Cheating teachers

It is shameful that a small minority of teachers feel the need to help their students cheat on tests ("To Catch a Cheat," Research, Winter 2004). The issue says something larger about our society that is very hard to fathom and is simply unacceptable.

Brian A. Jacob and Steven D. Levitt should be commended for their excellent work in analyzing this problem and for their concrete recommendations of ways to prevent it. I am pleased that the authors believe that the problem "is not so widespread as to call into question the integrity of the nation's educators," because our teachers really are America's unsung heroes.

It is a travesty and an outrage that the few rotten apples in this study may be used by opponents of educational accountability, like the reforms of the No Child Left Behind Act, to charge that testing should be eliminated because the pressure it brings causes cheating. If someone cheats on his/her job application, we don’t blame the form. Cheaters get caught.

The authors themselves say that their results 'show that explicit cheating by school personnel is not likely to be a serious enough problem by itself to call into question high-stakes testing.' They astutely point out that extreme cheating is rare and that it would be easy and cheap to eliminate.

With testing and accountability, schools have a powerful tool to monitor the progress of their students. Tests that evaluate students’ progress are the key to serving them. There are some who think accountability won’t work. They are wrong—of course it will.

Rod Paige
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The inclusion mandate

While the situation described by Ann Christy Dybvik ("Autism and the Inclusion Mandate," Feature, Winter 2004) can and does occur, it is not the norm in special education. In reality, there are many excellent special-education programs around the country, programs that provide highly qualified teachers for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, due to poor working conditions, some students with disabilities are taught by unlicensed teachers and do not get the instruction they need in order to progress.

Dybvik’s claim that inclusion is done primarily for social reasons is not accurate. In fact, students with disabilities are placed in general education classes most often because they will make greater gains in these classrooms. During the past 12 years, the period in which inclusion has been used more extensively, the number of students with disabilities who have graduated from high school has tripled; the number attending college has doubled. Also, if students with disabilities are to meet the adequate yearly progress goals set forth in the No Child Left Behind Act, they must have access to the general education curriculum.

To improve special education, we need to ensure full funding so that districts can hire certified special-education teachers; reduce paperwork so special-education teachers have more time for planning and instruction; and provide administrators with training in special education. The Council for Exceptional Children has recommended that all of the above be incorporated into the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Drew Allbritten
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Council for Exceptional Children
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How to decentralize

The problems of governance structure and budgeting described by Jon Fullerton and William Ouchi ("Mounting Debt" and "Academic Freedom," Forum, Winter 2004) are not unique to education. The same problems of overcentralization plague the management of all government enterprises—from policing to transportation to environmental protection.

The constraints placed on public employees most often emerge in response to some specific error (perceived or real) by an employee—an error that we want to ensure never happens again. If one school principal spends public funds on pencils that we believe were ineffective or inappropriate, we quickly demand that all teachers use a required curriculum. If one teacher uses a curriculum that we believe was ineffective or inappropriate, we quickly demand that all teachers use a required curriculum.

Consequently, to the recommendations offered by Fullerton and Ouchi, let me suggest an additional one: Minimize the potential for scandals and other embarrassments that can create pressures to recentralize authority.

To do this, those who would implement these decentralizing reforms should first seek to explicitly identify the potential indiscretions that are most likely to produce a scandal. They will miss some, of course. But they
ought to be able to identify the high-probability, big-consequence errors—
the mistakes that when exposed by an inspector general, candidate for office,
or crusading journalist are most likely to engender a crippling new centralizing
requirement.

Second, they should train the people to whom they propose to allocate
more discretion to recognize and prevent the most likely and most damaging
indiscretions. Superintendents, principals, and teachers need to understand
that though their authority is not complete, they are still responsible not only
for educating students but also for maintaining citizens’ faith in the integrity of
public servants and the process of educational governance.

