

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

This is the print-friendly version of the SQE Forum to read like a newspaper.

Any financial contribution you can make to defray our newsletter costs would be gratefully received. You can donate on-line at [www.societyforqualityeducation.org/donate.html](http://www.societyforqualityeducation.org/donate.html) or by sending a cheque to us at 57 Twyford Road, Toronto, ON, Canada M9A 1W5. We are pleased to be able issue tax receipts.                      Regards, Malkin

## EVERYONE CAN LEARN TO DRAW

Drawing trains the skill of observation, awareness of relationships of parts to wholes, of spatial relationships and effects of light and shading. Children's drawing often parallels their cognitive development. It makes sense to foster thinking through drawing, which can be fun, challenging and a source of satisfaction and creative expression.

- Here's a good introduction to the subject. <http://drawsketch.about.com/cs/kidsdrawing/a/teachkids.htm>
- Show children how to draw by breaking an object or scene into simple, component shapes. Here are some good lessons, examples with young children, and links to a book that elaborates on the ideas. [www.drawyourworld.com/art.html](http://www.drawyourworld.com/art.html)
- Here is an interesting article by an artist, explaining some specific techniques, like using a viewfinder. [www.goshen.edu/art/ed/draw.html](http://www.goshen.edu/art/ed/draw.html)
- Want to draw on the computer? This open-source drawing program from the UK is recommended for children 3-12. Free to download, and much supportive documentation. [www.tuxpaint.org/](http://www.tuxpaint.org/)
- Take the challenge – draw your shoe! [www.everydayart.com/draw.html](http://www.everydayart.com/draw.html)

- Here's an interesting discussion from a BB archive, with some insightful comments on teaching drawing skills to 4 and 5 year olds. [www.wetcanvas.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-152345.html](http://www.wetcanvas.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-152345.html)
- This site for older children has Flash applets showing how to draw a variety of animals, vehicles, buildings etc. [www.abasoft.com/how\\_to\\_draw/index.html](http://www.abasoft.com/how_to_draw/index.html)
- Here are lots of links to various freebies and helpful sites. [www.artistshelpingchildren.org/howtodraw.html](http://www.artistshelpingchildren.org/howtodraw.html)
- Teachers and homeschoolers may find these sites useful in relating drawing to other subjects. [www.amazon.ca/Draw-Write-Now-Book-Characters/dp/0963930710](http://www.amazon.ca/Draw-Write-Now-Book-Characters/dp/0963930710)  
[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_hb3451/is\\_1\\_99803/ai\\_n8219319](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3451/is_1_99803/ai_n8219319)

## MAIL BAG

*Our readers' comments are always interesting and insightful. Here is some of the feedback we've received this month.*

### **Ontario Election**

Watching the Ontario election campaign unfold from a distance, I was astounded at how successful those parties opposing public funding of faith-based schools have been at misrepresenting the issue. Where is the conscience of Dalton McGuinty and his ilk, and where is the informed and critical thinking of a public that is supposed to be educated? *Regina, SK*  
(*Saskatchewan funds religious schools without apparent problems. Ed.*)

### **Stairway to Reading**

Kudos for the excellent job you've done with your remedial reading program. I learned about it through a post on the Moore Homeschooling group, and I have been using it with my six-year-old

son. We live in the heart of rural Kenya, so your work is helping quite far away. Be encouraged.

Kenya

### **Organizational Skills**

I have written an article on organizational strategies for school and work. It can be accessed at [www.crux-of-the-matter.com/?p=412](http://www.crux-of-the-matter.com/?p=412).

### **Good Teaching Programs**

I want to pass on information about two programs that are extremely sound in my opinion. Right Start Math ([www.alabacus.com](http://www.alabacus.com)) is the most exhaustive, well-made program I've seen. It works equally well with challenged and gifted kids. All About Spelling ([www.all-about-spelling.com](http://www.all-about-spelling.com)) is a multi-sensory spelling program that includes lots of repetition. It apparently works very well with children who either struggle with spelling or experienced trouble learning to read. *Plano, TX*

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

This month, we feature this year's value-added analysis of every Ontario public school on the basis of its students' performance on the provincial tests as published by the CD Howe Institute. ([http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/ebrief\\_39scoresupdate2007.pdf](http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/ebrief_39scoresupdate2007.pdf)) Dr. David Johnson, the author of the CD Howe report, was recently awarded a prestigious Canadian Fulbright Scholarship Award. Professor Johnson will continue his work on the economics of Canadian elementary education as the Fulbright Visiting Chair at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

