "and I'll explain to them why I do this. The hard part is standing firm when you announce it at the beginning of the course, and dealing with the resistance. But students are always going to complain about something in your course. It might as well be quizzes."

By the end of the semester, Ms. McDermott says, most students have come to appreciate the role the quizzes play in helping them absorb the course material.

### **Too Narrow?**

Ms. McDermott says she tries to persuade her colleagues that writing and grading daily quizzes is really not so bad. But her colleagues sometimes come back with another objection: Don't these quizzes encourage students to concentrate on narrow, isolated facts, as opposed to the broader concepts and themes at the heart of the course?

Researchers still have a good deal to learn about that question, Ms. **Society for Quality Education, July 2007, Page 13**

McDermott says, but they are starting to believe that frequent quizzing actually helps students absorb a broad range of material not directly included in the quizzes. Jason C.K. Chan, a newly minted Ph.D. at Washington who will become an assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State University this fall, recently designed experiments that seem to demonstrate this. "In the process of retrieving Fact A," Ms. McDermott says, "if it takes you a minute to get there, you think, Hmm - what did I learn about this general topic? So in a sense, you're also retrieving Fact B and Fact C, even though that's not what you were directly asked to do."

Mr. Roediger, meanwhile, hopes that teachers and college instructors will take Mr. Spitzer's 68-year-old advice seriously, but he knows that it will be an uphill battle. "What I hear from teachers is, Quizzes would take time away from good learning activities," Mr. Roediger says. "But my point is, this is the best thing that you could be doing if you want them to learn. Give them a quiz, and give them feedback on that quiz."

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## **Failure is Not an Option**

**By Louise Brown**

She has skipped 30 classes in a row and hasn't handed in an assignment all term, but the principal wants her teacher to cut this Grade 12 student some slack.

"He told me, 'Look, the student says she's finally willing to hand in all her work, so I want you to mark it and don't take off points for being late,'" sighs the English teacher at a west Toronto high school. "Whatever happened to deadlines? We bend over so far for kids these days, it's a joke."

With the school year almost done, the pressure for marks is on – and not just for students, but also teachers. A growing chorus of educators say Queen's Park's new drive to keep kids in school to 18 is pushing them to coddle students with inflated marks, too many second, third and fourth chances and too few flunking grades, adding to an already lofty sense of entitlement.

In a new survey of nearly 1,000 high school teachers in Durham Region, four out of 10 say they feel principals push them to drop standards so more students will pass. One in four feels pressured not to give an F.

Yet some say it's time to bring back the F-word – Fail – to a school system that has shunned it for a generation.

"Everyone wants what's best for the student, but teachers are asking, 'Have we gone too far?'" says math teacher Ken Coran, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.

"I can't say every principal is pushing teachers to raise marks, but the buzz we're hearing in staff rooms is, 'Are we making it too easy to get a credit?'"

Worried about the true value or integrity of school credits, a new province-wide teachers' work group on "credit integrity" has called for sweeping steps to lock in standards, including letting teachers give a "zero," something discouraged by the province in lieu of giving teens another chance.

The group is planning a symposium this fall to address mounting teacher complaints, and will meet June 19 with the Ontario Principals' Council to discuss the hot-button issue.

"One teacher ran into a student last summer who thanked her for a final mark of 50," said Oshawa math teacher Rudy Schmidt, "but the teacher was confused because she had given the girl 30-something. The principal had raised it to a pass.

"Many schools want teachers to keep failure rates below 10 per cent, but how is that possible when kids skip more than 15 classes with no consequence?"

Following the murder of Jordan Manners at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate, complaints about inflated marks have been swept into a larger debate about the shifting power balance between students and teachers.

Coran says many teachers feel increasingly powerless to keep schools safe because the office won't back them up on report cards or behaviour. Indeed, Ontario's new focus is to help at-risk kids, not crack the whip over their heads.

The McGuinty government has spent \$1.3 billion on a smorgasbord of new supports, from summer literacy camps and free tutoring to "credit recovery" programs that let teens who fail a subject redo just the parts they flubbed, not the whole course.

While kids still fail courses, especially Grade 9 math, schools throw sinking students more and more remedial lifelines, and few are ever held back in grade school. Last year, for example, the York Region District School Board failed only six Grade 8 students out of 8,064 across the board. The year before that? One.

Together with Ontario's near-ban on deducting marks for late work – brought in by the Harris government so marks reflect what you know, not how you work – even some students ask if schools dole out too much help.

