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# AMERICAN Educator

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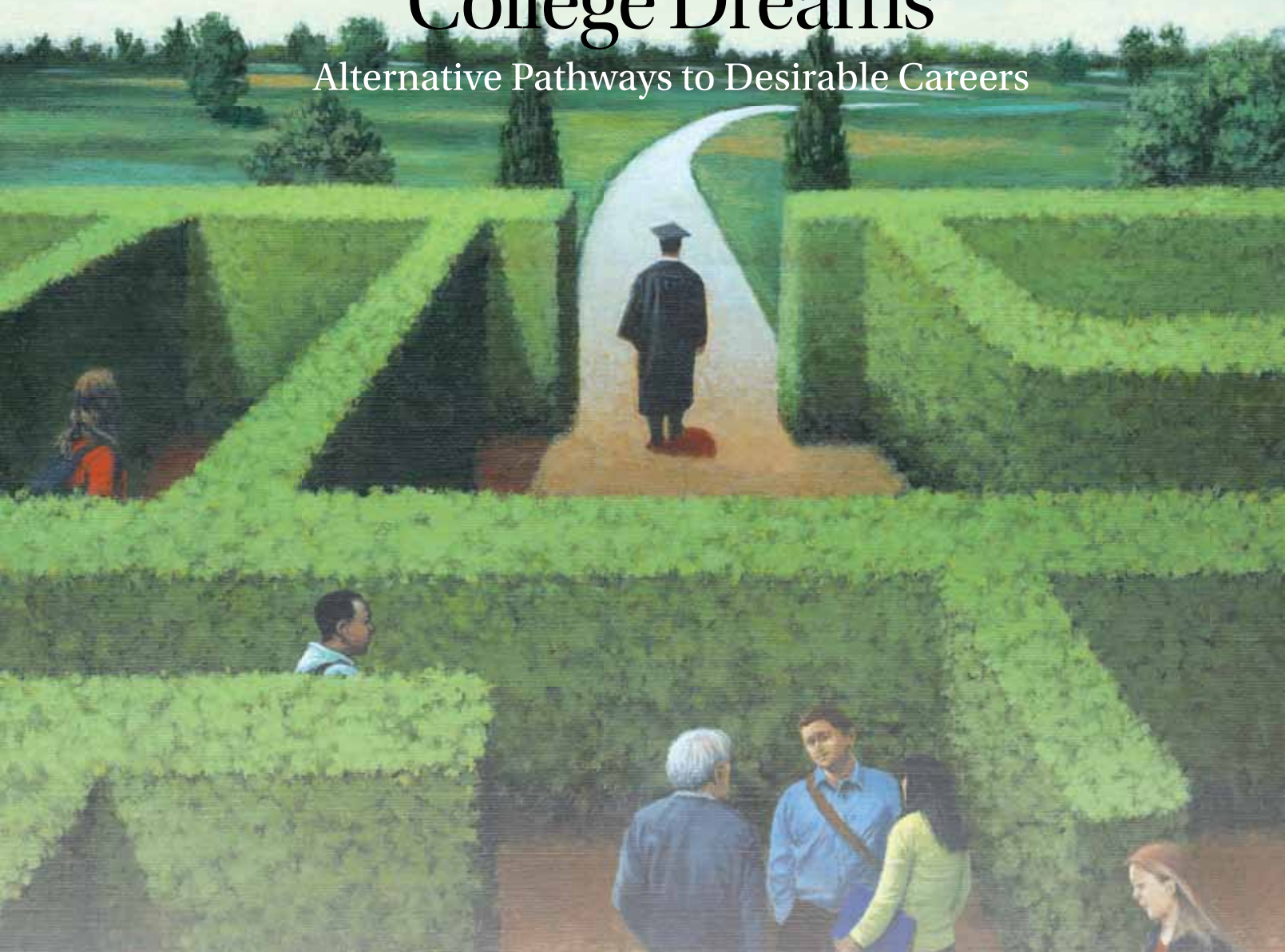
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# Beyond One-Size-Fits-All College Dreams

Alternative Pathways to Desirable Careers



BY JAMES E. ROSENBAUM, JENNIFER L. STEPHAN, AND  
JANET E. ROSENBAUM

**A**sk middle and high school students if they plan to graduate from college and the vast majority will likely answer yes. Even students whose grades are below average or downright abysmal will nod their heads and

say they sincerely believe they will not only gain admission to college, but will earn a four-year degree. This desire among practically all students to attain a bachelor's degree is both natural (given our society's emphasis on college as the key to a good life) and worth encouraging (especially since higher studies can lead to a good life of the mind).

A four-year college degree has long been an aspiration for the nation's highest-achieving students. But over the past couple of decades, two dramatic changes have occurred: most of society became convinced that a bachelor's degree is necessary to land a good job, and many educators responded by encouraging all students to go to college. Today, most high school graduates are going to college, but that's not necessarily good news. The fact is, few are earning four-year (or even two-year) degrees.

While we laud the college-for-all ideal, we believe that unless students are better informed, the movement will be self-defeating.

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With thousands of higher education institutions offering open admissions, it is true that virtually all students can go to college. Yet less than half of high school seniors planning to get bachelor's degrees succeed in this goal, and completion rates are less than 20 percent for low-achieving students. Those who are poorly prepared end up in remedial courses—many drop out without earning a single college credit. Meanwhile, they have wasted precious time and money that could have been spent on career-focused certificates or associate's degrees that have better outcomes than are generally recognized.

In short, with our good intentions, we actually mislead the youth who most need our guidance. And, with our imprecise language, we actually mislead each other too. In everyday language and in formal policy discussions, the word “college” is used as a synonym for “bachelor's degree.” Colleges have much more to offer than just four-year degrees—and recognizing that fact would

In everyday language, the word “college” is used as a synonym for “bachelor's degree.” Colleges have much more to offer than just four-year degrees.

go a long way toward rescuing the college-for-all movement. Although the policy rhetoric now includes “college- and career-ready” goals, that hasn't had much impact. Too many four-year colleges still make exaggerated claims about students' future earnings, too many community colleges advise nearly all young students to enroll in BA-transfer programs (regardless of how many remedial courses they will need), and most students and parents only consider BA plans, without any awareness of trade-offs or alternatives.

Before diving into the research, we'd like to note that withholding potentially discouraging information from youth appears to be a widespread societal problem—not a problem limited to the education field. We conduct research in both the health and education fields, and we often see adults' idealism getting in the way of better outcomes for youth. For example, just last year one of us (Janet Rosenbaum) completed a study of programs to encourage abstinence among teenagers. Like other research, this study found that such programs tend to be ineffective in their goal to promote abstinence. More disturbingly, condom use among abstinence program participants was drastically lower. Likely, the lower condom use is due to three ways in which many abstinence advocates implemented their deeply felt ideals: (1) they encouraged students to follow a narrow, idealized course of action (i.e., abstinence only); (2) they withheld information from students about the extremely high (80 percent) failure rates of abstinence programs, and some gave inaccurate information about condom effectiveness; and (3) they persisted with their idealized programs instead of alternative sex education programs with better outcomes (such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Programs That Work, some of which result in greater sexual abstinence than abstinence-only programs).<sup>1</sup> Some observers simply ridicule these abstinence advocates and their tightly held beliefs,

but we do not. We are mystified by what we are increasingly seeing as idealism that prevents optimal outcomes across youth-related fields. We think our society's tendency to advocate BAs for all is a good example of this problem. Somehow, across fields, we must find a way of being honest with our youth without crushing their dreams. Short term, the truth about college might be disheartening. Long term, knowing the truth is the only way to accomplish one's goals.

This paper aims to identify three elements of the BA-for-all movement that are potentially harmful: (1) the idealization of the BA degree, which results in ignoring excellent options like an applied associate's degree in mechanical design technology, graphic communication technologies, dental hygiene, or computer networking; (2) the promise of college access, which results in high school students seeing their slightly older peers go off to college, but not seeing the trouble many have once on campus; and (3) the cultivation of stigma-free remediation, which results in many “college” students not even knowing that they are in remedial, noncredit courses. In discussing each of these issues below, we call for three simple remedies: realizing that many good jobs do not require a BA, fully informing students about their options, and, as students select goals, honestly telling them what it will take to succeed.

## 1. Idealization of the BA Degree

The BA-for-all movement presents an oversimplified, idealized goal: everyone should strive for a BA. This goal is based on several misleading assumptions:

- BAs have a million-dollar payoff.
- BAs guarantee higher earnings.
- High earnings signal good jobs.
- BAs lead to better jobs than AAs.
- Alternative degrees prevent BAs.
- People with BAs would never return to college to get AAs.

In addition to being misleading, each of these assumptions discourages considering alternative backup options. Let's briefly examine each assumption.

### **Assumption: BAs have a million-dollar payoff.**

Far too often, the message in public service ads, the educational reform literature, and guidance counselors' advice is that BA degrees have a million-dollar payoff in lifetime earnings.<sup>2</sup> This message is simple and powerful—and students have gotten it to an impressive extent. Over recent decades, the proportion of high school students planning to get a BA has steadily increased.<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2004, 89 percent of high school graduates planned to earn a BA; 6.5 percent planned to attend college but did not expect to graduate from a four-year college; 3.5 percent did not have plans; and *less than 1 percent (0.54 percent) planned not to attend college.*<sup>4</sup> In other words, nearly all high school graduates, regardless of academic achievement, planned to attend college, and 89 percent planned to get bachelor's degrees. In interviews, many



students explain that they want a BA because of its earnings payoffs.<sup>5</sup>

**Assumption: BAs guarantee higher earnings.**

While the million-dollar lifetime payoff may be accurate, *on average*, earnings vary greatly within educational levels, and there is substantial overlap in the earnings distributions of different educational levels. As shown in the first table on page 6, it is true that people with BAs have higher median earnings than those with AAs, but 25 percent of people with BAs have earnings below the median earnings of those with AAs, and even substantially below the earnings of the top 25 percent of people who did not go beyond high school.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the fact that not all jobs that require a BA pay more than jobs that require an AA or a high school diploma, many BA graduates have jobs that don't use their four-year-degree-level skills.<sup>7</sup>

Of students with BAs, we can predict who will be in that bottom earnings quartile. Among BA graduates, those who were in the bottom 25 percent of high school achievement tend to have lower earnings than students with average achievement.<sup>8</sup> Even 30 years after high school, the average annual payoff for low-achieving BAs is less than \$3,000,<sup>9</sup> which isn't likely to add up to anywhere near a million-dollar payoff over a 40-, 50-, or even 60-year career. Students are rarely told this, and some low-achieving students believe a bachelor's degree will guarantee a million-dollar payoff *even if they only do the minimum necessary to graduate*.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, students who attend less selective colleges also get a lower-than-average payoff for a bachelor's degree.<sup>11</sup>

Another way to predict students' future earnings is by what they are studying: some majors have a big payoff. The median annual earnings of young adults with BAs in a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) field is \$12,500 (37 percent) higher than for those with BAs in the humanities.<sup>12</sup> As shown in the second table on page 6, at age 26 the earnings difference between those with a BA and those with a certificate or AA is not necessarily very large. In fact, those with a certificate or AA in a health-related field earn about the same as those with a BA in a health-related field.<sup>13</sup> Only in the STEM fields do we see a large difference of about \$15,000 per year. Although these findings only apply to age 26, for the students who have limited time, interest, and funds for college, these quick payoffs of certificates and AAs are likely to be valued, and they influence income at a time when many people are starting families.

When we stop and think about it, these numbers are not really a surprise. We all know that many people with jobs that require a BA (e.g., teachers, social workers, etc.) are paid less than some people with jobs that require an AA (e.g., computer specialists, engineering technicians, mechanics, heating/air conditioner repairers, dental and medical assistants, insurance appraisers, and funeral directors). Moreover, there are indications that the BA payoff has declined in recent years.<sup>14</sup> Of course, we also know that earnings is not the only criterion by which students should select their career. However, most of us don't know about the other rewards in associate's degree jobs, so let's turn to those now.

**Assumption: High earnings signal good jobs.**

Our society's emphasis on the million-dollar payoff is also mis-

leading in suggesting that earnings should be the primary criterion for choosing one's education and occupation. While economic theory recognizes that high pay is sometimes offered to offset disagreeable job conditions, this is rarely considered by policymakers or students. However, job-placement specialists are well aware of these issues. In a study of colleges offering AA degrees, job-placement staff report that they urge their AA graduates to *avoid* the highest-paying jobs<sup>15</sup> because of the five Ds: they tend to be dirty, demanding, dangerous, dead-end (meaning they don't lead to long-term payoffs), or deceptive (such as promising high commissions that rarely occur). These job-placement staff are responsible for helping their graduates get jobs that are all-around good; they urge graduates to take jobs that use the skills they've learned, and that provide job training and future promotions. Although these concerns were expressed about the AA-

Some low-achieving students believe a bachelor's degree will guarantee a million-dollar payoff even if they only do the minimum necessary to graduate.

degree labor market, we suspect they apply to some of the BA-degree market as well. Focus on high pay in starting jobs is self-defeating if there is no potential for advancement.

**Assumption: BAs lead to better jobs than AAs.**

Although BAs lead to higher average earnings than AA degrees, a focus on high pay can be self-defeating across one's entire career if it means ignoring the many other factors that make for rewarding work. Although researchers and policymakers tend to focus on earnings, working adults evaluate their jobs on many other dimensions. In a recent national survey, working adults reported that their jobs vary on eight conditions: feedback, autonomy, skill variety, say in decisions, workload, safety, stress, and the fairness of pay.<sup>16</sup> *All eight of these job conditions are more strongly related to job satisfaction than actual earnings.* Moreover, we find that BAs are not the only way to get a job that offers good conditions. Associate's degrees are just as strongly related to these job conditions as BAs are.

**Assumption: Alternative degrees prevent BAs.**

The focus on BAs not only suggests that associate's degrees are inferior, it also suggests that one must choose one or the other. Some community college counselors discourage associate's degrees because they will lead to "settling" for an inferior degree and divert students from higher degrees.

While low degree-completion rates are a concern at two-year colleges, many of the students who complete associate's degrees go on to further degrees, including bachelor's degrees. In a national survey of the high school class of 1992, by the year 2000, 10 percent of high school graduates had earned an AA. Of these AA recipients, 78 percent also got further education, and 34 percent earned a BA.<sup>17</sup>

In a small local survey we conducted that focused only on associate's degree recipients in occupational (i.e., business, health, and technical) fields, we found a similar pattern. While this sample may not be representative of the larger population, it provides one of the few sources that allows seven years of follow-up after the associate's degree. In this sample of 80 occupational associate's degree recipients from community colleges, 54 percent got further education, and 35 percent earned a BA or higher degree. Compared with the national percentages reported above, this sample shows fewer pursuing further education, but almost exactly the same proportion earning BA or higher degrees. In addition, 6 percent of our respondents earned master's degrees (often MBAs).



**Assumption: People with BAs would never return to college to get AAs.**

Associate's degrees have become much more common over the last several decades, and they have become a formal requirement for certain skilled jobs. In our local survey, we found four BA graduates who returned to college to earn associate's degrees. Some students wanted jobs that are more satisfying or allow them to help other people. Others wanted more technical skills or more practical skills. One reported that an AA in radiography led to a higher-paying job (over \$80,000 a year) than her prior teaching job. These individuals clearly did not believe that people with BAs get better jobs than those with AAs. We have not found any nationally representative research to indicate how often this happens, but the fact that it happens at all indicates that our nation's preconceptions about two- and four-year degrees are too simplistic.