### **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 at [mdare@societyforqualityeducation.org](mailto:mdare@societyforqualityeducation.org). This month, Aunt Malkin answers Dominique's question about her daughter's reading problem.*

### **QUESTION**

We have now been using *Stairway to Reading* for a month, and I wanted to update you as to our progress. My daughter is doing extremely well. She is now reading silently on her own, just because she wants to. I think she jumped 7-9 months in reading level in one month. Everything has im-

proved in her reading, but she still skips/changes the small words "the", "a", "this", "in". How can I get her to read them accurately?

Signed, Dominique in Texas

### **ANSWER**

This is a very common problem. It's a habit, nothing to do with vision or genes or learning disabilities – but unfortunately, it's a habit that is very hard to break. The habit develops in students when they are expected to read text that includes words they can't sound out. The only way students can figure out unknown words is to guess at their meaning, based perhaps on the rest of the sentence or the pictures elsewhere on the page. Consequently, their eyes are always on the move, roving over the page and ahead in the sentence, and their eyes skip over the easy words.

Here are a couple of ideas for breaking this habit. First, have your daughter read some really easy sentences, like "The boy saw a cat". She will probably have no difficulty reading every word correctly (if she does, provide intensive practice at this level). Gradually ramp up the difficulty of the sentences, insisting on 100% accuracy. Eventually, you should arrive at her current reading level, with the problem close to being solved.

In the meantime, of course you will want to continue her excellent progress, and here are some suggestions for her everyday read-aloud sessions.

- Cut a small rectangular hole (about 2 cm by 1 cm) in an index card, and place it over your daughter's reading material, with only the first word showing through the hole, and then advance the hole as she reads. In other words, she will be able to see only one word at a time as she reads. She will not enjoy this, and it will provide her with an additional incentive to prove to you that she can read accurately without the card.
- Right now, there is no need for your daughter to read aloud fluently, quickly, or with expression — these things will come later without being sought. For now, all that matters is accuracy.
- Every time your daughter makes a mistake, stop her and point out the error. It is helpful for some students to be forced to return to the beginning of the sentence in which they made the error (they hate this).
- Some students find it helpful to point to each word with their finger and/or use a ruler to keep

their place. Such crutches will drop away as soon as they are no longer necessary.

- Some students are more motivated to read accurately if they can earn a few M&M's (or pennies or another small treat) per page, losing one reward for each mistake. Do not take away a reward if your daughter hesitates at an unknown word and says she can't read it. In fact, this is great progress! In the past, she would probably have taken a wild guess. After she has spent a few seconds attempting to decode the unknown word, simply supply it and praise her for not guessing.
- Recording your daughter's reading on a tape recorder is another good way to encourage accuracy.
- Because the effort to read accurately can overwhelm a reader's ability to grasp the meaning of the text, repeated readings of each story can be extremely beneficial — for comprehension, word recognition, and fluency.

I am so pleased to learn that your daughter is reading for pleasure.

Aunt Malkin

## FEATURE ARTICLES

### A World First for Scotland

By Tom Burkard

Throughout the Anglophone world, educators take it for granted that at least 20% of their pupils will spend 12 years in school without learning to read. The human misery that lies behind this statistic can scarcely be imagined by those who have not endured the daily humiliation of colouring in worksheets designed for "dummies". Nor can many people fully appreciate the daunting task faced by teachers who are expected to "differentiate" the curriculum for the benefit of children who can barely read or write.

Yet we have known for quite a while that all children can be taught to read with a method now known as *synthetic phonics*. This year, the impoverished Scottish school board of West Dunbartonshire announced that *all* 11-year-olds have entered high school with a reading age of at least 9 ½. To put this in perspective, they could all read well enough to read an ordinary newspaper. Reading scores beyond this age are mostly a measure of verbal intelligence. A child with a reading age of 9 ½ should be able to

read a sentence like "Civil servants occupy powerful positions in governing the country's affairs".