"It's not fair to good kids when no one gets marks off for being late," complained one Grade 10 student who handed in a final project by the May 3 deadline, only to be told to take it back because no one else was ready. "I don't think it's a good way to teach us to meet deadlines at work."

While Education Minister Kathleen Wynne says this kinder, more thoughtful approach to schooling helps more children learn, others charge it can drag standards down.

"Whatever happened to being allowed to fail?" asks Durham Region music teacher Jeff Pighin, who says he is one of a vanishing breed of teachers who fails several students each year in his Grade 9 music course and hands out exactly the marks he believes students deserve.

"I gave one student 8 per cent on his interim report card because he hadn't done a single assignment," said Pighin. Yet rather than let the student fail, the school is looking for alternate ways for the teen to earn this arts credit, he says.

"No wonder kids come to school thinking they're getting a free ride. There's some sense that you just can't fail," said Pighin. "We hand out credits like tic tacs."

Toronto student trustee Nick Kennedy thinks Ontario is right to let teachers deduct marks for lateness only as a last resort, and mark tardiness on a report card under "learning skills" instead. "It's good because it doesn't confuse your work habits with your knowledge," says the Grade 12 student at North Toronto Collegiate. "School isn't there to teach you all life's lessons."

Jon Cowans disagrees. The Pickering English teacher has called for the return of the F as an educational form of tough love, and says the theory that 'failure is not an option' produces students who simply aren't prepared to move on. "I call it Credits Lite, the whole Byzantine apparatus teachers must go through before you're allowed to fail a student." Principals ask how often a teacher called parents before failing the student, he says, and whether the teacher modified the work enough.

"But I teach a class of students, not just one. I'm not a tutor. If I work only with some students, the others will be climbing the wall," said Cowans. "You don't dare give a student a mark between 45 and 49 because the school will push you to raise it to 50."

On the other hand, does failing work? Research by Queen's University shows students who fail more than one Grade 9 course are more likely to drop out.

"I've been teaching long enough to remember those 15-year-old boys who were held back with 12-year-olds. It was horrible for their self-esteem," recalls Lynn Sharratt, York Region's curriculum superintendent. "I don't think we knew what to do with them."

York schools lead Ontario's remediation wave. The four weakest readers in every Grade 1 class get 12 to 20 weeks of daily tutoring through a program called Reading Recovery. And the board tops the province in reading and writing scores.

Nancy Vail agrees that failing students fails to help kids. "The teacher used to say, 'Look, I taught it, you just didn't learn it. My job's done: you try again,'" said Vail, instructional coordinator for the Peel District School Board.

"Now we know if it didn't work the first time, more of the same won't work. The onus is on the educator to find a way to reach every student."

With what we now know about the different ways people learn – auditory or visual? male versus female? left brain/right brain? – Education Minister Wynne says there's pedagogical bedrock under this whole new focus on help. She points to the 6,000 more high school graduates every year as proof.

"It's true, we're going to extraordinary measures to help kids who are at risk, but I won't apologize for that. It's what we need to do to reach all kids who have been struggling on the fringes." Wynne says she's open to teachers' suggestions about ensuring the value of a high school diploma, but said she trusts they're not lowering standards to help students at risk.

To principal Blair Hilts, president of the Ontario Principals' Council, it's simple: "There's no such thing as giving a student too much help."

*(Reprinted with permission – Torstar Syndication Services)*

## **Top of the Class**

***Two of the best 15 young spellers in the world come from Alberta. Hardly surprising, given the province's remarkable education system***

**By Patrick McGee**

It begins with 10 million students, but after thousands of competitions, and countless more mental lapses and misplaced letters, just 286 pupils make the final cut to compete in the prestigious Scripps National Spelling Bee. In late May, 20 Canadians flew to Washington, D.C., to compete, and of the three who made the top 15, two were from Alberta's public schools, with Edmonton's Nate Gartke picking up the silver medal. But it isn't only Alberta's spelling savants who are showing off the province's superior education; a host of other achievements are putting Wild Rose country on the map, year after year.

In the 2004 results of tests conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment, Alberta's 15-year-olds scored well above the national average in each category, and ranked among the top four nations in the world in reading, mathematics, and science. In the test's main area of focus, mathematics, Alberta placed ahead of 39 nations, second only to Hong Kong.

Such consistent results were noteworthy enough that, last September, the influential magazine *The Economist* published an article headlined

**Society for Quality Education, July 2007, Page 17**

“Clever Rednecks,” documenting how “over the past 30 years Alberta has quietly built the finest public education system in Canada”. The message is being heard, and according to Kathy Telfer, spokesperson for Alberta Education, delegations from Australia, China, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Singapore, and South Africa have visited Alberta to study the education system in the past year alone.