**I**n summary, the million-dollar lifetime payoff makes a compelling message, and it may be the best way to get students' attention, but this simple message is incomplete and far too narrow. Failing to elaborate on and clarify the message can lead to serious problems. First, this oversimplified message does not warn students that some of them will receive lower earnings from a BA than most associate's degree recipients, despite the fact that these lower earnings are predictable from students' achievement, college, and major. Second, it encourages a focus on earn-

ings in choosing college majors and first jobs, when other job conditions are at least as important for life and work satisfaction. Third, it encourages students to pursue the bachelor's degree without regard to risks of interruption. For students at great risk of having their college careers interrupted by work or family concerns, planning a degree sequence (certificate, associate's degree, and then bachelor's degree) might provide backup options. Indeed, some colleges have designed their curriculum to encourage students to get certificates and associate's degrees along the way, before getting bachelor's degrees. Fourth, low-achieving students are rarely warned that they have a low probability of attaining a BA (a point we discuss further below). The million-

dollar payoff makes a compelling message, but it provides poor guidance for helping students make good career choices. While skill demands have increased in many jobs, many of these are mid-skill jobs that require more education than high school, but not a BA.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. The Promise of College Access

In the 1960s and '70s, high school guidance counselors typically acted as gatekeepers. They discouraged low-achieving students from attending college.<sup>19</sup> While some counselors may still do some gatekeeping today, many high school guidance counselors now report that they don't like the idea of being gatekeepers and don't function that way.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike prior counselors, today's counselors do not have to discourage low-achieving students from attending college: many two- and four-year colleges now have open admissions. Since the 1960s, while enrollment at four-year colleges has doubled, enrollment at community colleges has increased fivefold. Today, nearly half of all new college students attend community colleges, and counselors can promise virtually all students they will be able to attend college, since open admissions offers access for nearly anyone.

However, although no one will regret a reduction in the old model of gatekeeping (especially since far too many students were discouraged from attending college on the basis of their family income, skin color, or gender, not because of their academic achievement), all is not well when it comes to counseling in today's high schools. A serious problem is the lack of counselors—a problem that may be getting much worse as the nation's economic troubles affect school districts' budgets. Data from 2001 reveal that, on average, the ratio of counselors to students is 1 to 284.<sup>21</sup> In some high schools, the workload for counselors is truly inconceivable, with the ratio exceeding 1 to 700.<sup>22</sup>

Possibly as a result of these workload issues, today's typical counselor tends to present an oversimplified picture of open admissions. Counselors often say that students can enter college even with low achievement in high school, but they rarely warn that low-achieving students cannot enter college-credit classes or certain programs.<sup>23</sup> Avoiding these details keeps students optimistic and encourages their college plans. However, it also gives students insufficient information to make sound decisions (including deciding to work harder in high school).

Although open admissions has provided much-needed second

chances to many, those of us in the education world tend to focus on its benefits while ignoring its costs. In a national longitudinal survey conducted in 1992, high school seniors who planned on getting a college degree but had poor grades (Cs or lower) had less than a 20 percent chance of completing any degree in the 10 years after high school;<sup>24</sup> similar results were found in a study conducted in 2000. More recent research using data collected in Florida in 2007 shows remarkably similar results: for students with a C average in high school, only 19 percent earned any credential (certificate, AA, or BA) in the six years after high school.<sup>25</sup> Open admissions is truly a wonderful second chance for the nearly 20 percent who succeed. However, the vast majority of students who were low achieving in high school fail to get any college degree, and *many don't get a single college credit*.<sup>26</sup>

How many of these students would have made other plans at the end of high school if they had known their chances of success in college were so slim? How many would have planned to earn a certificate and/or a two-year degree on their way to earning a BA? How many would have tried harder and gotten better grades in high school if they had known that it would make a difference?

Although these examples seem to blame counselors, counselors often don't have a choice. Setting aside the counselor-to-

student ratio problem already mentioned, they face three structural influences that limit their actions. First, most counselors cannot get authoritative information about their graduates' college outcomes. Data on colleges' graduation rates are rarely provided, and whatever numbers are available usually do not apply to the graduates of any one particular high school, since several high schools usually feed into each community college. Second, even if counselors had good information, their many noncounseling duties (like copious paperwork) mean that most of them spend less than 20 percent of their time on college counseling.<sup>27</sup> Third, and most important, counselors feel limited in what they can say. The BA-for-all norm prevents counselors from providing candid information. Many counselors report that they would receive complaints from parents and principals if they informed students that their poor high school grades suggest they aren't prepared for college courses. Some counselors report they would lose their jobs if they gave such advice.<sup>28</sup>

Like the million-dollar payoff, the promise of "open admissions" is accurate but incomplete. Open admissions lets students into classes on college campuses, but not necessarily into college-credit classes, and noncredit classes (e.g., basic skills, remedial, and avocational) don't lead to degrees.<sup>29</sup>

The result of all this oversimplified information is that seniors

### Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers Ages 25 and Older, by Gender and Education Level, 2008

	Females			Males		
	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile
High School Graduate	\$20,800	\$28,400	\$38,000	\$26,900	\$39,000	\$53,200
Associate's Degree	\$26,800	\$36,800	\$51,100	\$35,700	\$50,100	\$68,000
Bachelor's Degree	\$33,900	\$47,000	\$65,500	\$43,800	\$65,800	\$96,800

SOURCE: SANDY BAUM, JENNIFER MA, AND KATHLEEN PAYEA, *EDUCATION PAYS 2010: THE BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY* (NEW YORK: COLLEGE BOARD, 2010).

### Median Earnings of Workers at Age 26 by Field of Concentration

	Workers with a BA degree	Workers with a highest credential of certificate or AA degree
Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)	\$46,052	\$30,922
Health-Related	\$45,680	\$45,968
Professional	\$39,912	\$35,188
Vocational-Technical	\$39,360	\$33,476
Social Science	\$38,212	\$28,528
Humanities	\$33,552	\$26,812

SOURCE: LOUIS JACOBSON AND CHRISTINE MOKHER, *PATHWAYS TO BOOSTING THE EARNINGS OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS BY INCREASING THEIR EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT* (WASHINGTON, DC: HUDSON INSTITUTE AND CNA, 2009), WWW.HUDSON.ORG.

### Socioeconomic Status Quartile among Two-Year College Students

	Public	Private
Low SES	21%	26%
Low-Mid SES	23%	24%
High-Mid SES	27%	16%
High SES	28%	33%

SOURCE: AUTHORS' CALCULATIONS BASED ON THE NATIONAL EDUCATION LONGITUDINAL STUDY.

### High School Grades Quartile among Two-Year College Students

	Public	Private
Low Grades	26%	31%
Low-Mid Grades	12%	18%
High-Mid Grades	18%	18%
High Grades	44%	33%

SOURCE: AUTHORS' CALCULATIONS BASED ON THE NATIONAL EDUCATION LONGITUDINAL STUDY.



are misled about their future prospects and younger students are not informed about what they ought to be doing in high school. When counselors encourage students to attend college despite their low achievement, students infer that college is a place where previous low achievement doesn't matter. Just as they managed to graduate from high school despite low achievement and minimal efforts, they expect the same in college. Indeed, while we are trying to protect students, we are actually preventing students from seeing what actions they could take to improve their outcomes. In interviews we conducted in Chicago public schools, seniors reported that they will be able to enter community college even with an easy senior year.<sup>30</sup> They claimed they don't have to take difficult courses in senior year (such as mathematics and sciences), they don't have to work hard in class, they don't have to think about college in advance, and senior year can be a time to "rest" before seriously thinking about college.

Students should be aware of the downside of open admissions: it allows access to college, but not necessarily to college-credit courses.

These student reports are consistent with findings from national surveys. While most high school seniors plan to get a BA, many don't take the demanding courses that would prepare them for college-level coursework.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, many seniors do very little homework.<sup>32</sup>

While some critics observe these patterns and blame students for refusing to prepare for college, this criticism assumes that students know they are not prepared for college, know what they need to do to prepare for college, and refuse to take those steps. These assumptions are probably wrong. High school students are rarely given good information about what college requires, how prepared they are, and what steps would prepare them. Especially in low-income communities where few adults have completed college and the public schools are badly under-resourced, students may have no one to turn to for information or support.

Worse, students are often given misleading information. For instance, many states require exit exams to certify mastery in order to graduate from high school. Yet the standards for these exams vary greatly. Many states are concerned that low pass rates will lead to criticism, and so these tests usually certify mastery far below the 12th-grade level. Consequently, just one summer after passing these exams of high school competency, many students fail their college placement exams. *Students are understandably surprised to learn that "high school competency" does not indicate "college readiness."*

Students could get more useful information about their college prospects if they took college placement tests at the end of their junior year of high school\* (when they still had time to take some college-preparatory courses), or if high school competency exams

indicated college-readiness levels, even if those levels were not required for graduation. Even earlier testing might be better for giving students more time to prepare. For example, the Dayton Early College Academy (a high school in Ohio) gives the college placement test to ninth-grade students to identify skill needs very early. Unfortunately, only a few experiments have been done along these lines. Until such steps are taken in all high schools, most students will not know if they are prepared for college, and may not see any reason to take difficult, college-prep courses that would reduce their college costs and the years they need to complete a degree. A simple first step would be to make students aware



of the downside of open admissions: it allows access to college, but not necessarily to college-credit courses.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. Stigma-Free Remediation

Just as high school counselors typically encourage everyone to attend college, staff in some community colleges encourage everyone to enter traditional BA-transfer programs. Community colleges offer a variety of certificates and associate's degrees (e.g., Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Associate of Applied Science, and Associate of General Studies). Many have fewer requirements and shorter timetables than BAs and, as we have seen, lead to good jobs with desirable working conditions—sometimes they even offer better pay than jobs that require a BA. Nonetheless, some community colleges focus only on BAs, particularly for students under the age of 22, who are the traditional college-age students.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, this ambitious goal conflicts with many students' poor academic skills. There are two logical responses to this mismatch: lower the goals or raise students' achievement. Just as

\*New York City's recent policy of reporting graduates' remedial placements by high school is an acknowledgment of the problem, but contains no remedy unless one believes stigma leads to constructive action. Students and teachers could take constructive action to address students' remedial needs if the college placement test were given in high school, ideally with subscales identifying areas for improvement. Moreover, the test would put younger students on notice that these are important skills to learn. Instead, high schools give a multitude of standardized tests that indicate percentile ranks but make no clear predictions about academic knowledge and skill needed to avoid remedial coursework.



high school counselors used to act as gatekeepers, community college counselors used to encourage students to settle for lower goals.<sup>35</sup> And, just like high school counselors, community college counselors now tend to actively encourage BA plans.<sup>36</sup> Analyses of national survey data find that many students raise their expectations after entering community college. Examining this issue more closely, a study of seven community colleges found that many students report that their faculty and advisers strongly encourage them to increase their degree plans.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, BA plans require some further adjustment, since most community college students' academic achievement is too low for college-credit classes. Over two-thirds of community college students are directed into remedial courses intended to bring their academic achievement up to the level required by BA-transfer programs.<sup>38</sup> *In some urban areas, the remediation rate is over 90 percent.*<sup>39</sup> Remedial classes do not give credit toward a college degree; they are high-school-level courses designed to get students up to college level. Unfortunately, many students do not successfully complete these remedial courses.<sup>40</sup> While research evidence is mixed about whether remedial courses help students who are close to college-ready, there is overwhelming evidence that students who have large deficiencies or deficiencies in several subjects often fail to complete the remedial sequence and often drop out of college without completing any degree or even earning a single college credit.<sup>41</sup> One recent study found that only 29 percent of students referred to the lowest levels of reading remediation, and just 17 percent of those referred to the lowest levels of mathematics remediation, successfully completed their sequence of remedial courses.<sup>42</sup> In effect, staff recommend remedial sequences because they appear to be a pathway to a degree, but it turns into a dead-end for the vast majority (71 to 83 percent) of low-achieving students.

With two-thirds of students in at least one remedial course, institutions have had a strong incentive to reduce the stigma that was once associated with such courses. Currently, many course catalogs and staff don't use the term "remedial;" they use the euphemism "developmental."<sup>43</sup> In interviews, faculty and counselors report that they "communicate their high expectations of students in order to combat their students' tendency to lack academic self-confidence," and they tell students that developmental courses are "a positive and necessary step in fulfilling their ultimate goals."<sup>44</sup>

Impressively, these efforts have the intended consequence: students typically don't feel stigmatized or demoralized when they learn of their developmental placements. Referring to English 101, the *lowest* college-credit English course, one student reported, "they told me that my test scores were pretty high, but I didn't test in the high end, which is 101."<sup>45</sup> This unstigmatized approach has clear advantages. It avoids discouraging students by labeling them as deficient or giving them the impression they don't belong in college. But, like the idealization of the BA and open admissions, it too has many costs that tend to be ignored and end up hurting most students.

While we certainly are not calling for students to feel stigmatized, we do see a need for students to be better informed about placement tests and remedial courses. A placement test is

required for all students who enter community college with degree goals. Typically, students are not warned about this test or its importance. They are merely told what courses they should take based on the results.<sup>46</sup>

Because many college staff, catalogs, and websites tend to downplay the placement test, students rarely prepare for this test before arriving at college. In our research, community college students in the Chicago vicinity reported that they didn't realize they had to take this test when they entered college, so they didn't use senior year as a time to prepare for it, nor did they refresh their knowledge before the test, taken after a long summer vacation away from academics.<sup>47</sup> For some students, a few days of review might have saved 4 to 12 months of additional college time and tuition. For others, knowing about the test while in high school

Many certificates and AAs lead to good jobs with desirable working conditions—sometimes they even offer better pay than jobs that require a BA.

may have radically altered their approach to high school academics. For students who are serious about earning an AA or BA, the placement test could provide a strong incentive to take difficult courses and work hard senior year, and to review tested subjects before starting college. Unfortunately, the incentive is totally ineffective because few students know about it.

College staff also typically say very little about remedial courses. Colleges not only remove the stigma about remediation, they also remove clarity. Far too many college staff, catalogs, and websites do not clearly state that remedial—or "developmental"—courses do not give college credits, or that they prolong degree timetables. Remedial classes that are several levels below college-credit classes can add one or more terms of remedial study before students can enroll in college-credit classes, but community colleges usually make it difficult for students to understand this. On many campuses, no one explains remedial courses, their hierarchy, or their implications.

Many students believe that a "two-year associate's degree" will take two years, but *it actually averages 3.5 years* in many community colleges, even for full-time students.<sup>48</sup> Of course, students could infer how much their degrees will be delayed if counselors explained their remedial placements—but that is rarely done.

Indeed, research indicates that most students do not understand that remedial courses are noncredit and delay degree timetables. In a survey of students in seven community colleges, students were asked if they had taken any of a list of courses, all of which were remedial. Of students reporting they had taken any of these courses, 39 percent wrongly believed these courses counted toward their degrees, and another 35 percent were not sure.<sup>49</sup> Among students taking three or more remedial courses,

*(Continued on page 10)*

# What Message Does College for All Send?

BY CHRIS MYERS ASCH

Several years ago, I took a group of low-income middle school students to a motivational talk at a local university. A dynamic young professor encouraged them not to settle for anything but the best. After the presentation, he asked the students what they wanted to be when they grew up. One of our girls (I will call her Shanika) answered excitedly, "Nurse!"