In a recent Centre for Policy Studies booklet — *A World First for West Dunbartonshire* — I explained that eliminating reading failure across an entire local authority is an astounding achievement. The Clackmannanshire synthetic phonics study — which provided much of the ammunition that blew apart the old National Literacy Strategy — involved an experimental group of only 200 pupils in five schools. Clearly, it is one thing to achieve outstanding results on a small scale, when talented teachers can ensure a high fidelity of implementation, but it is quite another matter to do the same thing across an entire school board. Especially when you have to convince everyone from the council leaders down to part-time teaching assistants that it is *not* normal for at least 20% of your pupils to fail, and that all children from dysfunctional homes *can* be taught to read!

This kind of change cannot be enforced from above. Dr. Tommy MacKay, the consultant psychologist who engineered the West Dunbartonshire miracle, distinguishes between "restructuring" and "reculturing". The former is the stock-in-trade of managerialists the world over, and it rests upon the illusion that improvement is merely a matter of technocratic competence. Reculturing, on the other hand, is the process by which people come to question the sort of beliefs that permeate their profession. It can be achieved only through leadership. Leaders inspire their colleagues by example, whereas managers tell their subordinates what to do. On top of this, Dr. MacKay had to overcome all of the usual difficulties encountered in large bureaucracies, the "friction" that upsets the most carefully-laid plans — matters like staff-turnover, competing demands of other initiatives, and breakdowns of communication.

The full significance of the West Dunbartonshire miracle has yet to be fully appreciated in Scotland, let alone England or Wales. It has passed virtually without notice in other Anglophone countries. This should not surprise us: for as long as I can remember, educators have been announcing miraculous results for their initiatives — and where are they now? I recently bought an old paperback which excitedly extolled the virtues of "open education" — schools without internal walls, where children wandered from one activity area to another as

they pleased. Teachers, and the general public, can be excused their scepticism.

Yet things are changing. As one special needs teacher said to me, "We know that what we are doing now isn't working". The pilots of my own *Sound Foundations* programme, conducted with Reception (K) pupils in 14 English primary schools, have demonstrated how quickly and easily slow readers can be taught to read with a good synthetic phonics program. My program is welcomed with open arms, because it is so easy to use: no lesson-planning, no paperwork—with 10 minutes of individual instruction per day, nearly all of these children learned to read in one short term.

Since then, I have been travelling all over Britain, and I hope I am not being too optimistic in saying that there is something of a sea-change in the air. It's not just that teachers want to know about synthetic phonics, but also that they seem to be throwing off the yoke imposed by their masters in the ministry. And not before time. We need a modern Cromwell to tell these meddling fools, "In the name of God, go!"

*(Mr. Burkard is a research fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies, the London think-tank founded by Margaret Thatcher. He founded the Promethean Trust, a charity for dyslexic children, and is the co-author of the revolutionary "Sound Foundations" decoding and spelling programs.)*

## **Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World**

**By Andrew Coulson**

*This article is an excerpt from a longer and very thoughtful article on the threat posed by militant Islamic schools in dozens of less-developed nations around the world. Because these schools charge no fees and sometimes even provide free room and board, they appeal to many poor parents who can't access government schools or private schools. It may seem obvious that the solution is to increase the accessibility of government schools so that poor parents will choose them instead of the madrasas. However, it turns out that in many cases the government-run schools are almost as propagandistic as the madrasas – since totalitarian governments tend to view schools as ideal sites for brainwashing young people in order to consolidate their hold on power. The author describes a solu-*

*tion that is better than shored-up government schools and shows how it is already working in the city of Quetta in Pakistan. In Quetta, there have been dramatic increases in "the enrolment of girls and boys in academically-focused schools, while lessening the existing incentive for families to send their children to madrasas or government schools."*

"The single most important pattern to be found among the education systems of the developing world is that private schools paid for at least in part directly by parents are consistently more responsive to parents' demands. As a result, these schools are far less likely to try to indoctrinate children than schools paid for entirely by third parties (whether governmental or private). When choosing and paying for their own children's education, parents in these countries overwhelmingly seek out practical academic instruction and career training that will allow their children to become economically successful. Both government schools and militant seminaries tend to attract students chiefly by virtue of their low or non-existent out-of-pocket costs to parents.

"The biggest lesson of the research comparing alternative school governance structures is that fee-charging market schools outperform government schools (and to a lesser extent government-funded private schools) in academic achievement, cost effectiveness, facilities conditions and maintenance, gender equity, and enrollment growth.

"The reason for these patterns is not hard to fathom. Market schools paid for at least in part by parents must be responsive to the demands of parents or they cease to exist and their employees lose their source of livelihood. Unlike government schools, market schools have a financial incentive to expand their services to the widest possible audience and to operate as efficiently as possible.