Helen Raham, research director for the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, a Kelowna, B.C.-based think-tank, says Alberta’s success started when declining enrolment and budget deficits in urban communities forced the public education system to respond by encouraging an environment where parents had more choices available to them. A growing number of alternative programs and charter schools offer “specialized programs of choice as a mechanism to hold and draw back people,” Raham says. Parents can send their children to religious schools or performing arts or science schools, for instance, or enroll them in special classes where languages such as Mandarin or German are offered. Spelling champ Nick Gartke attends a school that offers the International Baccalaureate program.

The choice-driven system produced results last February, when the conference Board of Canada awarded its overall National Award in Governance to the Calgary Board of Education, marking the first time an education board has won the prestigious award. Ted Flitton, a CBE spokesman, is proud of the award because it recognizes the board’s program isn’t only about students attaining high marks, but becoming good citizens as well.

Norm Sigalet, a specialist in Career Pathways, one of CBE’s unique initiatives, concurs, adding that the goal is “helping students find their passion while they’re in high school”. And it’s not only the school system, says Telfer. Alberta’s academic success is supported by what she calls a “yearning to learn” culture found across the province. Being enveloped in this broader environment of education helps motivate kids to do well, she says.

A unique example of this will take place this July for six gifted Canadian high-school students who will spend 16 days at special training camps in Alberta. With two team leaders from Calgary, the students will train at the University of Calgary and at the Banff International Research Station, before flying off to represent Canada at the 48<sup>th</sup> International Mathematical Olympiad in Hanoi, Vietnam.

No wonder Alberta excelled in a novel evaluation carried out by the Canadian Council on Learning, published in late May. Called the Composite Learning Index, the survey measured the environment and resources available for lifelong learning. Calgary recorded the nation’s highest score

with 93, joining with Edmonton's 89 to make Alberta the highest-ranked province in the country. The national average was 76.

About the only thing going wrong with the province's education system is its higher-than-average dropout rate, which experts blame on plentiful, high-paying oil-patch jobs. But if the CCL's lifelong learning findings are to be believed, there's every chance those dropouts will eventually return to pick up where they left off, making them wealthier and wiser too.

*(Reprinted with permission from the Western Standard, July 2, 2007.*

[www.westernstandard.ca](http://www.westernstandard.ca))

## **WHAT'S NEW?**

### [Improving Reading Scores](#)

The U.S. Reading First program offers substantial funding to jurisdictions that adopt research-based reading approaches. This *City Journal* article explains the program and profiles some school districts that have adopted systematic phonics – with excellent results. [more](#)

### [Ontario Admits Learning Disabilities the Result of Teaching Methods](#)

Ontario's "Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6" reports that "the use of the 'tiered' approach in the early years has been shown to dramatically reduce the number of students in the later grades who would meet criteria for learning disabilities". (p. 60) The tiered approach is a delivery system for increasing intervention. [more](#)

### [Fighting for School Vouchers](#)

A group of parents in New Jersey has taken the state and 25 poorly-performing school boards to court, arguing that since public schools deny students their constitutional right to a proper education, the court should refund their money so they can spend it at any school they choose. [more](#)

### [Drugging Young Children with Antipsychotics](#)

A new Canadian survey shows that antipsychotics such as Risperdal, Zyprexa and Seroquel are being widely prescribed to children with behaviour and mood problems, with a significant proportion going to children under nine and even as young as three. None of the drugs has been officially approved for use in children. [more](#)

### [School Board Amalgamations Not Very Cost Effective](#)

Mackinac Center Adjunct Fellow Andrew Coulson found that "the relationship between district size and spending is weaker and more complicated than many people imagine. District size explains only about 2% of the difference in per-pupil spending, and bigger is not always better." The study concludes that bigger savings could come from more vigorous competition among schools. [more](#)

## [No Teacher Trustees in Alberta](#)

The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that provinces are free to forbid teachers from serving on local school boards. The teachers' case was backed by the Alberta Teachers' Association. [more](#)

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Ivory Tower Blues**

*A University System in Crisis*

by James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar

The authors of this book are two professors at the University of Western Ontario. They provide a very frank report on the situation in modern Canadian universities, principally with reference to the problems of grade inflation and its consequences. More and more high school students have been given increasingly inflated marks, and so more and more high school students are coming to university expecting to do well – despite the fact that large numbers of them have low levels of academic interest and ability. The universities have responded by watering down their courses and inflating their grades. The excerpt tells the story of a Canadian professor in a unique position to notice how much things had changed in a 20-year period.