"Nurse?" the professor asked, disappointed. "How about doctor? Don't you want to shoot high?"

Shanika's face fell. Though I sympathized with the professor's intended message, I was incensed.

Not only was he wrong on a practical level—this country faces a serious nurse shortage—but he exemplified the haughty disdain with which many educators and policymakers view careers that do not require a bachelor's or advanced degree. Shanika did not need to hear that her dreams were not up to snuff. Unfortunately, that is a message students hear all too often in our college-obsessed culture.

As someone who founded and ran a college-prep enrichment program for at-risk secondary school students, I appreciate efforts to raise expectations and encourage students to go to college. But I also recognize the potentially distorting effects that our college obsession can create. "College- and career-ready" may be the new catch phrase, but the emphasis is all on the "college" part—most policymakers and educators seem to ignore alternatives to college.

This is shortsighted because, simply put, some students should not go to



college, or at least not a four-year college.

I know, I know. Writing that sentence can incite the wrath of the "achievement police," the legions of self-appointed guardians of high expectations (and, I confess, I have at times been an officer in this force myself). To even broach the idea that some students may not be suited for a four-year college degree can invite scornful accusations that one is perpetuating, in George W. Bush's memorable phrase, "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

We have so effectively pushed the notion that "success equals college" that other options, such as vocational education, seem horribly limiting and even discriminatory. But college prep has become a one-size-fits-all approach to secondary education, and some students simply do not fit. Though it may be difficult to conceive for the highly educated professionals who devise curricula and policies, college is not always the best choice for students whose interests and skills lend themselves to trades rather than a college degree.

As noted in the main article, the emphasis on attending college leaves many high school students woefully unaware of how many alternatives to the four-year college degree there are. Some students may feel that college is the only "good" option, and so they may enroll in a university or community college even

though they are neither well prepared nor particularly interested in the subject matter.

Worse, some kids who are frustrated or bored within a college-prep curriculum may wind up dropping out of high school. Once they drop out, their chances of future economic stability decrease markedly. The Center for Labor Market Studies estimates that dropouts earn less than half as much annually as high school graduates do.\*

Young people should have a variety of good options. Along-

side a challenging college-prep curriculum—and extensive information on what success in college requires—our schools should offer more rigorous and relevant vocational education programs and apprenticeships that build on students' interests and help them develop real-world skills that will give them an economic foothold after graduation. We should bolster partnerships with nonprofit organizations and businesses that agree to provide training and development while students earn their high school diplomas. And we should not discourage students from pursuing military careers.

As a nation, we need young people to become skilled carpenters, electricians, lab technicians, nurse practitioners, and drill sergeants. By pushing college to the exclusion of other options, we indulge in what might be called "the inadvertent bigotry of inappropriate expectations." If we are not careful, we can send a subtle message to students who fail to live up to those expectations or who choose other goals for themselves: "You're not good enough." And that can be as dispiriting and discouraging as "You're no good." □

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\*Center for Labor Market Studies, *Left Behind in America: The Nation's Dropout Crisis* (Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009).



(Continued from page 8)

the misconception was slightly lower (36 percent), but the “not sure” rate was higher (44 percent). In other words, more than 70 percent of students were wrong or not sure about these courses.

Most seriously, remedial coursework is strongly negatively related to degree completion, but students don’t realize it. In a national survey, as the number of remedial subjects increased from one to three (or more), students’ perceived chances of achieving their degree goals declined only slightly (from 94.4 percent to 91.0 percent),<sup>50</sup> but students’ actual degree completion declined severely (from 25.5 percent to 15.3 percent).

Finally, students are also not well informed when it comes to degree selection. Different degrees and programs have different academic prerequisites, so students could use placement test scores when setting their goals. For example, students with low

require fewer remedial courses and lead to preparation in high-demand fields. These colleges also use other innovative, successful procedures: they motivate students by offering a series of credentials with frequent milestones, and they hire job-placement staff who help students land desirable mid-skill jobs.<sup>54</sup>

These procedures seem to have benefits: analyses of national longitudinal data find that, on average, private occupational colleges have much higher degree-completion rates than community colleges (56 percent versus 37 percent), although both kinds of colleges enroll similar students. Indeed, as the third and fourth tables on page 6 show, private colleges enroll slightly more stu-



Youth should have dreams, but if school staff feel compelled to withhold crucial information to preserve those dreams, that is not a kindness; it is deception that does great harm.

placement test scores in writing might choose a program with lower prerequisites in writing (such as computer networking), and students with low scores in math might choose a program with lower prerequisites in math (such as medical coding or court reporting). These occupations are in strong demand, with desirable job conditions and decent pay, and they don’t close off the option to go on for a bachelor’s degree. Yet placement test results are rarely used to assist students’ program choices.

### A Better Plan: Degree Ladders

If we stopped idealizing the BA, what other options might we see? Most students enter community college with the aim of quickly improving their job prospects. That may be even more true for low-achieving students, who generally have acquired a distaste for schooling, but have been persuaded that community college will improve their labor-market prospects. Raising their academic skills a little by taking some remedial courses isn’t likely to improve their job opportunities—only credentials do that.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, recent research suggests that students can “increase their earnings substantially by completing the courses needed to obtain a certificate.”<sup>52</sup>

Here we can learn a valuable lesson from some exemplary private occupational colleges. While research has documented that the private sector has some colleges with dubious and even fraudulent practices,<sup>53</sup> it also includes some colleges that have devised innovative and effective procedures. Instead of pushing BAs for all and extensive remedial coursework, the better private occupational colleges carefully match low-achieving students with appropriate occupational programs that do not require college-level achievement in math or writing. These programs

require fewer remedial courses and lead to preparation in high-demand fields. These colleges also use other innovative, successful procedures: they motivate students by offering a series of credentials with frequent milestones, and they hire job-placement staff who help students land desirable mid-skill jobs.<sup>54</sup>

Our point is not to advocate for these colleges, but to learn from them. Regardless of what other practices the worst colleges in this sector are using, exemplary private colleges have devised innovative procedures that could be used by community colleges to get similar successful results. Community colleges already offer certificates and applied associate’s degrees in a wide variety of occupational fields that lead to good jobs with strong growth prospects. Many of these programs allow students to enter credit-bearing courses despite lower academic achievement in one or more subjects, so students with academic deficiencies would need fewer remedial courses to enter these programs. Moreover, these programs can create degree ladders, which some community colleges are already doing. For instance, at Henry Ford Community College in Michigan, programs in Cisco Systems networking, renewable energy, and several health careers provide certificates that are stacked to lead to associate’s degrees. Expanding such offerings is a major goal of the Michigan Occupational Deans Administrative Council.

The BA-for-all movement provides a positive goal for youth. But in implicitly disparaging middle-level attainments, it inevitably creates disappointment. Moreover, it conveys an unnecessarily narrow vision of success, which inadvertently fails to identify intervening degrees that lead to desirable careers with fewer

# Higher Education and the Economy

BY GROVER J. "RUSS" WHITEHURST

Just before the school year started, President Obama renewed his call for America to regain the world lead in college graduates by 2020. He tied doing so to our future economic competitiveness.

The statistical backdrop for the president's remarks is that we have fallen from 1st to 12th place internationally in the percentage of young adults with postsecondary degrees. This is not because our rates have gone down (they have been rising), but because other countries have leapfrogged us. Improving the education of our citizens is a worthy goal, and the president is to be applauded for using his bully pulpit to push our aspirations higher.

A presidential address is not the place to address subtleties, but policymakers and practitioners in higher education will need to do so if our increased emphasis on attaining college degrees is to pay the expected dividends. In that sense, focusing on the horserace may be counterproductive.

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The relationship between years of schooling and economic output at the national level is complex, to say the least. A small but consistently positive relationship between long-term growth and years of schooling is found in econometric studies, but there are many caveats and exceptions that are relevant to designing higher education policy in the United States. For one thing, there is tremendous variability in the relationship. For example, Germany has a stronger economy than France but half the percentage of young adults with college degrees. Further, France has increased its percentage of young adults with college degrees by 13 percentage points in the last 10 years, whereas Germany's output of college graduates has hardly budged—yet the economic growth rate of Germany has exceeded that of France over this same period. Obviously, increasing educational attainment is not a magic bullet for economic growth. Education credentials operate within boundaries and possibilities that are set by other characteristics of national economies. We must attend to these if more education is to translate into more jobs.

A growing body of research suggests that policymakers should pay more attention to the link between job opportunities and what people know and can do, rather than focusing on the blunt instrument of years of schooling or degrees obtained. In international comparisons, for example, scores on tests

of cognitive skills in literacy and mathematics are stronger predictors of economic output than years of schooling. Within the United States, there is evidence (which is described in the main article) that for many young adults, the receipt of an occupational certificate in a trade that is in demand will yield greater economic returns than the pursuit of a baccalaureate degree in the arts and sciences.

A single-minded pursuit of regaining the world's lead in college graduates may blind us to the fact that one size does not fit all nations or all young adults. One of the distinctive feathers of the U.S. higher education system is its diversity. We have more than 6,000 institutions of all manner and stripe, serving students of many ages and needs. In contrast, the higher education systems in most of the countries with which we compete are centrally managed and homogenous. We should make diversity our strength by establishing national policies that encourage institutions to adjust quickly to changing needs in the marketplace for learning. A good place to start would be creating much better information on the graduation rates and employment outcomes associated with particular degree and certificate programs at particular institutions. If we're to win the international horserace, we will need to create the conditions for postsecondary institutions in this country to focus on the important finish lines: productivity and employment. □

obstacles, shorter timetables, and a greater likelihood of success. Indeed, often these intervening credentials can be part of a degree ladder that leads to conventional bachelor's or applied bachelor's degrees.<sup>56</sup>

We are not saying that high school counselors and teachers are aware that so many students are failing when they enter college. The poor information about student outcomes (and high student mobility among colleges) means that even many college counselors and teachers don't realize the extent of the troubles students encounter. Some high school counselors suspect that BA goals are unrealistic for some students, but high school staff can't be sure because they don't get systematic information about student outcomes. Researchers could play a powerful role in informing high school staff about their graduates' college outcomes, which could free them to give authoritative advice with confidence. This could improve students' incentives in high school and improve their college, degree, and career choices. It may even help high schools improve their college-preparatory courses.

Colleges could also promote a broader conception of desirable jobs and desirable degrees. As we've shown, working adults value many job conditions, and associate's degrees lead to those conditions as much as bachelor's degrees do. Colleges could better portray a wider variety of career options and the pathways to them.

Of course, youth should have dreams, but if school staff feel compelled to withhold crucial information to preserve those dreams, that is not a kindness; it is deception that does great harm. Far too many high schools and community colleges allow students to retain their dreams about becoming doctors and lawyers without telling these students the truth about what being a doctor or lawyer takes. As a result, some students may not be working hard and pushing themselves to live up to their potential simply because they don't realize they are not on track to meet their goals. Meanwhile, other students who are already working hard are not getting any help in determining if their doctor and lawyer goals are realistic. If not, they would benefit from learning about other, similar jobs, such as radiography technicians and court reporters,





that have good pay and working conditions.

Because society idealizes the BA, far too many “college” students never even take a college-credit course; they remain stuck in remedial courses until they drop out. Could this be one of the reasons for the rockiness of the transition to adulthood? If we gave students better advice, could we reduce the floundering of young adults through age 30? High schools and community colleges must guide students, not let their good intentions prevent them from helping students find realistic goals that fit their interests and achievements.

**F**or the 89 percent of high school graduates with BA goals, we are not saying to reduce those plans, but we do suggest broadening them. While counselors should not say “don’t seek a BA,” we should let counselors warn students with low achievement that they have only a 20 percent chance of getting a BA, and we should encourage counselors to help students make backup plans. Since less than half of high school seniors with BA aspirations attain a BA, and only 20 percent of low-achieving seniors do so, many students should consider earning intervening credentials, like a certificate and an AA, along the way. If students had realistic short-term plans, they would face fewer immediate academic requirements and could make more rapid progress toward credentials that lead to desirable careers—with decent pay, good working conditions, and advancement opportunities. These are outcomes worth pursuing, and much better than what is typically available to those with only a high school diploma. Simultaneously, students could stay on a ladder to a bachelor’s degree. Adding intervening credentials may take more time than directly pursuing a bachelor’s degree, but it also provides a form of insurance. If students do have to drop out of their BA program, they will be in a much better position if they have already earned an AA. The intervening credential also gives students access to better jobs during college, improving their

earnings (and thus their ability to keep taking classes), job skills, and job experience for later careers.

Some readers will correctly note that it is unfair to focus exclusively on community colleges or even high schools; the problems of low achievement begin much earlier. Indeed, poverty creates disadvantages before young children even begin school that strongly predict academic disadvantages in later years.<sup>57</sup> Yet, until society addresses these larger problems, we still need ways to help today’s youth. Withholding crucial information may make youth feel good, but it seriously harms their careers.

For most students, but especially for low-achieving students, transferring into a BA program is a long slog—it entails many remedial courses, low probabilities of success, and a long timetable: the “four-year BA” could take six to eight years even if students are full time. It also offers no short-term credentials along the way. In contrast, a quick-win strategy gives a valued credential in a short time, with few academic requirements and few remedial

Some students may not be working hard and living up to their potential simply because they don’t realize they are not on track to meet their goals.

courses. Although, in theory, students who fail at one option can shift to another, 50 percent of students who drop out in their first year don’t return over the next five years (and over half of those who do return drop out again without earning a credential). While this research doesn’t say what happens in later years, at best this indicates wasted time.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, quick-win certificates can be the first step on a degree ladder to associate’s and bachelor’s degrees. Like an insurance policy, quick wins may have extra costs (in time and money), but they may also give students confidence, practical skills, potentially better jobs while in college, as well as experiences to inform their career choices. If students were informed about both options and their likely implications, they could choose which one best fits their needs. But if we let our BA ideals keep us from providing information, students can’t make informed choices.

Note that in order to be a good insurance plan, students’ mid-level credential should not be the traditional Associate of Arts degree: it has little payoff in the labor market for most majors.<sup>59</sup> More lucrative are applied associate’s degrees in fields with labor-market demand. Applied associate’s degrees may not be a direct route to a career as a doctor, but they can lead to many good jobs. For example, some radiographers earn over \$80,000 a year,<sup>60</sup> health information technicians play a crucial role in the medical world, and medical office managers report that physicians respect their advice. Likewise, technicians in computer networking and other fields rescue many of us from computer disasters. These are high-demand fields, and our society will have increasing difficulty finding enough individuals with these skills for the foreseeable future. While most community colleges offer these applied associate’s degree options, they could do more to build clear degree

ladders so that students could see how to combine intervening credentials and BA goals. They could also make their degree ladders easier to climb by reducing the number of courses required for one degree that don't count for the next.

The new labor market may seem an abstraction, but it reflects a powerful reality. We recently heard about a small town— emblematic of small towns all across the country—that lost its main employer 10 years ago when a factory closed, and has suffered since. Recently, a new factory decided to locate there, but its jobs require technical skills that few townspeople have. The local community college has created applied associate's degree programs to provide those skills. Together, this new factory and these new programs have the potential to save this town. Hopefully, the local high schools are joining in by encouraging their counselors to make students aware of this new opportunity, and what it will take to seize it.