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Finding good leaders

I had always planned to semi-retire into education after I had saved
enough in my business career to supplement a teacher’s pay. Now that I am
moving from the business world to education, I read Frederick Hess’s article on
educational leadership (“Lifting the Barrier,” Forum, Fall 2003) with great antici-
pation. Unfortunately, I found his arguments thin.

The article makes a number of poorly defended assertions. First, Hess
argues that a principal does not need to have classroom experience to judge a
teacher’s performance or to mentor his charges. Teaching is much like the sales
profession. Unless you have carried a bag and walked the streets, it is extremely
difficult to gain the respect of the sales force. Without the ability to feel their
pain, one will be long on punitive sticks and short on supportive carrots.

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New Publication:

Government Failure:
E.G. West on Education
Edited by James Tooley & James Stanfield
Foreword by Antony Jay
Price $22.50 plus shipping

This publication is a selection of E. G. West’s papers containing a wealth
of economic and philosophical analysis which can guide policymakers in
the field of education. The chapters show how state monopoly provision
of education has led to a particular model of schooling which does not
work for many of those who use the education system – parents and chil-
dren and that it is a model that is least likely to benefit the poor, although
they could benefit from programmes to help fund their education.

The editors suggest that there are four major arguments in West’s work that are especially relevant today.
Firstly, the historical record shows that the educational needs of almost everyone, including the poor, were met
without the state. Secondly, that the demand for imposing state education was made by important opinion-
formers acting on misplaced reasoning and spurious evidence. Thirdly, there are practical ways in which
education can be reclaimed from the state, with examples from all over the world (and interesting histori-
cal agitation for some of these reforms), and finally, that if education is to be reclaimed from the state, then
we are also free to liberate education from 19th century ideas of schooling.

In an era when there is increasing dissatisfaction with state education provision, but in which the state has
ever greater control of the curriculum – including the teaching of citizenship – and management of
schools, the papers in this book have never been more relevant.

2002, Occasional Paper 130, 0-255 36552 7, 212pp

Still Available:

The Global Education Industry
Lessons from Private Education in Developing Countries
James Tooley
Foreword by Birgitta Kantola
Price $22.50 plus shipping

The first edition of this pioneering book produced surprising conclusions from research around the world
into the extent of private education. Drawing on examples from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, India,
Indonesia, Peru, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and other countries, Professor Tooley gave a
snapshot of private education that was unknown to many readers; contrary to expectations, the private edu-
cation sector was large in the countries studied, was innovative, and was not the exclusive domain of the
wealthy. On the contrary, he found that the private sector often provided social responsibility, subsidised
places and student loan schemes.

Tooley identifies the factors that impede or facilitate the development of the private education sector in var-
dious countries, focusing on the regulatory regimes that may impinge upon private education. This led him
to conclude with a proposal for the role of for-profit education enterprises in promoting equitable develop-
ment.

In this second edition, Professor Tooley contributes a new preface which shows how his work has devel-
oped and extended into other countries. In particular, he provides a fascinating account of how private edu-
cation is flourishing in China.


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Second, Hess believes that graduate programs leading to an administrative certificate do not provide effective quality control. His evidence is that the standardized test scores of students earning MBAs are higher than those of doctoral candidates in the same universities’ schools of education. It is clear that the higher compensation and competitive challenge available in business attracts more capable candidates; that is the state of our values, not a condemnation of our education schools.

I plan to take the best available path in attempting to become a great administrator. I have acquired some business and leadership experience; now I plan to pay my dues to acquire the practical experience and relationships to become a well-rounded school leader.

MIKE FREEDMAN
Oceanside, California

To those who worry that the compensation afforded to principals and superintendents is not high enough to attract good talent (Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Broad Foundation, “The Power to Perform,” Forum, Fall 2003), I would refer them to the extensive literature on what drives job satisfaction and performance. In short, it is not about the money. Give a principal or superintendent a clear mandate and clear expectations; a reasonable timeframe in which to meet those expectations; and the freedom to act decisively on staffing, budget allocations, and curriculum, and you will find no shortage of talented applicants. Interestingly, the same holds true in every other human enterprise.