"Even USAID and multilateral aid agencies that are ideologically tied to universal compulsory state schooling recognize these realities, though they are unable to follow them to their local conclusion. A USAID project aimed at improving the physical condition of schools in developing countries reported that facilities are more likely to be maintained if those charged with school maintenance and improvement feel a sense of ownership. The project description did not acknowledge, however, that the best way of instilling a *sense* of ownership is *actual* ownership by the school's manage-

ment. It did not mention that fee-charging, privately-owned schools across the developing world – and, for that matter, across the developed world – are generally better-maintained than collectively-owned schools, even when they are out-spent by collectively-owned schools.

“The practical upshot of these observations and findings is that expanding access to fee-charging private schools would likely be the most effective means both of improving the educational situation in developing nations and of promoting the U.S. national interest by lessening indoctrination. A potential difficulty in accomplishing this goal is that subsidies to fee-charging schools would lessen parents’ contributions to the cost of their children’s education – a key element of the market incentive structure that underlies the superiority of these schools.

“Fortunately, a large-scale study in Indonesia suggests that direct payment of tuition by parents has a diminishing return, and that significant benefit can be obtained when parents pay only a portion of the cost of their children’s education. Coupled with the previous section’s recommendation, this suggests that a privately-funded partial-tuition subsidy scheme would be a promising vehicle for broadening access to fee-charging schools. Another plausible approach would be to temporarily subsidize fee-charging schools so that they could build up an endowment of their own, allowing them to eventually become self-sufficient at a lower tuition fee than would be possible without the initial subsidies.

“These ideas are not new. They have in fact already been put into practice in one of the most challenging settings in the world: the city of Quetta in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan. Quetta is a very poor, very rough neighbourhood. Not far from the border with Afghanistan, it was home to one of the weapons trans-shipment sites used by the ISI to supply the mujaheddin during the Afghan jihad and was an international hub for the regional heroin mafia after the rise of the Taliban. It does not have an intrinsically-hospitable climate for women’s rights and education. Quetta is located firmly within northern Pakistan’s tribal belt and is populated mostly by conservative ethnic Pashtuns. An Afghani champion of women’s rights, known as Meena, was assassinated in a Quetta refugee camp in 1987 (reportedly with the help of Gulbuddin

Hekmatyar’s Islamist Hesbiz organization, a mujaheddin group backed at the time by the CIA).

“Despite this context, urban Quetta has been the setting for a successful World Bank education project aimed at increasing girls’ enrollment. Under this project, launched in 1994, families in 11 poor neighbourhoods were asked to select a manager who would open a private school. The new schools were then to be given diminishing subsidies over the first three years of their operation. The planned subsidies were 150 rupees (\$2.60 US) per girl per month in year one, 135 rupees (\$2.33 US) in year two, and 100 rupees (\$1.72 US) in year three. After that, schools were expected to become entirely self-sufficient, receiving no further subsidies.

“Participating schools were required to set aside at least 30 percent of the subsidies for a school endowment to help them achieve self-sufficiency. The new schools were permitted to enroll boys as well, but received no subsidy for doing so. The subsidies for girls were considerably smaller than the 200 rupees per student per month spent by local government schools.

“In any event, financial independence took slightly longer than expected, but most of the schools became self-sufficient by year five. Of the minority of schools that continued to require partial financial assistance at this point, the *largest* subsidy required was just 30 rupees (\$.52 US) per girl per month – 15 percent of the average expenditure of local government schools. The average monthly tuition charged per student in year five was 58 rupees. Both start-up and operating costs for the new private schools worked out to about one-quarter of the costs at a government school. The Quetta project thus combined the use of temporary subsidies for those schools that eventually became self-sufficient with ongoing partial subsidies for schools that needed them.

“The program’s effect on enrollment was dramatic. Initial average enrollment in the treatment neighbourhoods was 45 percent for girls and 56 percent for boys. By the end of the *second* year, these figures had jumped to 71 percent for girls and 76 percent for boys – a substantial increase for both sexes, and a halving of the initial 11 percent gender gap. In the control neighbourhoods (comparable areas that did not participate in the program), enrollment remained essentially unchanged for girls and dropped substantially for boys.