The more than 20 states that have joined Complete College America (a new non-profit organization) have pledged to increase the number of young adults who have college degrees or credentials of value. This goal will help students gain access to good jobs and help our society fill the new job requirements in the current labor market. Improving BA-degree completion rates is part of this goal, but our society also needs more people with certificates and associate's degrees.

If they were given good information and authorized to do so, high school counselors and teachers could do more to alert students who are unlikely to earn a bachelor's degree to the perilous road ahead, and to provide information about certificates and associate's degrees that lead to desirable jobs, and also lead to bachelor's degrees. We can be honest with our youth. There are many desirable options that present fewer obstacles and offer good pathways to further advancement. □

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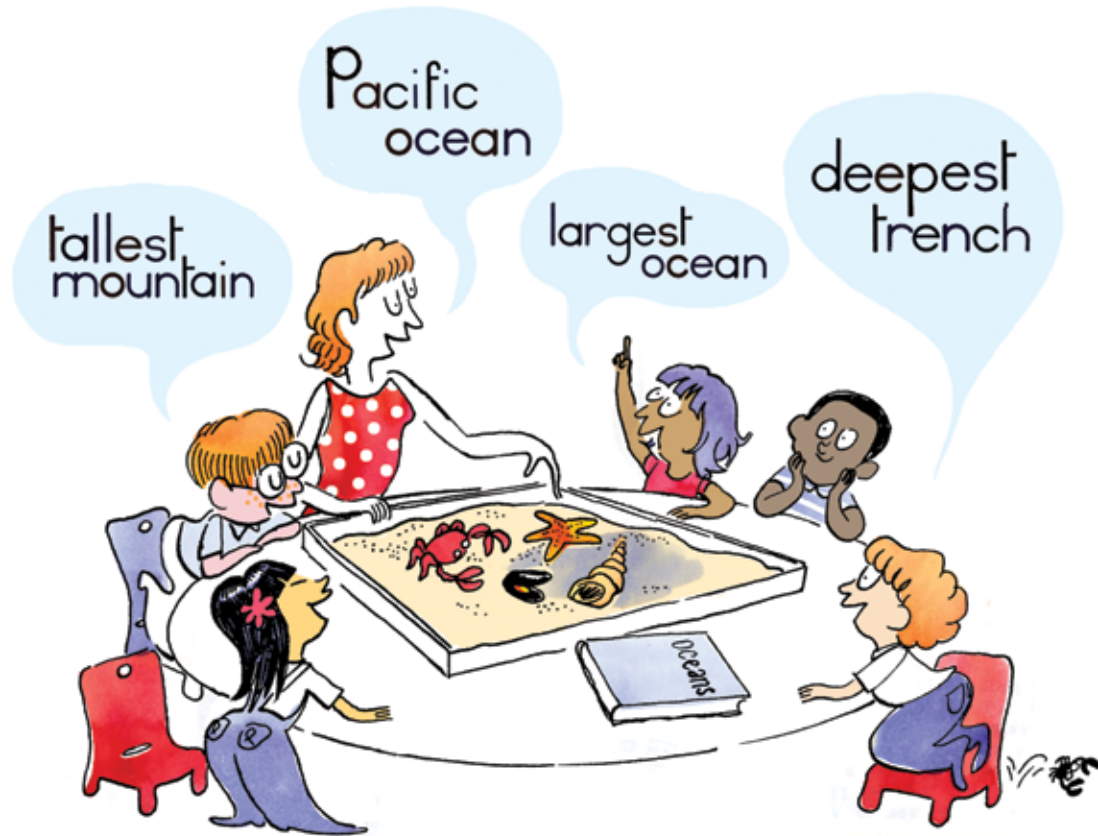
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# Sparks Fade, Knowledge Stays

The National Early Literacy Panel's Report Lacks Staying Power



BY SUSAN B. NEUMAN

When it came time to find the man of my dreams, my mother, a yenta of the best sort, would often speak in homilies. She would remind me to stay away from those super-handsome flashy types—you know, the ones that stand out immediately in the crowd—because “they don’t wear well,” and moreover, “a nebbish would drive you meshuga.” Rather, better look for the smart one, the “*mensch*”—someone you really want to hang out with over time—someone with “staying power.”

Well, the *mensch* won out, and now, some 40 years later, I’d say with some degree of certainty that my mother was right. Looks *can* be deceiving, especially when the pickings are slim. But when

you move outside of your immediate eye view, you begin to see a whole new world out there, something far deeper, and certainly more meaningful.

There’s something to be said about my mother’s wise counsel. In fact, I’ve relied on it throughout both my personal life and my professional life. Her words especially come to mind now, as I seek to better understand *Developing Early Literacy*, the report of the National Early Literacy Panel.<sup>1</sup> The panel, which consisted of nine experts, was convened by the National Institute for Literacy to synthesize the research on the development of literacy from birth through age 5. This panel was the intellectual sequel to the National Reading Panel, which consisted of a group of experts charged with analyzing the research on literacy development among school-age children. Both panels did important work, but both also suffered from a basic conundrum often faced by this type of consensus panel: the studies that met their methodological criteria sometimes were not the best studies to answer the questions posed. If readers of the resulting reports are not aware of this conundrum, they may not realize that the reports’ recommendations are limited to what can be said given the panels’ constraints, and that they don’t represent all that is known, is likely true, or requires further study. Panel reports are extremely useful, but finding the deeper meaning and figuring out what has staying

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power often requires a broader view.

In the case of the National Reading Panel, the experts were charged with examining all the extant literature on teaching school-age children how to read. Although they skimmed over 100,000 articles, only 428 articles included enough data to make the cut for their meta-analysis (which is a strategy for quantitatively synthesizing research). Despite initially examining 32 topics, they ended up reporting on just seven topics. And, of those seven, only two—phonological awareness and phonics—had enough data to make strong recommendations. The other areas—fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, teacher education, and technology—all had too few studies to make firm conclusions. The resulting report was terrific *as far as it went*. Phonological awareness and phonics, as well as the other five areas, are extremely important, but there's more to literacy development than these seven topics.

In the case of the National Early Literacy Panel, the esteemed scholars were charged with reviewing the existing research in early (ages 0–5) literacy. The pickings were slim. Over the eight years of their work, only 190 studies met their rigid criteria for examining the effectiveness of instructional strategies, programs, or practices. Almost half of those studies (41 percent) focused on code-based interventions. When I say “code-

based,” I mean the interventions were designed to help young children understand the alphabetic principle, decoding (i.e., sounding out words), and encoding (i.e., learning which letters are used to write particular sounds and words). You needn't be particularly prescient to guess what they concluded: code-based interventions are key to literacy. More specifically, here is the list of code-based interventions that they found to be the strongest predictors of later measures of literacy development: alphabet knowledge, rapid naming of letters, phonological awareness, phonological memory, and writing one's own name.

I agree that all these things are extremely important. But I worry that too many readers of *Developing Early Literacy* will not realize what a narrow view of literacy development it presents. The problem for the panel, of course (and I feel their pain), is that they can't examine what hasn't been tested. While many of us might think that at least something must be missing from this equation for successful reading, you'd be hard-pressed to convincingly prove your case. In fact, if your goal were to identify interventions, parenting activities, and instructional practices that promote the development of children's early literacy skills, more likely than not, you'd come up with the same result: code-based instruction = early reading development.

But while the existing evidence might suggest a code focus like letter-name knowledge, a different type of empiricism begins to argue against such a narrow focus. Just observe a really good preschool. Look at what's going on. The most engaging classrooms,

the ones where children seem actively involved in projects or investigations, aren't just fiddling around with sounds associated with printed letters. Sure, you will (and should) see ABCs, tons of books in all locations, and paper, pencils, and writing implements in the room. But these materials are not the drivers of the activities.

Rather, they stand in service of a much more important focus: the desire to know. Children are natural knowledge seekers. Whether it's orca whales, dinosaurs, or the latest technological doodad, children's activities are often guided by their need to know. They want to become expert in a domain. And it's this goal that drives their ambition to come to school to learn about liter-

acy, among many other things, not their desire to be able to “rapidly name a sequence of repeating random sets of pictures of objects” (which is one of the things that the National Early Literacy Panel found code-based interventions help children do, and which, to be fair, is actually important for learning to decode fluently).<sup>2</sup>

All well and good, you might say. Of course it's important to know such things. But the discussion here is supposed to be about literacy development, not background knowledge or concept development. If the charge to the panel had been to look at science achievement, we might take a look at content knowledge. However, if



Whether it's orca whales or the latest technological doodad, children's activities are often guided by their need to know.

we are to stick to the panel's charge, to discern what it takes to develop conventional literacy skills—decoding, oral reading fluency, comprehension, writing, and spelling—it only makes sense to target aspects of literacy that are clearly the focus of reading, writing, and spelling development.

Or does it? Here's where things get tricky. Of the skills listed above defining conventional literacy, you'll see one that sticks out like a sore thumb: comprehension. Except for comprehension, these skills are code based.\* Comprehension is not code based. In the early years, it is not even the understanding of text—at least in the conventional form. Even the most precocious child in the birth-through-5 age range isn't really engaged in the kind of text reading that is adequately measured through questioning, synthesizing, and thinking aloud.

Most of what we know about comprehension comes from studying students in grades 4 through 12 who are failing at it. You'll hear teachers describe it like this: “The student can't understand the text at all.” “The student reads the text by totally changing its meaning.” “The student misreads the text by taking words and phrases out of context.” “The student is a word caller” (which is someone who can decode the words but not understand them). Whether you call it the “fourth-grade slump” or the road to drop-

\*In the upper elementary and middle grades, spelling is also an exception as it requires kids to learn about words' origins and histories. See “How Words Cast Their Spell” in the Winter 2008–2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter0809/joshi.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter0809/joshi.pdf).



ping out, the problem is the same: as the texts get harder and the academic language gets tougher, students can't understand what they read.

So let's step back a minute and ask what we could do to change this unfortunate trajectory. Given that the large majority of children have the wherewithal to read and read well, what might we need to do in the early years to help children get on the road to successful reading, not just in kindergarten, but in the later years when the comprehension demands are greater?

The flashy solution would be to hit the code-based interventions highlighted in *Developing Early Literacy* even harder. Instead of outdoor activities, or play, or science projects, or the teacher reading books aloud, we could have phonological memory time or games with random letters and digits. Sadly, such approaches are becoming increasingly popular across the country.

But there is another solution. Taking my mother's advice to heart, let's do our own literature review to see if we can find an approach that may have more staying power. Perhaps the true path to literacy is not to focus exclusively on the procedural skills that stand out in the crowd, but to ensure that all children develop both skills and the knowledge of content and concept that underlie comprehension. If so, most of our efforts in the preschool classroom would be to get children to engage with new content, to think, to grapple with ideas, to experience the "aha" that comes when we achieve something meaningful against resistance. In this scenario, knowledge is the headline star, and conventional literacy skills are the supporting cast members.

Now, thinking that knowledge must come into play, we could approach the panel's charge in a somewhat different way. Instead of only looking for studies about reading, we could also look for studies about content understanding or comprehension. Taking this broader view, we are rewarded with many studies—and even a meta-analysis—that the panel did not consider. Let's start with the meta-analysis, which consisted of 22 studies describing 40 experiments on instructional strategies for science classes that spanned third grade through the beginning of college.<sup>3</sup> None of the approaches that focused on skills made a bit of difference for students' comprehension of science. Rather, the effective interventions all focused on the structure and function of students' scientific knowledge base. Most powerful were interventions that helped students integrate their knowledge into larger scientific categories and concepts.

Moving on to the individual studies, it's not long before we find one of the seminal studies of comprehension—a simple look at children's ability to comprehend and recall a text about

baseball.<sup>4</sup> The researchers asked seventh-grade students to read a grade-level passage that described a half inning of a baseball game. According to a standardized reading test, half of these students were good readers, half were poor readers. Using a task somewhat similar to a think-aloud protocol, the researcher divided the passage into five parts, and after each part students were asked to use a replica of a baseball field and players to show the plays as described in the text. It turns out that background knowledge of baseball trumped all the reading skills measured on the standardized achievement test: poor readers with high knowledge of baseball displayed better comprehension and recall than good readers with low knowledge of baseball.

What is going on here? Could knowledge actually aid comprehension of text? As we continue our search, we come upon studies that go one step further, looking at high- and low-aptitude children (according to standardized intelligence tests), some who have prior knowledge of the subject domain and some who do not.<sup>5</sup>

For example, in one experiment, 576 young soccer experts and novices were compared on their ability to memorize details, make inferences, and detect basic contradictions in a story about soccer that was contrived to include lots of misinformation.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, the experts wildly outperformed the novices: experts remembered more details, better applied what

they read to new situations, and detected more contradictions than their novice peers. But here's something that the researchers didn't anticipate: *the high- and low-aptitude experts did not differ from one another*. In other words, there was virtually no distinction between their performance on these tasks, and both were clearly superior to high- and low-aptitude novices. In addition, high-aptitude novices did no better than the low-aptitude novices.

Being meticulous scientists, the researchers replicated their study, this time with another 185 students, to find out if the tests might have inappropriately prompted the experts' recall and understanding, or if the skills associated with executive functioning (e.g., memory monitoring techniques) might differ between experts and novices.<sup>7</sup> This time around, they chose a more open-ended task, being careful not to cue or prime students in any way. They asked them to "think aloud" as they read, and to recall what they had learned from this text. This time, even memory monitoring and prediction accuracy were superior for students who had more prior knowledge about soccer, despite differences in aptitude. Even more remarkable, other researchers looking into areas such as chess, computer programming, bridge, circuit design, map reading, music, and dance performance all show the same



We should get children to engage with new content, to experience the "aha" that comes when we achieve something meaningful.

result.<sup>8</sup> *Knowledge improves comprehension and performance.*

So if the National Early Literacy Panel had examined comprehension, instead of only examining studies related to a rather narrow definition of reading, then the major headline in *Developing Early Literacy* might have been “All students will learn more and comprehend better if they have greater background knowledge,” or “To be successful in reading comprehension, students must acquire knowledge.”

However, there’s not a smidgen of evidence on background knowledge in the panel’s report. In one case, I came upon the term “world knowledge” as a modifier of oral language development, but I could never find it on its own. Background knowledge is not considered a predictor, it’s not listed as an independent variable—it’s just missing.

Why? you might ask. Most likely it is due to the old-fashioned notion that learning to read precedes reading to learn. And this might be the crux of the problem in *Developing Early Literacy*. To examine the importance of knowledge and concepts, the panel members would have had to look at learning to read in rich content domains. Take, for example, educational psychology professor Deborah Simmons and her team,<sup>9</sup> who have developed the Project WORLD (Words of Oral Reading and Language Development) intervention designed to teach the content areas of science and social studies through shared book reading in kindergarten.

Another example is the work my colleagues and I have done with the World of Words curriculum; we teach preschoolers vocabulary through the content areas of health, science, social studies, and math.<sup>10</sup> By the end of a typical eight-week session, we have children making inferences about new, unfamiliar words that are related to the concepts we taught. Others before us have examined children’s knowledge gains in science and math through such conventional measures as retellings and listening comprehension, as well as less conventional measures such as problem sets—solving new problems that require children to use their knowledge.<sup>11</sup> None of these studies, however, would have likely made the panel’s cut, with its narrow focus on skills in reading.