#### ***Excerpt (pages 22-24)***

“A useful voice to add to this analysis comes from a Western professor, Thomas Collins, who spent 21 years as an administrator, first as chair of the English department, then as dean of Arts, and finally as provost and vice-president academic of Western (the second-highest position in the university). These posts took him out of the classroom entirely from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. Thus, we have a rare case study in which someone's institutional memory is untainted by the experience of having to adjust his teaching year after year to increasingly unprepared and disengaged students, as appears to be the case for many professors. In a paper written for the council of Ministers of Education, Collins admitted to some naïveté when he returned to the classroom in the mid-1990s, and considerable shock at how standards had slipped in 20 years and how ill-prepared students were for the English courses he taught, especially first-year courses. From his experiences in the trenches during his first year back, he concluded that he could not ‘assume even a moderate level of literacy from [these students] ... presumably because they think, or have been led to believe, that they are at least proficient in English.’

“Collins blamed this result on poor and inconsistent preparation in secondary schools in reading and writing, poor work habits, and low levels of critical thinking and learning skills. Given the high grades with which these students gained entry into university (Western in this case), Collins

clearly saw the negative consequences of grade inflation that we discuss here. He presented institutional data showing an average 14 per cent grade drop for first-year students, who entered with a 79.5 per cent average as a group but finished first year at Western with a 65.3 per cent average. Western's standards had not yet changed significantly from the traditional standards about which we write, but high school standards had obviously loosened, giving students terribly false feedback about their abilities, while selling them short by not preparing them for university-level learning.

“At the same time, Collins recognized how universities were contributing to grade inflation because, confronted with so many ill-prepared students, he and his colleagues could not grade them by traditional standards, because then they would have failed most of them. Consequently, they patiently corrected papers, but passed on a certain amount of false feedback with higher grades than the work deserved. For example, in his 1997-98 first-year tutorial, out of 17 students, ‘only 4 wrote at an acceptable level of literacy’, by which he means the ability to ‘construct basic sentences and paragraphs’. The remaining students struggled but could not move up a learning curve of literacy, so they made the same mistakes in assignment after assignment.

“To conduct a reality check on his own experiences, he talked with his colleagues and found that their experience was much the same as his, but they were just accustomed to it as a result of their adjustments over the years. He also looked for other evidence about the decline in standards and student preparation. In one case, Collins gained access to the results of a chemistry test that had been administered each year in Introductory Chemistry from 1978 to 1996. On this test, which contained the same 40 questions over this two-decade period, there was a steady decline in average grades from 64 per cent in 1978 to 48 per cent in 1996. One lesson was that if he were to grade his first-year students by the standards he followed in the mid-1970s, he should have been giving Fs instead of Cs to the illiterate students who could not move up a learning curve. So why didn't he or his colleagues fail them? More generally, why weren't universities speaking up more about the lack of high-school preparation among many of the students they were matriculating?

“Collins's answer came in part from his inside knowledge as a former administrator. In his words, one reason was that

Western adopted the invidious internal funding system which rewards faculties and departments financially for attracting and retaining additional students in post-year one courses. This system has ostensibly been introduced to encourage interdisciplinary teaching and course development (and strangely so, particularly at a time when students have

little or no disciplinary knowledge): its actual effect has been to increase grade inflation across the university.

“He and his colleagues discussed this openly and extensively, and in his words, the message was ‘Don’t mark the students too honestly or we shall have few students in upper years, thus losing funds and probably faculty positions.’ He also noted that more difficult upper-year courses, especially those requiring essays, were under-enrolled – avoided by students who ‘wisely understand their own deficiencies’. Collins suspected that some version of this funding-induced problem now existed in all universities, but they ignored the need to attack the problem, because remediation programs would cost huge amounts of money.”

## **The Last Normal Child**

### **Essays on the Intersection of Kids, culture, and Psychiatric Drugs by Lawrence H. Diller**

This book is a collection of articles by a San Francisco pediatrician who specializes in children with learning and behaviour problems. Although Dr Diller sometimes prescribes stimulants like Ritalin, he strongly prefers to begin by trying behavioural and educational interventions, such as encouraging parents and teachers to use more structured and immediate responses to bad behaviour. The author is very concerned about the “aspects of our society and culture that contribute to the epidemic of psychiatric diagnoses and treatment of children”. The excerpt tells the story of Ryan, a six-year-old dynamo whose teachers wanted him evaluated for ADHD.