“By concentrating their funds, skills, and volunteer efforts on replicating Quetta-style programs throughout Pakistan and the rest of the developing world, private donors could dramatically raise the enrollment of girls and boys in academically-focused schools while lessening the existing incentive for families to send their children to madrasas or government schools. This approach would be far less costly than trying to extend the government school sector, and less fraught with the indoctrination, corruption, and abysmal facilities maintenance associated with that sector.”

*(Excerpted with permission from a much longer article at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa511.pdf>. Mr. Coulson is Director of the CATO Institute Center for Educational Freedom and the author of Market Education: The Unknown History. He blogs at [www.cato-at-liberty.org](http://www.cato-at-liberty.org).)*

## **Divided by Unison**

**By John LaPlante**

---

Which is more important – community building or educational choice? A controversy in one city in south-central Kansas raises this important question about the definition of a community, and its relationship to education.

The town of Bel Aire, in the northeast corner of the Wichita area, has a population of over 6,600. With an eye towards economic development and population growth, the town purchased and annexed 2,400 acres of largely undeveloped land.

However, the annexed parcel fell within the boundary of the Circle School District, based in a neighboring county. As a result of the annexation, half of Bel Aire’s land was now in the Wichita School District and half in the Circle School District. (The city of Bel Aire does not have its own district.)

On September 17, the Bel Aire City Council, by a 4-1 vote, expressed its support for shifting the boundary between the two school districts, removing the 2,400 acres from the Circle School District and giving it to the Wichita School District.

As you might expect, the Wichita School District thought this was a good idea, while the Circle School District vowed to fight it. Meanwhile, some Bel Aire residents are talking of circulating a petition to block the move.

In local discussions on the topic, several themes stand out, but the predominant question is whether Bel Aire needs one school system or two, and whether the answer to that question trumps everything else.

One position, the one that prevailed in the Bel Aire city council, is that having the whole city within a single district would unify the city and be good for community spirit. “We do need one school district here in Bel Aire,” said one resident. One newspaper account said that proponents of the single-district idea imagine families “gathering at their local high school to cheer for the same team, instead of sending their kids to more than a dozen public and private high schools.”

Another position is that having options among schools and school districts is itself a valuable part of the community and contributes to the education of children. Each district has different offerings. “Why not have the best of both worlds?” asked one mother who led the failing cause. Winston Brooks, superintendent of the Wichita School District, gave a nod towards the value of choice when he touted his district’s ability to offer Bel Aire residents more intra-district choice than the Circle School District could. So who’s right?

The belief that a single educational option is required for community life is a curious one. It is curious because public schools are often sources not of unity but of controversy and division.

For example, does a school district offer too much sex education? Too little? The wrong kind of sex education? These and other questions are likely to arise as long as there is an expectation that everyone should be served by the same system. Indeed, the history of public schools is filled with controversy and even violence over disagreements on subjects ranging from textbooks to busing to how to teach math. In a recent analysis, for instance, the Cato Institute’s Neal McCluskey documented more than 150 instances of “political combat” in public schools during the 2005-06 school year.

The claim that community harmony requires having only one school district is mistaken for another reason: it neglects the other ways we build community and social harmony. Arts groups, business and professional organizations, churches, and social service organizations such as soup kitchens, not to mention chance encounters among citizens

while walking the dog, all build a sense of place, belonging, and community.

In short, the belief, in Bel Aire and elsewhere, that the good life requires a single provider of education in a community is simply misplaced. Equating a single school district with a strong community and setting that option against educational choice presents a complicated matter in far-too-simple terms. Sacrificing greater choice for the sake of having a single football team to rally around is an unfortunate outcome for Kansas education. In a society that values choice and having options, we should place more, not less, importance on having options in schooling.

*(Mr. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, an organization based in Wichita, Kansas. See [www.flinthills.org](http://www.flinthills.org) for more information. Reprinted with permission)*

## WHAT'S NEW?

### Learning Disabilities Can be Prevented

The report of the Second Annual Ontario Research Symposium includes an excellent paper (#2) entitled "Narrowing Achievement Gaps for Children with Special Education Needs". Among other things, the paper states that "up to 70% of later diagnosed LDs can be prevented with a combination of early screening, progress monitoring, and teaching that is responsive to early emerging learning problems".