Here my mother’s sage advice becomes even clearer. If we are to stay true to our long-desired goal of high achievement for all children, then we cannot simply focus on the nearest target: decoding. Rather, we must look toward the goal that has real staying power: the complex skill and knowledge required for reading comprehension. Their foundation is word and world knowledge, the critical features that will enable students to be proficient readers in elementary school and beyond.

This means that to be successful, children need to learn *both*

code and content knowledge. Code-related skills, like the essential alphabetic principles that make up our language, are a critical component in learning to read. But while these skills are necessary, they are certainly not sufficient. They must be accompanied by a massive, in-depth, and ever-growing foundation of factual knowledge.

For those who are new to early childhood education, it’s important to realize that this built-up store of knowledge can’t be poured into children as if they were empty vessels just waiting for our precious insights. All children, but especially young children, need time to play actively with ideas, experience and ask

questions, and connect new learning with what they already know. Such efforts can’t be delayed until children are supposedly reading to learn; nor can they be subordinated in any way to other skills. Code and content learning must be emphasized simultaneously.

Suppose, for example, instead of focusing on print referencing or some other basic skill in shared reading, we returned book reading to its original purpose: learning about ideas and the words that convey them. We read to little 4-year-old Abigail a story about kings and queens. Then, instead of going on to a new topic, over the next few days or even weeks we read more stories about kings and queens. We select fiction and information texts to give her lots of background information. Over the

course of the readings, Abigail learns how kings and queens lived, what they did, and what problems they had to solve. Her questions become more pointed; her curiosity is piqued as she develops a growing knowledge base on the topic. We develop some activities, perhaps some play settings, that allow Abigail and her friends to use what they are learning, constructing new meaning through play. And the chances are good that Abigail will increase not only her general knowledge but the vocabulary she uses to express her ideas.

If we took knowledge building as a significant goal, just consider how we might organize instruction. Instead of a cafeteria approach to content, with a little bit of this and a little bit of that, we could develop units that immerse children in significant topics, and use activities like shared book reading to deepen knowledge and spark challenging conversations. Such features of classroom instruction might include:

- time, materials, and resources that carefully, actively, and sequentially build language and conceptual knowledge;
- a supportive learning environment in which children have access to a wide variety of reading and writing resources;

*(Continued on page 39)*



To be successful, children need to learn *both* code and content knowledge.



# An Artful Summer

## A Job Program Inspires Creativity and Teaches Responsibility



BY JENNIFER DUBIN

The young man looked about 16. He had attached a grocery cart to the back of his bike and was banging it against parked cars as he rode up and down an alley in East Baltimore one summer afternoon. As soon as she saw him, Randi Pupkin recalls thinking to herself, “That kid needs something to do.”

Pupkin came across the youth six years ago during one of her many trips to Rose Street Community Center, a grass-roots organization that runs a homeless shelter and provides children and teens with engaging activities in a part of the city where positive outlets are few. The center is in a row house sandwiched between other row houses, many with boarded up windows and sagging stoops and roofs, in a neighborhood known for high poverty and crime. When she spotted the youth on the bike, she figured the community center didn’t appeal to him, and he had chosen vandalism to escape boredom. She remembered that at his age she had worked as a summer camp counselor. As she watched him dent car after car, she realized he needed a job, and so his frustration became her inspiration.

Pupkin was visiting Rose Street as part of her work with Art with a Heart, a nonprofit she founded 10 years ago to provide art classes to low-income youth and adults, homeless people, the disabled, and battered women and their children. Thanks to that mischief-

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Students in Art with a Heart’s Summer Job Program sell their wares at Artscape, a summer arts festival in Baltimore. Youth 13 and older receive a daily stipend of \$10 to create marketable art.

vous youth on the bike, the organization now also runs an art-focused Summer Job Program for youth 13 and older.

Each summer, Art with a Heart hires about 40 young people to make marketable art—tables and chairs, jewelry, and lamps, among other pieces—which they then sell at Artscape, an annual summer arts festival in Baltimore. Professional artists or people with art backgrounds teach the classes, in which students are employed for four weeks creating and perfecting their wares. Par-



ticipants earn a stipend of \$10 a day and receive breakfast and lunch. Many are from low-income families, others are homeless, and some have dropped out of school. They find out about the program through community centers, like Rose Street, or their schools. The program does not require that students have art experience or any kind of artistic skill to land a job. They need only an interest in working hard, showing up on time, and learning something new.

Though teachers will cultivate talent when they see it, the purpose of the program is not to discover the next Pablo Picasso or Romare Bearden. Art with a Heart instead uses art as a vehicle to teach job skills to students, many of whom have never filled out a job application or looked an interviewer in the eye. The program also allows teens to express themselves through visual art, an opportunity they may not get during the school year. With the increasing focus on improving reading and math achievement,\* many students nationwide—not just in Baltimore—no longer have the chance to draw, paint, or sculpt. The economic downturn has also made the arts even less of a priority. Budget cuts have forced districts to scrap art classes and many other extracurricular activities that keep students engaged in school. In Baltimore, Art with a Heart's Summer Job Program provides the enrichment—not to mention the paycheck—that most youth here desperately need.

### “Consistency Is Coveted”

A Baltimore native, Randi Pupkin had practiced law for 14 years in her hometown when she realized she no longer enjoyed her work. She mostly argued with other lawyers in the contentious field of construction litigation. After one such argument, it hit her: this is not how she wanted her life to go.

In what free time she had, she enjoyed arts and crafts. When her children were born, she made murals in their rooms. When one of them had a bug-themed birthday party, she made sets of wings and antennae for the guests. “I felt that art was a very joyful thing to do,” Pupkin recalls. While her desire to help people prompted her to become a lawyer, she felt like she wasn't fulfilling

\*The Center on Education Policy has documented the narrowing of the curriculum. See *Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era* (available at [www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.showDocumentByID&nodelD=1&DocumentID=212](http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.showDocumentByID&nodelD=1&DocumentID=212)) and *Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects* (available at [www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.showDocumentByID&nodelD=1&DocumentID=234](http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.showDocumentByID&nodelD=1&DocumentID=234)).



The Summer Job Program takes place at three sites in Baltimore, including Paul's Place, a community outreach center. Above, students glue glass beads onto lamps. Left, teacher Monica Lopossay works with student Yasmine Campbell.

that ambition. Art, however, would allow her to share the pleasure of self-expression.

So she researched group homes, shelters, and community centers, and found the people she was going to work with. Pupkin would teach and provide supplies. The classes, she hoped, would foster the camaraderie that can develop among people who make art together. “If you're a senior sitting alone and idle, it's nice to have the structure of a weekly art class, the community that the class creates for you, and the caring teacher who comes and engages you in something that you didn't know how to do before,” she says. “The same applies for a student in third grade or tenth grade.” Pupkin began to discuss her idea with friends and foundations, all of whom encouraged her. She chose to call her service Art from the Heart until she discovered that a tattoo parlor had already taken the name. So she settled for Art with a Heart, and in 2000, she established her nonprofit.

That first year, she enlisted a friend to help her teach evening classes at two group homes for emotionally troubled adolescent boys, a shelter for battered women and children, and an Alzheimer's facility. Though the annual budget was just \$6,000 and Pupkin describes herself as naive about the challenges she faced, Art with a Heart thrived.

Today, it has a budget of \$416,500, most of which comes from grants, donations, programming fees, and an annual fundraiser.

Art with a Heart offers 1,400 art classes each year at more than 30 different sites in Baltimore, as well as a couple in nearby Prince George's County, Maryland. Pupkin now spends most of her time cultivating partnerships and raising funds. She also manages the organization's five administrative employees and 22 teachers and assistants, and acts as a sort of mother hen. She stocks the office with plenty of food and sees to it that everyone is well fed, including the students who sometimes work there. A born nurturer and hugger, Pupkin constantly touches arms and shoulders in conversation. Her manner is informal, with no hint of pretension. She tells students to call her Randi instead of ma'am.

But don't mistake informal for unstructured. What sets her organization's art classes apart "is that we're not a workshop," Pupkin says. "We are a consistent, ongoing program within many different sites. So, for example, every Thursday at 5:30, Michael knows that the Art with a Heart teacher is showing up at his group home. They're going to do something that's fun. They're going to learn something. They're going to sit around the table and talk about their day. This is consistency for a population that has never known consistency. When you're talking about 15-year-olds who are homeless or 14-year-olds who have never known parents and have been in four different foster homes, consistency is coveted."

The Summer Job Program especially tries to teach the value of sticking with something and seeing it through. This year, students began their jobs on June 21 and worked until July 16-18, the week-end of Artscape. Art with a Heart partnered with three different sites to provide space for the program: Paul's Place, an outreach center in southwest Baltimore, where 14 students worked; Dr. Rayner Browne Academy in northeast Baltimore, where 20 students worked; and an office space a block away from Art with a Heart's headquarters in Baltimore's Hampden neighborhood, where 11 students worked.

Each summer, the schedule stays the same: Work begins at 10 a.m., and students must show up on time. Work ends at 2 p.m., and students can't leave early. They take a half hour for lunch at noon, and at 12:30 p.m., they must pick up work where they left off. If they arrive late, they don't get paid for the day. If they miss two days in one week, they don't get paid for the week. And if they need to miss work for a personal reason, they must provide

a note from home. "It's very strict," Pupkin says, "and it's very structured."

### Not Just a Summer Job

A visit to Paul's Place during the program's second week shows that many students thrive on that structure. After a light breakfast of cereal and juice, they quietly sit at tables covered with paint-splattered cloths and write in their journals. Before working on their art, they spend the beginning of each day reflecting on a topic posed by their teacher. Pupkin and her staff provide teachers with journal ideas as well as the specific pieces they want students at each site to create for Artscape.



Kqwan Williams, left, and Raven Cornish, above, paint glass beads for lamps they will sell at Artscape. The students sold \$3,000 worth of artwork at this summer's festival.

This morning's journal theme: "If I could give any gift..." Students at the other two job sites also engage in the same exercise. After 15 minutes, Monica Loposay, the teacher, asks who wants to share. One student says she would give the gift of love. Another says she would give the gift of imagination. A young man says he would give away a million one-dollar bills. Their responses seem especially poignant given the program's location.

Around noon each day, a long line of people waiting for a hot meal forms outside of Paul's Place, a red-brick building situated among blocks of dilapidated row houses, many with trash-covered yards. The facility is an outreach center that houses a soup kitchen and a clothing bank, and provides services such as addiction programs and GED classes as well as afterschool and summer enrichment activities. This is the fourth year that Paul's Place has partnered with Art with a Heart to offer the Summer Job Program.

The students work in their own room on the building's first floor. The space has a sink for washing paintbrushes, hooks to hang smocks, bathrooms, and a couple of couches. They leave the work space only to help themselves to the hot lunch next door.

This morning's task is to finish arranging and gluing beads they painted earlier in the week onto contemporary, rectangular lamps. While students decorate the same kind of lamp, they



choose their own colors and create their own designs so that the lamps hardly resemble each other.

Ty'aira Manning, 17, sings along with the pop music coming through the mini speakers hooked up to Lopossay's phone, as she glues orange, red, and yellow beads onto her lamp. Teachers in a photography program she attends elsewhere suggested she apply for this job. She's here to gain a deeper understanding of art. A senior at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Manning took art as an elective last year, so she knows a little about colors and tones and how to stroke paint on paper. "I enjoy the program a lot," she says of her job. "I'm learning more a sense of responsibility," and how to "improve my time management."

This summer, Manning has little free time. After she leaves Paul's Place, she works for a family with young children from 3:30 to 7:30 p.m. She spends the money she earns from both jobs on her cell phone bill and books from Barnes & Noble. She also gives some of it to her mother, who was laid off from a local bank. Manning also pays her younger brother to do chores around the house so that he has "something to occupy his mind."

Leeya Davis, 15, plans to save her money for school clothes and hair care products. The ninth-grader at Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts has participated in art classes and homework help at Paul's Place since third grade. She has developed a rapport with Cintra Harbold, the director of programs for children and youth at Paul's Place, who suggested she apply for this job. "It's fun to express yourself with art," Davis says, as she glues green beads onto her lamp.

Yasmine Campbell, 17, decorates a lamp with three other students. She says she wishes her school, Baltimore Talent Development High School, offered art. "Maybe it would help everyone in our school work together" and "have patience for certain things." Certain things? Campbell grins sheepishly. She explains that her peers at school "are not very patient with teachers."

Lopossay, a former photojournalist with the *Baltimore Sun*, walks around the room. "Do you like how this is set up so far?" E'Mynie Smith asks. Smith is referring to the pinks and neutrals covering her lamp.

"Let me take a look," Lopossay says, as she leans over Smith's work. "You're doing a good job of making sure the spaces are tight." Lopossay has spent much of the week encouraging everyone to cover the entire lamp and leave no visible white space.

A senior at Reginald F. Lewis High School, Smith says her favorite project so far is the small glass mosaic (about the size of an index card) each student made the first week on the job. Smith actually made two: one says "LOVE" and the other depicts an eye with a teardrop. Both mosaics feature colorful shards of glass. "When we were breaking the glass up, there was emotion behind that," Smith says. The day she made both pieces, she was upset over a fight with a friend; breaking the glass and creating something beautiful out of it helped her work through her anger.

It's an emotion that some students struggle to control. Hardships in their personal lives sometimes make it difficult for them

Leeya Davis, left, and Ty'aira Manning, right, can't help smiling as they decorate their lamps.



to focus or to accept constructive criticism. The program tries to help students improve their attitudes by providing one-

on-one attention and feedback. On Fridays, teachers at each site meet with participants individually to review their work for the week and to pay them stipends. Students are rated poor, satisfactory, good, or excellent in six categories: quality of work, quantity of work, cooperation, attitude, dependability, and communication. Lopossay spends 10 to 15 minutes with each student. First, she asks how they think they did. Then she tells them what she's observed. During these evaluations, most students say they want to improve their art and their attitudes. At the end of each weekly meeting, she pays them for their work in \$5 and \$10 bills. "I make sure to tell them, 'I'm not giving you this money—you earned this money!'"

One afternoon, Lopossay must tell two students that Friday she will dock their stipends for one day because they had done almost no work. Instead, they had talked and distracted their peers. When they find out they're losing a day of pay, they become angry and argue. Both vow to quit. To diffuse the situation, she tells them she will not argue with them and reminds them they have the option of not returning to class. When they do show up the next day, Lopossay greets them cordially. "I'm glad to see you ladies came back," she tells them. "I look forward to seeing the work you'll produce today."

The day they return to class, they do not misbehave, possibly because they want to keep their jobs and possibly because two speakers captivate the room. Pupkin has contracted with Workforce Solutions Group of Montgomery County Inc., a nonprofit that provides employment and training services to people looking for jobs and those who already have them. Pupkin has asked trainers from the group, Denise Higgs and Sheridan Stanley, to visit Paul's Place twice, and Rayner Browne and the Hampden site four



times each, to conduct sessions on job skills. This morning, they engage students in activities focusing on body language, the power of words, and the importance of teamwork. Both speakers share personal stories about overcoming adversity. Stanley says he grew up in the same hardscrabble neighborhood where the class is being held. Higgs shares how she learned to manage her anger only after a court mandated that she get help.