#### ***Excerpt (pages 73-74)***

“Employing my invariant prescription with Susan and Bill, I offered the basic reframe of interpreting Ryan’s problems as a repetitive unconscious behavioral attempt to ask the question, ‘Are you steady and strong enough to take care of me?’ Ryan experienced Susan and Bill’s efforts at comfort, placation, and explanation, though noble in intent, as weakness. Would they be willing to temporarily put aside their well-intentioned means to their goal of a harmonious loving family with a confident and happy son and employ strategies that would convince Ryan that they were more consistent and powerful than he could be?

“The speed and intensity with which the parents, especially Susan, adopted this point of view surprised me. Apparently, she’d been thinking a great deal about their parenting style. She was raised more strictly herself and judged her childhood overall as positive. She had been confused by the contradictory advice offered by the school, her pediatrician, and the myriad self-help books on parenting when it came to discipline. Bill was also comfortable making a change.

“They decided to work on having Ryan sit for five minutes at the dinner table and get ready in the morning for school without so much fussing and delay. They would use a timer at dinner to help Ryan monitor the time, and they were prepared to have him miss his meal and not eat anything else until morning if he failed to sit. He would get an extra helping of dessert when he successfully stayed seated for five minutes. We went over a procedure for an effective time-out for Ryan should he become too angry.

“We also altered the morning routine. Susan and Bill told Ryan he must accomplish the few tasks he needed to do – get up, eat breakfast, brush his teeth, and comb his hair – before he’d be allowed to put on his clothes for school. They would give him three reminders of the time that was left before the family had to leave. Whether he dawdled or delayed was his choice, but any clothes not on him by the time they had to leave would be put in a shopping bag left near the front door, and he could get dressed at school. I told the parents to actually let him get dressed in the back seat of their car the first time, but not to tell him about this partial amnesty in advance.

“Susan and Bill returned the next week, pleased and astonished at Ryan’s improvements at dinner and in the mornings. Over the next three months, I saw them with the children four more times. I noticed immediately the change in Susan’s words and tone of voice when she had to set a limit or offer a directive. Gone were the questions such as ‘Do you want to help clean up the toys?’ Instead, with her voice deepening just a bit and her tone lowering at the end, she said, ‘Help me clean up the toys now.’ Could nothing more remarkable than that lead to Ryan’s improved cooperation and decreased activity in my office? It appears so. It turns out that, at heart, he was a pleaser.

“Ryan’s behavior also improved at school. Susan said she shared with Mrs. Gray how well immediate and tangible rewards were working to keep Ryan on task. His teacher then began offering Ryan ‘special pennies’ that could be used for prizes and privileges at the end of the week. She found that giving immediate rewards worked so well with Ryan that she was offering the pennies to the entire class.

“Ryan’s experience is unusual in my practice only in that I believed the impulsive aspects of his personality were making things more difficult for him and his family. I was genuinely prepared to offer him Ritalin if the efforts of his parents and school failed to help him sufficiently. But as it turned out, Ryan, like so many other less intense children, succeeded after his caregivers made specific changes in their behavior toward him.”

# A Nation Deceived

## ***How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*** by Nicholas Colangelo, Susan G. Assouline, Miraca U. M. Gross

This two-volume report is very informally written, although the authors are professors, experts in the field of gifted education, who base their recommendations on mainstream research. The authors are passionate about the value of accelerating gifted students' schooling. Examples of acceleration include early entrance to school, grade-skipping, moving ahead in one subject area (for example Advanced Placement), and being allowed to complete two years' work in one year. The excerpt lists 12 reasons why acceleration is very uncommon and refutes each one.

### ***Excerpt (pages 6-9)***

**Reason #1: Teachers lack familiarity with acceleration.** Educators in most schools are unfamiliar with the research evidence on acceleration's benefits.

*Response:* A primary goal of this report is to eliminate this barrier. This comprehensive two-volume report brings together extensive research on acceleration, and the report is available to all schools at no cost.

**Reason #2: Confidence about acceleration isn't running high.** K-12 educators may know about acceleration as an intervention, but they don't feel confident in using this option.

*Response:* We respect that all educators make decisions that they believe are in the best interest of their students. The overwhelming evidence about the many academic and social advantages of acceleration should make educators confident enough to consider acceleration.

**Reason #3: Acceleration runs counter to personal beliefs.** When personal beliefs conflict with research evidence, personal beliefs win out almost every time.