[www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/research/barnes.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/research/barnes.pdf)

### An Ounce of Prevention

Following on from the above item comes news from BC where a UBC researcher has shown that at-risk children can close the gap if they are taught to read by means of a program called "Firm Foundations" (systematic phonics). <http://clarity.cllrnet.ca/issue4/Clarity4.pdf> (pp 20-23)

### Phonics Phobia

The Toronto District School Board has rejected Remediation Plus, a systematic phonics (Orton-Gillingham) program, on the basis of its "lack of connection to Ministry of Education expectations and its lack of emphasis on reading within a context".

### Should Children be Drugged?

The Multimodal Treatment Study of Children with ADHD suggests that drugs such as Ritalin and Concerta have no long-term benefits and could in fact

be stunting children's development.

[www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/11/12/ndrugs112.xml](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/11/12/ndrugs112.xml)

### Undereducated Educators

A study by Arthur Levine, who recently left the presidency of the prestigious Teachers' College at Columbia University, reports that American colleges of education are giving PhDs to researchers who aren't qualified to hold a PhD. These people, in turn, are providing the research on which public school policy decisions and teacher training is based. [www.goldwaterinstitute.org/AboutUs/ArticleView.aspx?id=1597](http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/AboutUs/ArticleView.aspx?id=1597)

### Competition Works

This 40-minute John Stossel video takes an irreverent look at the American education system, showing what a difference competition makes. The video includes a very interesting section on Belgian schools.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfRUMmTs0ZA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfRUMmTs0ZA)

### Performance Grouping Works

A Montgomery, Alabama school is having remarkable success in lifting its poor and minority students out of the achievement gap. Among other things, it appears that the school's success is due to its practice of grouping its students according to their math and language ability for more than half of the instructional day. [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/03/AR2007110301167.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/03/AR2007110301167.html)

## THE BEST OF THE OQE FORUM

*In the place of our poll, this new feature will showcase one article per issue from the archives. To start us off, here's a little humour from the September 1999 issue on the subject of staff meetings – told from the point of view of a lowly teacher.*

### Meeting(s) Some Need

By Don Cropp

Principals frequently attend meetings, preferably far away from their own establishments. Amazingly, the schools run quite efficiently for days in their absence, proving that principals are not vital cogs in the machinery of education.

Alas, principals also run meetings at their own schools. It is possibly the one activity in which all principals have qualified by examination! Typically, to keep their hand in, they hold regular staff

meetings at which they exercise their dictatorial prerogatives.

The significance which administrators attach to meetings was driven home to me during my last semester's teaching before retirement. As a pawn in my board of education's set of pieces to be sacrificed, I had been transferred to an unfamiliar school.

Soon after, I was invited to a light lunch with other new teachers and selected senior members of the staff. I anticipated an informal get-together over smoked meat sandwiches and juice — but I got a very formal meeting, called to order and run by one of the department heads.

At first, most of us were scratching our heads and wishing we were free to indulge in our favourite pastime of marking homework. But then it dawned on us: the whole meeting had been set up so that the superintendent could evaluate the meeting-running proficiency of our chair, a 'wannabe' vice-principal. The mere fact that the superintendent had deigned to grace our meeting with her presence should have tipped us off immediately that this event was of a significance beyond lowly teachers' understanding.

But I digress. Let's take a look at plebeian, non-superintended staff meetings. Here's how they go. Attendance is compulsory — except for those teachers running football practice. The teachers straggle into the library, picking up a number of documents and a couple of crackers to go with coffee or juice.

The meeting drones on for a hour or two with the staff setting their minds in neutral, carefully eschewing excessive discussion, dispute or debate, lest the meeting be prolonged by one unnecessary minute. Many a gaze is cast wistfully out on to the football field where a few favoured teachers can be seen actually enjoying themselves. Staff meetings are doubtless one reason why the football coach never lacks for eager helpers.

Not being particularly athletic, I developed my own method of countering the soporific nature of the proceedings. I would fix a pleasant look on my face and proceed to occupy myself by solving Bohr's equations for the classical model of the atom with orbiting electrons.

*"Blah, blah ... new copier for the office ..."*  
The trick is to quantize angular momentum, derive an expression for kinetic plus potential energies ...  
*"The teaching staff will use the old office copier..."*

Then, nibbling on a cracker, I remember how Bohr's equation leads to the Ritz Principle. "...  
*During the next month, both machines will be taken over by office staff...."*

Not all staff meetings are so dull, however, some being enlivened by humour, disconnectedness, and dispute. At one pre-exam meeting, a teacher who did not set examinations attempted to display some of his expertise with the preliminary comments — "Something has just passed through my mind!" A teacher at the rear responded, *sotto voce*, "Well, it would; there's nothing there to stop it" As might be expected, he of the permeable mind became a vice-principal in due course.