The students seem to be most moved by an activity in which they stand in a circle and share one thing they would change about themselves. Many say they want to improve their attitudes and, specifically, control their anger. Keishawn Dargan, who rarely speaks, says she wants to overcome her shyness. A few minutes later, Kqwan Williams, a quiet, lanky boy, makes this frank admission: he would change growing up without a father. “Maybe I’d turn out better than what I am now,” he says, as the room grows quiet. “Most boys in Baltimore don’t grow up with a father.” His peers nod knowingly, and they applaud when he says, “If I become a father, I wouldn’t leave.”

With the desire to change their attitudes fresh in their minds, Higgs tells them that next week’s session will focus on dealing with anger.

That session comes too late for one student. Toward the end of the program, one young woman continually disrespects her teacher and peers, and erupts in fits of rage. After several attempts to diffuse and redirect her, Lopossay tells her not to return to the program. She makes this difficult decision to teach the student that her actions have consequences and to keep the rest of the class on track.

### Create with Care

The 11 students at the Hampden site also wrestle with their emotions. Most, estranged from their families, live on Madison Street in a shelter that Rose Street Community Center runs. Last summer, they worked with other students at Dr. Rayner Browne Academy, but “the mix of this group did not feel successful to us,” Pupkin says. The majority of the youth at Rayner Browne attend Rayner Browne during the school year; the Rose Street youth did not get along with them. So this summer, Pupkin decided they should work at their own site a block from Art with a Heart’s headquarters in Hampden, a hip neighborhood in northwest Baltimore known for its independent shops and restaurants. A van picks them up from the shelter each morning, giving them a chance to get to know a more vibrant section of their city. Having them close to her office also allows Pupkin to keep an eye on them.

One morning, tensions run high. The teacher, Edward Williams, a local muralist, has repeatedly told the students not to use cell phones during work, and he sternly tells them the no-cell-

phone rule yet again. The students sit unsmiling, and some rest their heads on the table. But once they start working, the tension lifts. Students focus on selecting photos from *National Geographic* magazines to cut out and use to decorate serving trays. Sierra Foster, 25, says her tray’s theme is “above and below ground,” so she’s looking for pictures of fish and trees. The mother of two has lived at the Madison Street shelter for three months and took this job to avoid being bored this summer. “I didn’t think it could be this fun,” she says.

Foster shows a visitor around the workspace—a vacant one-room office that Art with a Heart has rented. She points to the coasters the students made out of gravel and cut glass beads that



Diamonte Johnson talks to an Artscape shopper about Art with a Heart. Besides running the Summer Job Program, the nonprofit provides art classes to low-income youth and adults, homeless people, the disabled, and battered women and their children.

are drying along the wall, and the stools they painted with animal themes. She beams with pride as she points to her stool with an elephant painted on the seat and tiny peanuts on the legs. Foster says the stool so far is her favorite; she had never painted something before.

Davon Ferguson, 19, decorates his tray with abstract shapes that he cuts from wallpaper samples. Like Foster, he lives at the Madison Street shelter and applied for this job to “have something to do.” At 16, he was kicked out of school for hitting a teacher and now dreams of joining the National Guard. He hopes the military can provide him structure and discipline to change his life.

As Ferguson decides where to place his next shape, Williams looks over his shoulder. He likes what he sees so far. “Now you’re being interesting,” he says. “That grabs my eye more.” For those students cutting pictures from magazines, Williams encourages them not to get sloppy. He demonstrates how to hold the scissors firmly and to cut straight lines. He also says not to rush. Be “someone who really cares about his work,” he tells them. Make a customer at Artscape think, “I’m going to buy this piece.”

### Time to Sell

At Artscape, customers do indeed buy the students’ work. They flock to the Art with a Heart booth and browse the brightly colored clocks, stools, children’s tables and chairs, rings, lamps, place mats, mosaics, and magnets. Kristina Berdan, a teacher at the Stadium School, a middle school in Baltimore, spends \$45. She buys coasters decorated with blue glass, and a lamp covered with yellow, purple, and blue beads. She plans to give the lamp to a friend. The coasters will go to her in-laws. Berdan says she has shopped at the Art with a Heart booth for years. “I love that young people are working here.”

Two students from each site work two-hour shifts throughout the three-day festival. Others stick around to socialize with their friends even when they aren’t working. Wearing a black Art with a Heart apron, Yasmine Campbell works the 2–4 p.m. shift on this sweltering Saturday. She walks around with a price list and sales form tucked under a clipboard and waits on customers. “It’s awesome,” she says of working in the booth. “It’s good to see your artwork displayed for someone else to keep in their home.”

Tawanda Christian, 22, also sporting an Art with a Heart apron, eats lunch under a tree near the booth. Her shift doesn’t start until Sunday, but she’s here today because she wants to help. Yesterday, customers bought her purple and blue coasters, and a stool she painted with a giraffe on the seat. When they sold, Christian says, she was so happy. “I almost cried.”

While most of Art with a Heart’s works do sell, not everything in the booth finds a buyer. Pupkin stores what doesn’t sell, and then displays it at another festival held every November at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. And now she’s planning to open Art with a Heart’s first permanent store, which will sell work created by participants in all of Art with a Heart’s programs. Pupkin hopes to open its doors by November.

**I**n the days following Artscape, the program coordinators of Paul’s Place, Rose Street, and Rayner Browne, along with Pupkin, discuss how to spend the \$3,000 profit. In the past, they have used it to take students on trips to New York City and Philadelphia. On these outings, they stay at hotels and eat in



Visitors to Art with a Heart’s booth browse the students’ work, including glass-beaded lamps and colorfully decorated watering cans.

restaurants with waiters—first-time experiences for many students. A month after Artscape, Pupkin and the coordinators tentatively decide to

spend the money on a team-building experience such as Outward Bound. Many students have asked to keep the money made from this year’s festival, but Pupkin is reluctant to give it to them. When she has in the past, the students have just bought airtime for their cell phones.

The end of Artscape did not necessarily signal the end of their artful summer. Those who worked at Rayner Browne could spend three more weeks working with an Art with a Heart teacher to create a mosaic mural for the school. Middle schoolers who worked at Paul’s Place could stay another week for a jewelry-making class with an Art with a Heart teacher.

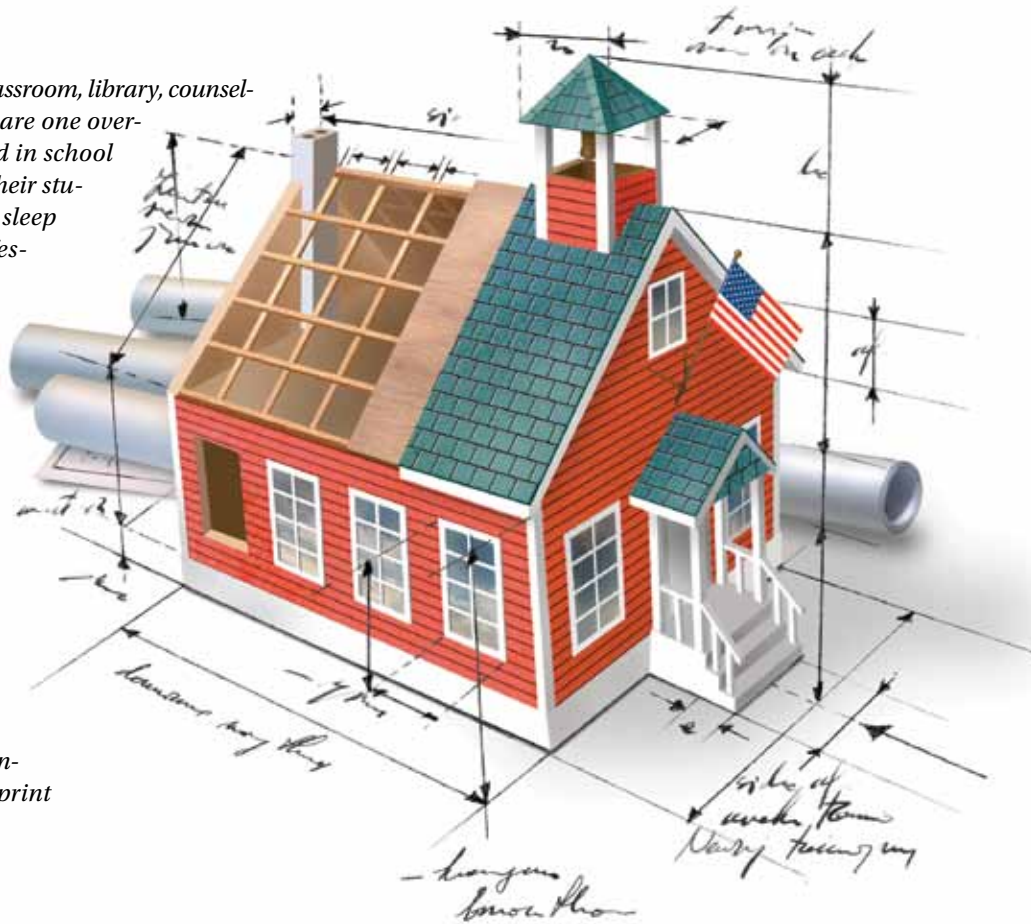
The youth from Madison Street did not have those options. Pupkin wanted to devise a way for them to continue their employment, but hadn’t found anything for the whole group. The day after Artscape, more than half of them called, asking if she had any work they could do. Pupkin said yes. She needed them to organize picture frames, lampshades, and bins of string, fabric, and felt, among other things, in the office’s storage room. If they showed up on time and worked hard, she would pay them a stipend of \$10 each day. Having worried about how they would handle the boredom they faced for the rest of the summer, Pupkin was thrilled and relieved that they contacted her. For as long as she could, she and her staff would keep Davon, Sierra, Tawanda, and their peers engaged, safe, and fed. She hopped in her car and picked them up. □



# Lessons on Organizing for Power

Professional educators—whether in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: seeing all students succeed in school and life. While they take great pride in their students' accomplishments, they also lose sleep over their students' unmet needs. Professional educators routinely meet with students before and after school, examine student work to improve lesson plans, reach out to students' families in the evenings and on the weekends, and strive to increase their knowledge and skills. And yet, their efforts are rarely recognized by the society they serve.

The AFT is committed to supporting these unsung heroes. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—not just their accomplishments, but also their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.



BY LOUIS MALFARO

School systems sometimes make promises they have no intention of keeping. Other times, they can deliver a world of opportunities to our neediest children. They may or may not want to listen to parents or even teachers, but school systems always attend to the demands of the most powerful individuals and institutions in their communities. For the last 20 years, I've been working and organizing to build power through my local union—Education Austin.

*Louis Malfaro is an AFT vice president and the secretary-treasurer of the Texas AFT. Previously, he was a second-grade bilingual teacher, president of the Austin Federation of Teachers, and then president of Education Austin, the first merged AFT-NEA affiliate in Texas.*

Over the summer, as I made the transition from being president of Education Austin to being secretary-treasurer of the Texas AFT, I spent some time reflecting on how union locals—especially locals like mine in states without collective bargaining—build power. Not power for its own sake, but power to work with school districts, policymakers, and institutions on an equal footing, to advance an agenda of issues for members and the children they serve. I don't have a list of lessons learned or a set of simple steps to follow. What I have is a story. It's my story and the story of my union's struggle to give educators a place at the table.

## Teaching and Learning the Hard Way

I started teaching in 1987 at Blackshear Elementary School in Austin, Texas, as a second-grade bilingual teacher. Just eight years earlier, Austin had been ordered by the U.S. Supreme Court to bus



students; it was one of the last major urban school districts to come under a court-ordered desegregation plan. The district complied, busing students at all levels beginning in 1980. In 1986, a new school board was elected on a let's-get-rid-of-busing platform. By then, the courts had pretty much gotten out of the business of desegregation. The school district was allowed to reinstitute neighborhood elementary schools, as long as it agreed to make certain accommodations for 16 high-poverty "priority" schools—including that they would be staffed by experienced and exceptional principals and teachers.

I arrived on the scene excited to be assigned to Blackshear Elementary, one of the 16 priority schools, where more than 95 percent of the students received free or reduced-price lunch. As a new teacher, I looked forward to being surrounded by veteran colleagues who would mentor and support me as I learned my new craft.

As it turned out, of the five of us assigned to second grade, four had never taught a lick. Our lone veteran colleague had fewer than five years under her belt. I received a quick lesson in how public school systems can work: promises made to communities (and courts) are not always kept.

At about this time, I was solicited through the mail by the Association of Texas Professional Educators, an anti-collective bargaining, anti-union teacher association. Its flier said, "We believe that strikes should be saved for the grand old game of baseball." Over 20 years later, I still recall the steam coming out my ears as I read this paean to passivity. Where I grew up, in Pennsylvania, my teachers were unionized and union workers at Bethlehem Steel forged the beams of the Golden Gate Bridge. I had learned my history too. Reading *The Jungle* in my public high school opened my eyes to an American history rife with abuse of the American worker. I knew that the labor movement played a very significant role in protecting workers' rights and promoting high-quality public schools.

In most states, the right of school employees to union representation is no longer a stirring issue for educators, but in Texas, state law prohibits collective bargaining. Unlike some southern states where the historical practice is to not engage in collective bargaining, in Texas, it is downright illegal, statutorily prohibited not only for teachers but for virtually all public employees (with a few exceptions for public safety workers). When I moved to Texas, I realized that as far as rights on the job are concerned, the clock had been turned back to pre-1960s America.

When I received the anti-union flier, I cursed the ignorance of it, but I didn't sit in the shadows swearing at the darkness. A few weeks later, I was contacted by the AFT affiliate, the Austin Federation of Teachers, Local 2048. I breathed fire into the phone about the flier I'd received. There was an organizer at my school the next day to sign me up as a new member.

The union, for me, was and continues to be a vehicle for forming relationships with people who share my interests and concerns. Within the first year, I signed up to be the building representative—there were only three AFT members at the school! In fact, although there were two AFT affiliates within the school district, a certified teacher local and a PSRP (paraprofessional and school-related personnel) local, the teacher local had fewer than 300 members spread across 80 schools.

The big group in town was the NEA affiliate. If somebody from

there had talked to me first, it's likely that I would have signed up with the NEA. As with the AFT, the NEA's positions on a lot of issues were similar to mine. Over time, I found that our local union was the little-but-loud group—the real union—so I embraced it.

One of my first initiatives as a building representative was to survey the 16 "priority" schools to find out if they had received the promised master teachers or any of the other promised resources. None of the 16 schools had received the experienced teachers. They did get other things, like reduced class sizes and a little extra money to take kids on field trips. So the district hadn't completely failed, but on the critical issue of quality teachers, nothing had been done. There certainly was quality teaching going on in those

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16 schools, but there were many, many greenhorns like me with precious little support.

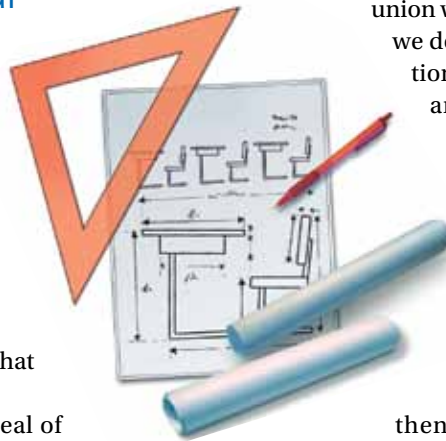
My first year, I literally got a cardboard box full of teacher's editions of textbooks and was turned loose with 15 second-graders. Nobody came into my room for weeks. Weeks turned into months, and I kept thinking to myself, "I can't believe they just put me in here with these kids! I've never taught before, and nobody is coming in here to see how I'm doing!" To make matters worse, I was the only bilingual second-grade teacher in my school, so I was the only person teaching my specific curriculum to kids in Spanish (their primary language) and English. It was an isolating experience.