*Response:* This report invites introspection and dialogue between educators and parents, asking them to re-evaluate their beliefs concerning acceleration.

**Reason #4: Age trumps everything else.** For many educators, age – not readiness – has become the primary determinant for grade placement.

*Response:* The notion that age equates to grade is out of tune with what we know about individual differences. Research reveals that gifted students are more academically and emotionally advanced than their typical age-mates. Therefore, it makes more sense to think about readiness, rather than age, as the main determinant for grade placement.

**Reason #5: Safe is better than sorry.** Most teachers see non-acceleration as safer – they feel that doing nothing is not harmful.

*Response:* Doing nothing is not the same as ‘do no harm’. Choosing not to accelerate is itself an intervention. The evidence indicates that when children’s academic and social needs are not met, the result is boredom and disengagement from school.

**Reason #6: Acceleration is not taught in faculties of education.**

These organizations, which train teachers, do not prepare teachers and administrators to make decisions about acceleration.

*Response:* Abundant research material is available, yet professors in faculties of education do not present it to future teachers. This report will help inform them. We know that faculty respect research and we hope that they will infuse this information into their course content.

**Reason #7: It’s bad to push kids.** Teachers and parents see acceleration as hurrying children through childhood.

*Response:* Acceleration is allowing a student to move at an appropriate pace. By worrying about hurrying, a chance is missed to match the enthusiastic, passionate, bright child who has the ability to move ahead with the right curriculum. They ignore the bright student’s rage to learn.

**Reason #8: New friends are hard to make.** Educators fear that children who are accelerated will not adjust well socially to the new class.

*Response:* Social adjustment in a school setting is a complicated issue. Some accelerated children do not adjust easily or immediately. Children who have felt out of place with students of their own age may need time to develop social confidence. Although the evidence on social success in accelerated settings is not as clear-cut as the evidence on academic success, it is still much more positive than negative. Acceleration broadens the friendship group. Many gifted children gravitate to older children, so making friends becomes easier.

**Reason #9: Individual kids are less important than equal opportunity for all.** Individual differences have been sacrificed in the political battles and culture wars about schooling.

*Response:* When educators confuse equity with sameness, they want all students to have the same curriculum at the same time. This is a violation of equal opportunity. When it comes to acceleration, the majority of children do not need it. In fact, it would be a disadvantage for them both academically and socially. But for the children who need it, acceleration is their best chance for an appropriate, challenging education. We know a lot about assessing ability and creating programming tailored to accommodate individual differences. The cornerstone of education is the flexibility to recognize the needs of the individual child. This flexibility is sometimes lost, however, when political and cultural pressures homogenize the learning needs of individuals and we pretend that there are no meaningful learning differences. Closing our eyes to children’s educational differences is

neither democratic nor helpful. Acceleration is a respectful recognition of individual differences as well as a means for addressing them.

**Reason #10: It will upset other kids.** Teachers sometimes fear that accelerating a child will diminish the self-esteem of other students.

*Response:* This is an important issue. Whatever we do in schools should be based on a respect and concern for all students. In fact, this level of sensitivity is one of the things that make America special. However, kids are used to seeing age-peers progress at different rates in many settings such as sports and music. In school, the idea of accelerating one or two children is not likely to negatively affect the class.

**Reason #11: There will be gaps in the child's knowledge.** Teachers are concerned that accelerated students will have gaps in their understanding of concepts.

*Response:* We accelerate students because they are well ahead of their age-peers in their academic development and knowledge. Gifted students are swift learners and any gaps quickly disappear.

**Reason #12: Disasters are memorable.** Unsuccessful cases of acceleration exist, but the numbers have been exaggerated, as have the reasons for lack of success.

*Response:* Good news doesn't make the news. Bad news, on the other hand, sells papers and travels fast in communities. People will repeat stories or greatly exaggerate the situation about an unsuccessful acceleration, even without first-hand knowledge. Researchers acknowledge that acceleration is not perfect and some situations may be less than ideal, but such cases frequently stem from incomplete planning or negative attitudes. We need to respect that even an intervention that is very positive is not fail-safe. A few poor decisions do not negate the importance of considering acceleration as an option. Excellent planning can minimize failures.

## **AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT**

Click [here](#) for the Campus Squirrel Listings. "The quality of an institution of higher learning can often be determined by the size, health and behavior of the squirrel population on campus. This site documents the criterion quality at schools throughout the United States and beyond!" Three Canadian universities have been evaluated: Queen's does best, with the University of Waterloo second, and York University in last place.

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