Then there was the principal who decided to broaden our appreciation of the impending de-streaming of grade 9 by drawing his brush over the political changes occurring in Eastern Europe, the Berlin Wall, Perestroika, Glasnost, etc. I'm still not sure what this principal's point was, but then who can see into the mind of a former head of guidance?

A frisson of excitement ran through one meeting when someone asked: "What are we going to do about love in the hallways?" At the time, students' locker doors were suffering large concavities at pelvic levels due to the amorous, and very public, extracurricular activities of a number of students.

Since neither the principal nor the vice-principal could find the part of the Education Act which made it the other's responsibility, nothing was ever done. But then why would anyone expect to solve problems at a staff meeting? After all, Bohr's equations turned out not to work for atoms involving more than one electron.

*(Mr. Cropp is a retired high school science teacher who now attends no meetings while living at his cottage in Peterborough, Ont.)*

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Amy's Game

*The concealed structure of education*

By Roger F. Bass

---

This book documents the underlying reasons why some children are so damaged by their schools. Among other things, the author touches on inadequate teacher training, the expensive fads that endlessly cycle through, the poor quality of much educational research, and the problems with testing. The author is so blunt that his book is painful to

read, and few will believe what he says – even though most of it is completely accurate. The excerpt shows why he is so angry.

**Excerpt (pages 6-8)**

“Amy seethed with full-blown autism: repetitive, stereotypic behaviours like hand flapping; placing objects in a row and calling them a ‘ta’-wain’ (train); and grabbing people (even strangers) by the cheeks and going nose-to-nose with them while cocking her head and staring into their eyes. She had perfected her signature temper tantrums – screams and hitting now escalated into slamming doors so hard the glass broke. Her few, completely out-of-context words compounded with discipline problems exacerbated by a ten-second attention span.

“It was clear that the preschool teachers would be no help. My first observation found Amy belly down on a dolly, the kind mechanics use to slide under vehicles, breast-stroking herself about 40 miles an hour along a hallway turned autobahn. I assumed her reckless driving was some kind of physical therapy or reward for good behaviour, but it wasn’t. Straight-faced, they told me it was her *reading lesson*. Here’s their two-part explanation.

“Part 1. Individuals recapitulate the evolutionary steps of their species. Each of us begins as a one-celled organism floating in our mother’s womb, just like the first life adrift in the primeval oceans. Part 2. We then develop in stages that replicate our species’ climb up the phylogenic ladder: single-celled to multi-cellular to re-enacting millions of years of evolution.”

“They surmised that Amy was at the amphibian stage; so propelling herself alligator-like down a hallway would therapeutically elevate her into a more complex life form capable of benefiting from reading instruction.

“My mentors were experimental psychologists, not educators, so while suppressing questions about why auto mechanics don’t devolve into alligators, I asked for data on her progress. They had none. But their strong general impression was that scooting down hallways for almost a year hadn’t improved her phylogenic standing. The daycare staff attributed that stagnation to the severity of her handicaps. I asked for published research on the instructional method. They had none and knew of

none. What they did have was a preschool teacher who’s heard a sketchy introduction to the technique in a special education class and, without training or supervision, used it with Amy. Anyone who had risen to the primate level could see it was a failure. So I did something very different. I used proven procedures under the supervision of an experienced behavioural psychologist.

“First, we identified effective rewards, and Amy had plenty: being pulled on a rug, bouncing on my knee, throwing a ball, swinging, riding in a wagon, and more, all of them normal, age-appropriate, inexpensive, easy to deliver, and obvious.

“Second, we started where she was at – ten seconds of eye contact that allowed me to prompt compliance skills I’d use to teach language. Within 10 one-hour sessions over several weeks, Amy’s attention span was 45 *minutes* (which is about the same as a college student’s) and she was reading individual words on cards.

“Third, those word cards were combined – initially into formulaic sentences and then into novel expressions of her own. The card-sentences included commands from me to her (‘Amy throw ball’, ‘Amy look at me’, etc.) and requests from her to me (‘Amy ride swing’, ‘Amy listen music’). Increasing Amy’s compliance reduced her disruptive behaviour to zero within 15 hours, and it stayed there.