Desperate, I eavesdropped on the four-year veteran's classroom, which wasn't difficult because our rooms were divided by a folding wall. During my planning period, I parked myself right next to the thin wall and, while grading papers, listened to her teach, to her pace and how she interacted with the kids. Aside from what I had learned from my student teaching, I really didn't know a lot about what I was supposed to be doing.

Nevertheless, I had the same experience many young, energetic teachers have. I fell in love with my students and their families. I poured in many hours and was astounded at how much I learned about children, and at how quickly my children learned. I went into teaching to work with poor, immigrant kids. I knew I would encounter a lot of really bright kids, but I was amazed by the children's capacity and potential. I ran an afterschool Shakespeare club for a couple of years in which we produced elementary school versions of several dramas, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Despite the lack of mentoring and support, teaching was a great experience for me. It renewed my faith in the importance of public schools, especially for kids whose parents are immigrants or did not go to college. Working in a classroom every day puts one in touch with the unbridled potential that children bring with them to school. Yet, too often, school systems don't invest adequately in teachers, who, like students, fail to reach their potential as a result. They never become as good at teaching as they could be because they haven't been equipped. I think I was an example of how that happens. I was hard working, I was well intentioned—and I'm not saying I didn't have success in the classroom. But I had so much more to learn. My school district did not have a mentoring or induction program, or a well-articulated professional development program, although I did receive some good training here and there. How much more quickly could I have improved

My time in the classroom taught me there was a need for powerful institutions that could hold the district accountable to its students, staff, and community.



with a real expert by my side, and how would that have affected my students?

The union, in contrast, provided a great deal of leadership training. Even though we were a small local, we were part of a bigger network of local AFT affiliates around Texas. I enjoyed meeting other teachers' union leaders from around the state and hearing about their struggles. The Texas AFT had a very strong leadership development program, with summer training that covered how to run a local, the nuts and bolts of what a local should do: advocacy, organizing, grievance handling, internal and external communications, and consultation (which, as I'll explain later, is as close as we have gotten to collective bargaining).

By 1992, I was on the executive board of the Austin Federation of Teachers. We were still the little 300-member, lean, mean fighting machine. Our local president decided abruptly that she didn't want to continue to serve, and the board, which we jokingly renamed "the junta," managed the local for the remainder of that school year.

That was the end of my fifth year in the classroom. I had been accepted into the graduate program at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. My plan was to take a leave of absence from school to earn a master's degree in public policy. The board members, thinking that I'd have more free time as a graduate student than they would as classroom teachers, asked me to run for president.

I agreed and was elected president of the local—a job that

came with many hours of work and a whopping \$50 a week stipend. For two years, I studied state governance, school finance, and other aspects of public policy. Meanwhile, every Monday night I was down at the school board meetings, and all week in the afternoons (when not in class) I was making fliers and visiting schools. Fortunately, it wasn't long before the Texas AFT assigned a staff person to my local.

At the end of graduate school, I had the choice between selling securities or becoming the local president full time, released from teaching. Although I received a very attractive offer from a major investment house, there was never a question in my mind about where I belonged.

## Building Power

My time in the classroom taught me there was a need for powerful institutions that could hold the district accountable to its students, staff, and community. But as the new leader of a very small affiliate, I actually felt a little resentment as I listened to Albert Shanker—the iconic president of the national AFT—say that fixing

schools and providing professional development are union work. I kept thinking to myself: "In Austin, we don't even have the basic right of recognition. How can we have a meaningful role in any quality-of-education initiative when they don't even recognize us?"

Still, I reflected on the locals doing professional issues work: they were the big locals that had grown enough to negotiate with the district as a peer. They could make demands and back them up with people and money. I began to see a sequence for the union's work. First, we had to build power, and

then we could tackle our priorities. So we focused hard on growing the union and talking to teachers about our rights on the job. We also fought for better pay and health care choices.

Unlike my experience as a teacher, in my union work I was anything but isolated. In 1994, my local was awarded an AFT organizing grant, and we hired two organizers. We merged with the local AFT PSRP affiliate, which was called the Allied Education Workers, and Julie Bowman (the then-PSRP local president who now directs leadership development at the Texas AFT) became my copresident.

For five years, we went into schools and work sites, and we organized teachers and school support staff. We built a great local, we elected school board members, we recruited new members, we conducted surveys to find out what motivated our members, and we waged campaigns to improve pay and working conditions.

During this time, my sister began her teaching career in a suburban Philadelphia school district. I used her family as an example when I talked to Austin's school board. My brother-in-law and my nieces and nephews all had health coverage through my sister's teaching job, but in Austin we didn't receive any health coverage for our families. And I would ask: "Why are teachers in some states paid well and treated decently? Why are we so stingy here? Why do you think 18 percent of the staff leaves every year?" We

differentiated ourselves from the nonunion teacher groups by explaining that collective bargaining had helped school employees win basic workplace dignity as well as decent pay, pensions, and health benefits. And we kept building a strong organization.

At the heart of that organization were—and still are—the words printed on the original charter the AFT gave us in 1970: “Democracy in Education, Education for Democracy.” Our union is an autonomous government of school employees. It is democratic, its leaders are elected, and it is governed by a constitution. What separates democracies in the world from tyrannies of the left and the right is the ability of individuals to associate freely and to speak freely—the basics contained in the Bill of Rights.

Can you imagine employers discouraging their employees from voting? People would be outraged. Yet, that is exactly what employers do when they discourage employees from associating with one another and from forming unions. Protecting our rights, whether at work or in our neighborhoods, is an act of preserving the very underpinnings of democracy. The institutions that make up what we call civil society in this country are fragile and often under attack. Ernesto Cortes Jr. of the Industrial Areas Foundation\* has pointed out that mobility, technology, and changes in the way we live, work, and associate have transformed human relationships. The neighborhoods where everyone knew one another—went to school together, worked in the same factory, worshipped together—have given way to a more dislocated society. We have to find new ways to build community, and the places we must look to do that are our schools, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, and our places of worship. The ability to associate freely with your coworkers, to organize, and to bring forward common interests and concerns is fundamental to the health and well-being of American democracy.

These notions of building power were in the forefront of my mind as I thought about how to continue growing my local in the late 1990s. At the national level, the AFT and the NEA were talking about merging, but Texas remained one of the few areas of the country where AFT and NEA locals were still fighting each other. San Antonio’s representation fight in the mid-’90s was especially bitter. The AFT wrested representation away from the NEA affiliate, but it took a tremendous expenditure of time, money, and energy from both sides.

In Austin, Julie Bowman and I had been paying a lot of attention to the NEA affiliate, partly because we were raiding its members, but partly because we were beginning to question our tactics. If we take all the members from one group and move them into another group, we wondered, have we really made progress in terms of organizing? So we started talking to the NEA affiliate, informally at first, to imagine having one big organization. Soon we had a committee that met quarterly. Eventually we conducted a retreat with both locals’ boards.

The negotiations with the NEA local were like a courtship, but in reality we were working on two fronts. Even as we were arguing for the merger, our local worked independently to challenge the NEA’s status as the consultation representative with the district. Although collective bargaining is illegal in Texas, school boards are allowed to set up “consultation” mechanisms to take input

from their employees. Consultation can’t result in a contract, but agreements can be struck and the school board can adopt them as it would any other policy. Austin’s school board had a long-standing consultation policy that named the NEA affiliate as the teacher consultation representative. Our AFT affiliate convinced the board to change the policy to require a vote of the employees to elect the representative. We then told the NEA local that we intended to challenge its bid to become the representative—but that we would rather join together and create a new organization instead.

Initially, the NEA local’s leaders thought we were trying to take consultation away from them. We told them we didn’t want to take it away, we wanted to share it. Since both groups understood that we needed one voice speaking for all employees, we came

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together to create a single union.

With the date for the election for the consultation representative having been set by the school board, we all felt pressure to bring our courtship to a close. The national AFT and NEA brought in high-powered facilitators from Harvard Law School. With their help, using an accelerated six-month process, we went from rival organizations to allied groups with a merger agreement. Then it took another three months to educate the broader membership and take a vote on both sides.

We started the school year in 1999 with a new superintendent, a new merged union called Education Austin, and a consultation election in which Education Austin was overwhelmingly elected. It was the first time school employees in Austin had ever had the ability to vote on a representative. Our combined membership surged over the next couple of years because people who’d been on the fence about joining were energized by our unity. The funny thing about bringing together two organizations that share a common set of values and goals is that, at the grass-roots level, it inherently makes sense to the members. We surveyed members on both sides, and they overwhelmingly supported unification. They clearly wanted one big, strong organization.

The merger agreement called for a three-year transition in which we had a tripartite presidency of Julie Bowman, who was our PSRP president (the NEA affiliate did not have a PSRP division); Brenda Urps, the NEA local president; and myself. After three years, the tripartite presidency ended and I ran unopposed to be the president of Education Austin.

There were plenty of kinks to work out, but we have thrived as

\*To learn more about the Industrial Areas Foundation, see [www.industrialareasfoundation.org](http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org).



the first merged local affiliate in Texas. Amazingly, San Antonio followed us a couple of years later. Members there realized the only alternative to fighting was to figure out how to follow our path. Other smaller districts around the state also pulled together, although many parts of Texas remain a battleground for the AFT and the NEA.

During our merger talks, we understood that if coming together were just about becoming bigger, then despite what we say in Texas, bigger wouldn't necessarily be better. This new organization needed to actually be better than either of its predecessors. The merger process helped us define what a "better" union should look like. Probably the most important improvement was working to more fully engage our members. We agreed to create structures through which more members would not just pay dues and answer surveys, but would also become actively involved in the union, in politics, in professional issues, in the consulting process with the school district, and in outreach to the community.

Today, we have a large group of political action leaders, and myriad standing committees on issues such as early childhood education, special education, assessment, and transportation.

Soon after the merger, Austin Interfaith\* (a community organization affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation and made up of about 30 congregations, schools, and unions) asked our union to join them. The group saw the newly unified Education Austin as a power within the school district and the city. Being a part of Austin Interfaith has helped our union develop and work more broadly to build power. We have borrowed extensively from its organizing style. Education Austin's organizing model asks each individual: What are you interested in? What problems could we work together to solve? Are you willing to form relationships with other teachers and school employees to work on those problems? This approach has defined the union and been very productive. It has also challenged our leaders to take on issues like health care, immigration, housing, and other issues that aren't school issues per se, but that do affect our students and members. Now, our work is expanding again: Education Austin was recently awarded an AFT Innovation Fund grant to work with Austin Interfaith to do community school organizing. Austin Interfaith has a track record of successful school organizing, having worked in the 1990s to organize the parents, teachers, and community at 16 high-needs schools.

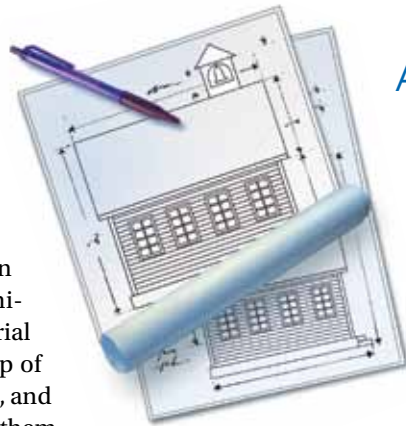
### Taking Up Shanker's Challenge

Right after the merger and consultation representative election in 1999, Education Austin focused on basic pay and health insurance issues. We negotiated decent pay raises. We persuaded the district to adopt an internal minimum wage for workers, so even the custodial and food service staff start off at a living wage. We

also negotiated leave benefits and training for employees. Then we began a long, hard push to include professional issues in our official consultation with the district.

I remember reading a "Where We Stand" column in which Al Shanker bemoaned the fact that when fighting to win collective bargaining, teachers and their unions were accused of only caring about their own pay and benefits—not caring about kids. But, Shanker said, when they won bargaining and tried to negotiate things that would be good for students, like reduced class sizes, they were told that it was not their concern. In city after city, management only wanted to bargain wages, hours, and working conditions. Shanker rightly pointed out the hypocrisy of calling teachers' unions self-interested while restricting what they could negotiate to wages and benefits.

In Austin, the same thing happened when we tried to introduce



Al Shanker rightly pointed out the hypocrisy of calling teachers' unions self-interested while restricting what they could negotiate to wages and benefits.

ideas that would be good for kids and for school quality, such as mentoring programs for new teachers and high-quality professional development for all teachers. We were told those things are management's prerogative. I remember the chief academic officer telling us, "I'll meet with you on the side about that, but we're not going to do that during consultation." It was frustrating.

One of the areas that we really had to fight hard on for many years was assessment, and in particular practice testing. Our district, like many districts over the last 10 years, ratcheted up the amount of time teachers are required to do practice testing with kids. We were told to administer beginning-, middle-, and end-of-year benchmark tests, plus six-week and nine-week tests. Some schools also gave three-week tests, and even weekly tests. None of these were teacher-made assessments. They were all designed to estimate how students would do on the end-of-year state assessment. One of our strongest committees in the last several years has been the over-testing committee. But until very recently, we were rebuffed every year, even though our proposals were reasonable requests, supported by a majority of teachers, to make some of the tests optional.

Recently, with our new superintendent, Meria Carstarphen, we were able to create a labor-management committee to review the district's testing regime. After a full year of work, we arrived at an agreement to significantly reduce the amount of practice testing and to spend another year designing meaningful formative assessments that will take up less class time and better guide instruction. This sort of labor-management partnership would have been unthinkable a decade ago, but with greater power and

\*To learn more about Austin Interfaith, see [www.austininterfaith.org](http://www.austininterfaith.org).

the political sophistication (on both sides) to engage around tough issues, we have improved the ability to get things done.

Compensation is another example of a difficult issue where labor-management collaboration has had some success. In 2006, we signed a two-year pay agreement, an unprecedented event because normally our pay negotiations are linked to the annual adoption of the budget. Teacher and support staff received raises of 11.5 percent over two years, and an extra \$4 million was set aside for development of a new alternative compensation plan that the union and district would design together. The compensation committee was jointly chaired by the human resources director, a business leader, and me. We already knew that we had strong resources from the AFT and the NEA, which both sent staff with experience in developing alternative compensation systems to help us. Many members got involved as the union worked with the district to create a large steering committee plus a smaller design committee. Our teachers helped the district understand that just paying more wasn't going to change anything—teachers needed better support and the right tools to improve.

The result of several years' worth of research, learning together, and work was the Austin Independent School District REACH program, which is now entering its fourth year as a pilot at 15 of our schools. In order to become a pilot site, two-thirds of the teachers had to vote in favor of participating.