MARK NASSUTTI
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Civic education

In “Tug of War” (Research, Fall 2003), James B. Murphy argues that “the attempt to inculcate civic values in our schools is at best ineffective and often undermines the intrinsic moral purpose of schooling.”

Murphy’s first argument relies on the empirical claim that civics classes are ineffective because they do not “foster desirable knowledge, attitudes, and conduct.” He cites “influential research by [M. Kent] Jennings and Kenneth Langton [which] found that the high-school civics curriculum had little effect on any aspect of civic values.” Murphy is referring to a 1968 article that derived its conclusions from asking students just six miscellaneous factual questions.

Murphy concedes that this picture has been complicated by Richard Niemi and Jane Junn’s book Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn...
correspondence

(1998). As Murphy summarizes their argument, Niemi and Junn “found that, although the civics curriculum had much less effect on civic knowledge and values than did the home environment, civics courses did make some difference. . . . However, as with earlier studies, Niemi and Junn found that civics courses had virtually no effect on attitudes.”

In fact, Niemi and Junn write that “the evidence points strongly in the direction of course effects” on students’ attitudes as well as knowledge. They analyzed the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment, which asked only two questions about values or attitudes. Thus the authors recognize that they have little data on attitudes. Nevertheless, the courses seem to raise students’ scores on the only two attitudes that were measured: confidence in government and belief in the value of elections.

Niemi and Junn further cite an extensive body of research—all produced after Jennings and Langton’s work—showing that civics classes do help to make young people into knowledgeable, engaged, and/or concerned citizens.

More recently, Judith Torney-Purta’s analysis of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement’s civics assessment (given to 90,000 14-year-olds in 28 countries) found that civics instruction correlates, controlling for demographic factors, with improved civics knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Likewise, according to The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait (a survey of Americans conducted in 2002), students who reported that their teachers led discussions of politics and government were more involved in their communities and more attentive to the news than other students.

To be sure, there are principled disagreements about what makes a good citizen. At the same time, there is an enormous amount of common ground, as evidenced by the detailed recommendations in the Civic Mission of Schools, a report issued jointly in 2003 by the Carnegie Corporation and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE). This report was written and endorsed by self-identified liberal and conservative scholars and representatives of groups as diverse as the Heritage Foundation, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Murphy reminds us of the poten-
tial tension between teaching the truth and trying to make the right kinds of citizens. However, his reading of the empirical literature is inaccurate and incomplete, and he overlooks a broad consensus on goals.

There is much more basis for optimism about civics than he admits.

Peter Levine
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Not getting it

I was pleased to see Lynne V. Cheney’s review of Kieran Egan’s Getting It Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget (“Progressively Worse,” Fall 2003). Egan is one of the few writers on education who thinks outside the box.

The irony is that although Cheney has little use for the progressives, her own rather conventional ideological critique is dwarfed by the power, originality, and range of Egan’s attack. It is almost as if she is reluctant to come to grips with an argument mounted on historical, intellectual, and imaginative grounds instead of one framed by political positions.

Egan’s critique exposes progressivism’s historical roots in the potent Darwinian metaphor of evolution toward progress. Developmental psychology has produced a body of theory, experimentation, and statistical analysis controlled by the assumption that a child’s brain will change, evolve, and progress. The charting and understanding of that progress is the thing of interest.

But if we free ourselves of the developmental cliché, we may think of the brain as more like an eye. Since eyes don’t change in dramatic ways, the eye metaphor might lead us to become less interested in whatever changes we could register inside the brain itself. We might spend more time thinking about things outside the brain that could offer the best kinds of stimulation and training to that organ, such as a demanding curriculum. By focusing on the development of the brain rather than culture and curriculum, progressives have squandered untold resources on unfruitful developmental research and theory, on stale positivism.

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