“I couldn’t wait to see the staff’s delight in Amy’s progress and, together, extend the program to other children. Neither happened. Instead, I was politely thanked and never asked to return. But fate had other plans.

“Several years later, I was a graduate student in psychology when college faculty and public school administrators again randomly assigned me to Amy’s classroom. Only her behaviour stunned me more than the coincidence. Everything she’d learned was lost, and her school files contained nothing about all she had so quickly accomplished.

“Amy disintegrated into physically-aggressive tantrums that peaked with smearing feces on bathroom walls and herself. Consultants hired by the school recommended putting her into a timeout box for engaging in the kind of disruptive behaviours she had stopped while a preschooler. No specialized training was needed to see that isolation was the worst possible tactic, because it gave her an

unregulated space to self-stim. Not long after, Amy was placed in a residential institution for the severely-retarded, even though by age five she was clearly autistic, not retarded, and with proper instruction, restrictive care would never be needed.

“Locking Amy away was an above-ground burial of her school’s failure.”

## Super Crunchers

*Why thinking-by-numbers is the new way to be smart*

By Ian Ayres

Written in a lively and engaging way, this book discusses the confrontation between the traditional approach to decision-making (using personal experience and intuition) and the modern approach (analyzing huge data banks). “Data-driven decision making is not revolutionizing just baseball and business; it’s changing the way that education policy, health care reimbursements, even tax regulations are crafted.” The excerpt follows up on a description of Direct Instruction, a scripted approach to teaching invented by Siegfried Engelmann which is stunningly successful, especially with disadvantaged students, but which is anathema to the education establishment.

*Excerpt (pages 166-167)*

“The story of Engelmann’s struggle with the educational establishment raises once again the core themes of this book. We see the struggle of intuition, personal experience, and philosophical inclination waging war against the brute force of numbers. Engelmann for decades has staked out the leading edge of the Super Cruncher’s camp. ‘Intuition is perhaps your worst enemy,’ Engelmann said, ‘if you want to be smart in the instructional arena. You have to look at the kid’s performance.’

“In part, the struggle in education is a struggle over power. The education establishment and the teacher on the line want to keep their authority to decide what happens in the classroom. Engelmann and the mandate of ‘scientifically-based’ research are a direct threat to that power. Teachers in the classroom realize that their freedom and discretion to innovate is threatened. Under Direct Instruction, it is Engelmann who runs the show, who sets up the algorithm, who tests which script works best.

“It’s not just the teacher’s power and discretion that is at stake. Status and power often go hand

in hand. The rise of Super Crunching threatens the status and respectability of many traditional jobs.

“Take the lowly loan officer. Once, being a loan officer for a bank was a moderately high status position. Loan officers were well paid and had real power to decide who did and did not qualify for loans. They were disproportionately white and male.

“Today, loan decisions are instead made at a central office based on the results of a statistical algorithm. Banks started learning that giving loan officers discretion was bad business. It’s not just that officers used this discretion to help their friends, or to unconsciously (or consciously) discriminate against minorities. It turns out that looking a customer in the eye and establishing a relationship doesn’t help predict whether or not the customer will really repay the loan.

“Bank loan officers, stripped of their discretion, have become nothing more than glorified secretaries. They literally just type in applicant data and click send. It’s little wonder that their status and salaries have plummeted (and officers are much less likely to be white men). In education, the struggle between the intuitivists and the Super Crunchers is ongoing, but in consumer lending, the battle ended long ago.”

### AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Let’s say you’re thinking of going for a stroll around the neighbourhood, but you’re worried it might begin to rain. If you live in Canada, you can now find out almost for certain if precipitation is in your near future. By visiting [www.weatheroffice.gc.ca/radar/index\\_e.html](http://www.weatheroffice.gc.ca/radar/index_e.html) and following the bread crumbs, you can see a radar image that shows whether it’s already raining or snowing in the area where your weather comes from. This web-site also allows you to see precipitation patterns three hours ago and then “play” their progress in 20-minute increments, allowing you to be sure which way the wind is blowing.

The Society for Quality Education is non-profit, non-partisan, and non-sectarian. Our charitable number is 85857 5087 RR001. Views on different aspects of education are many and varied. This publication contains opinions and theories from a variety of sources. The SQE executive does not necessarily subscribe to or advocate all or any of such opinions or theories, and readers are invited to reach their own conclusions.