REACH provides full-time mentors for teachers in their first three years, support for national board certification, schoolwide performance bonuses based on student growth on the state's reading and math assessments, and individual teacher bonuses based on teacher-developed student-learning objectives. We're comfortable with this approach to alternative compensation because teachers are well supported and the alternative pay is on top of the regular salary schedule. It was important to us to recognize and encourage teacher collaboration, so the state assessment results are only used for schoolwide incentives. Instead of looking at current achievement, the district looks at year-over-year growth of the same students and compares it with the growth in 40 similar schools. Bonuses are awarded to schools that rank in the top quartile on growth in reading and/or math. We were also careful in designing the individual incentives: they are teacher-selected student-learning objectives, and they are developed by all teachers in every subject and grade, so that the art teacher, French teacher, librarian, gym teacher, band teacher, pre-K teacher, etc., all set goals based on their students and the curriculum they teach.

REACH has started to create a culture of looking at data, setting measurable goals, and assessing personal and group performance. But that's only part of what makes it effective. The other part—probably the more important part—is the mentoring. All of the full-time mentors have completed the AFT's Foundations of Effective Teaching professional development course.<sup>†</sup> The first year, the union paid to send about seven people to the training. The district was so impressed by its quality that it paid the full cost for both the union and the district—around \$30,000—in the second year.

<sup>†</sup>Foundations of Effective Teaching is part of the AFT's ER&D (Educational Research and Dissemination) program, which is designed to enable local unions to provide their members with high-quality, research-based professional development, either on their own or in collaboration with their school districts.

When we designed REACH, our plan was to offer all pilot schools the alternative compensation, but to provide full-time mentoring only in the highest-needs schools (i.e., those with the highest concentrations of low-income students and English language learners). We quickly learned that mentoring should be offered to all pilot schools because all new teachers, not just those in our most challenging schools, are really interested in receiving extensive support and feedback. In addition, we found that mentoring new teachers is a huge relief to our senior teachers, who no longer felt pressured to assist their new colleagues. In fact, some senior teachers are seeking out the mentors because they want extra support too, especially in designing their student-learning objectives.

Going forward, all REACH schools will have the same supports, but the highest-needs schools will have added monetary incen-

One mistake I've seen new local presidents make is not grasping the difference between being political and being partisan. Even without collective bargaining, leaders can build power.

tives for teachers that include bigger performance bonuses and a retention stipend. For first- through third-year teachers, the retention stipend is \$1,000. For those who have been in the school more than three years, it's \$3,000. Use of a retention stipend is supported by research conducted by our district that links longevity at the school site with increased student performance.

This is the final year of the REACH pilot. We are still collecting data to determine program effectiveness, but there are some positive early results. We are hoping to expand the program to almost 40 schools, mainly our highest-needs schools.\*

Interestingly, working on the REACH program has deepened the union's relationship with the entire human capital development wing of the school district. The district now has a chief human capital officer who pays close attention to teacher leadership, professional development, the REACH program, and the development of a new, much more robust teacher induction program for the whole district.

REACH has also built our relationship with the chamber of commerce and the business community. The business community loves performance pay—but our business leaders have also appreciated that the program is a labor-management partnership. They've been real boosters and have supported raising the tax rate to help fund the program.

## Developing Leaders

Being a local union leader is transformative because it forces you  
*(Continued on page 40)*

\*To learn more about REACH, see [www.austin.isd.tenet.edu/inside/initiatives/compensation](http://www.austin.isd.tenet.edu/inside/initiatives/compensation).

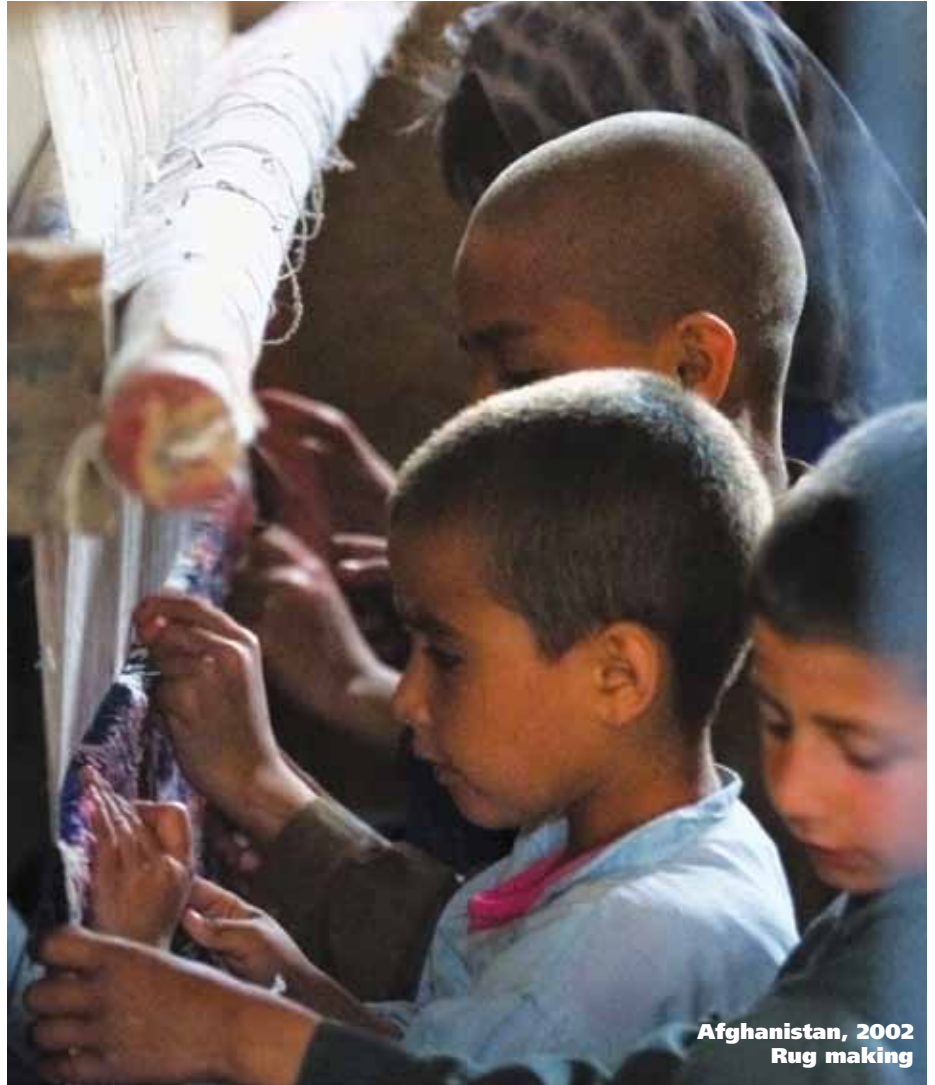
# Education for All

## Child Labor for None

*This fall, as more than 50 million American children return to school, we'd like to call attention to the world's 215 million child laborers, especially the millions of child laborers who have never been to school.*

*Education, both in the United States and around the world, is the key to ending child labor. In the United States, educating students, teachers, and the public about child labor is essential because the more aware of the problem citizens become, the more we can collectively call on our elected representatives to act. Tougher laws, and tougher enforcement of existing laws, are needed. Around the world, educating all children is essential because high-quality schooling is the single best way to prevent child labor among current and future generations. As the International Labour Organization (ILO) recently wrote, "Education is not the sole solution, but when it is free, full time, compulsory and of quality, it is the most important part of the sum.... We will not eliminate child labour without universal education and, conversely, we will not ensure every child is in school unless we bring an end to child labour, in particular its worst forms."<sup>1</sup>*

*In learning that there are 215 million child laborers, one may hope that this enormous number includes adolescents who legally work part time or children doing just a little more than the usual helping out at home. It does not. Child laborers are those*



**Afghanistan, 2002**  
Rug making



**United States, 1997**  
Crop harvesting



**India, 2010**  
Shoe polishing



# Child Labor Is Declining, but Progress Has Slowed

Collecting accurate data on child labor is difficult; these data represent the ILO's best efforts to estimate the extent of the problem.\* Since 1998, the ILO has supported over 300 surveys of child labor. Sadly, the worst forms of child labor—such as child soldiering, prostitution, and forced or bonded labor—are the ones we know the least about. Although the ILO estimates that children in these types of work make up less than 10 percent of the 115 million children currently engaged in hazardous work, they are almost always the hardest children to reach.

While the numbers are staggering, the charts on the right reveal some good news. Between 2000 and 2008, the number of child laborers ages 5–14 dropped by 33 million. Even better, the number of children ages 5–14 engaged in hazardous work dropped by 58 million.

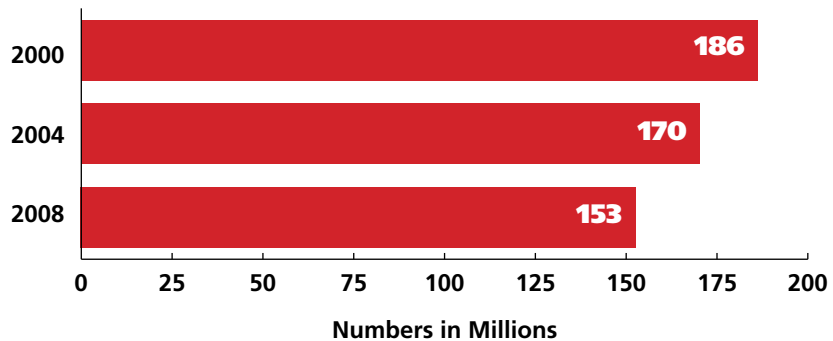
Among the older group, child laborers ages 15–17, there is no good news. Youth in this age group are only considered child laborers if they are engaged in hazardous work (i.e., jobs with very long hours and/or dangerous conditions like mining, or the worst forms of work like drug trafficking, prostitution, and forced labor). Some progress was made between 2000 and 2004, but all of it was lost between 2004 and 2008. From 2000 to 2008, the number of 15- to 17-year-olds engaged in hazardous work actually increased by 3 million.

So, where are these child laborers? Although child laborers are found all over the world, about half of the world's 215 million child laborers are in the Asia-Pacific region. But since the population of that region is so large, only about 13 percent of children there are child laborers. The most problematic region is sub-Saharan Africa. It has 30 percent of the world's 215 million child laborers, and 25 percent of children in the region are child laborers.

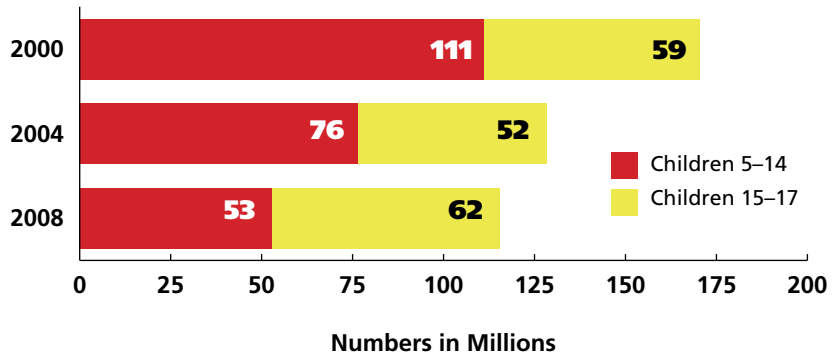
—EDITORS

\*These data and more are available at [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_126752.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_126752.pdf).

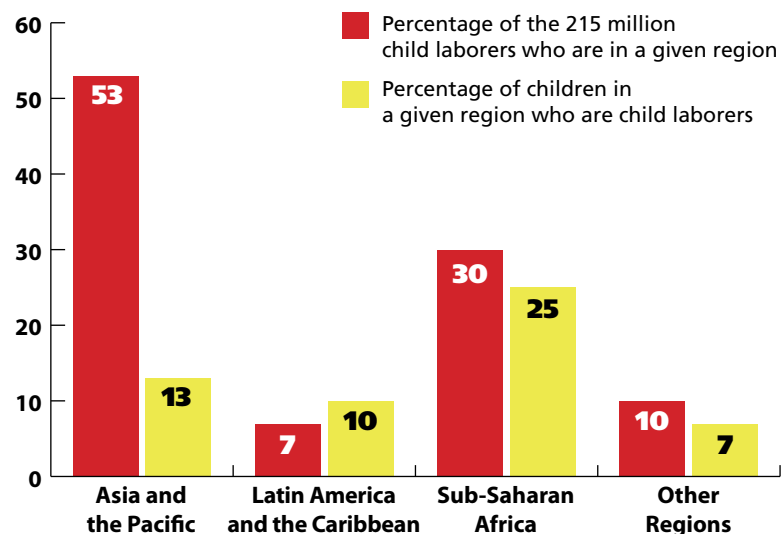
## 1. Child Laborers Ages 5 to 14, Including Children in Hazardous Work: 2000–2008



## 2. Children Ages 5 to 17 in Hazardous Work: 2000–2008



## 3. Child Laborers Ages 5 to 17 by Region: 2008



youth ages 5 to 17 who are below established minimum ages for various jobs and/or are enduring hazardous work that, according to the ILO, “poses a threat to their health, safety, or morals.” Long hours, physical abuse, dangerous chemicals or

machinery, sexual exploitation, and forced labor are far too common.

To call attention to the children who so desperately need our help, we have brought together the ILO's most recent statistics on child labor; a brief excerpt from a new book

that explores the connections between child labor, education, and health; photos of child laborers around the world; and a resource box with suggestions for how each of us can help.

—EDITORS

# Good Schools, Great Results

## Education Is the Key to Ending Child Labor and Improving Children's Health

BY DAVID POST

Schools are often the main alternative to intensive child labor. But as families decide whether their children should be at work or in school, the availability of high-quality, affordable education is a major factor. Education can be very costly (in terms of books, uniforms, and forgone earnings), even when the direct fees are low. The material benefits from education are not always obvious to families and—apart from school-based meals, discussed below—those benefits may come far in the future. When children are needed to supplement scarce family income, low-quality schools provide no countervailing incentive for families to send their children to school.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, high-quality and close-by schools can reduce the likelihood that children will work exclusively, or in addition to their time in school.

Education—or its absence—profoundly affects the health of children and their communities via several much-studied paths. A child's own education can improve his or her own health. It can also improve the health of his or her future children by affecting the number of births, their timing, and the resources available for the next generation.

Infants whose parents are educated are more likely to receive neonatal care, less likely to experience the increased mortality associated with large families and closely aged siblings,<sup>2</sup> and more likely to receive continued care and attention through their toddler years.<sup>3</sup> Educated mothers are more likely to seek medical care, to be better informed about their children's nutritional requirements, and

*David Post is a professor of education in the Higher Education and Comparative and International Education programs at Pennsylvania State University. He is also a research associate with the university's Center for the Study of Higher Education. This article is excerpted with permission from Child Labour: A Public Health Perspective, edited by Anaclaudia G. Fassa, David L. Parker, and Thomas J. Scanlon, © Oxford University Press 2010.*



South Africa, 2007  
Cattle herding



Indonesia, 2009  
Garbage scavenging

to adopt improved sanitation practices. The result is that their infants and children have higher survival rates and tend to be healthier and better nourished.<sup>4</sup> An infant born to an educated woman is more likely to survive until adulthood. In general, an educated woman is 50 percent more likely to have her children immunized against childhood diseases.<sup>5</sup> The effect of a mother's education on her child's health and nutrition is so significant that *each extra year of maternal education reduces the rate of mortality for children under the age of 5 by between 5 and 10 percent.*<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, communities with a large percentage of educated families have a better environment and offer more health



services for everyone, as compared with communities of uneducated adults. Because the children of educated parents are themselves more likely to be educated, they make better choices about nutrition and healthy lifestyles.<sup>7</sup>

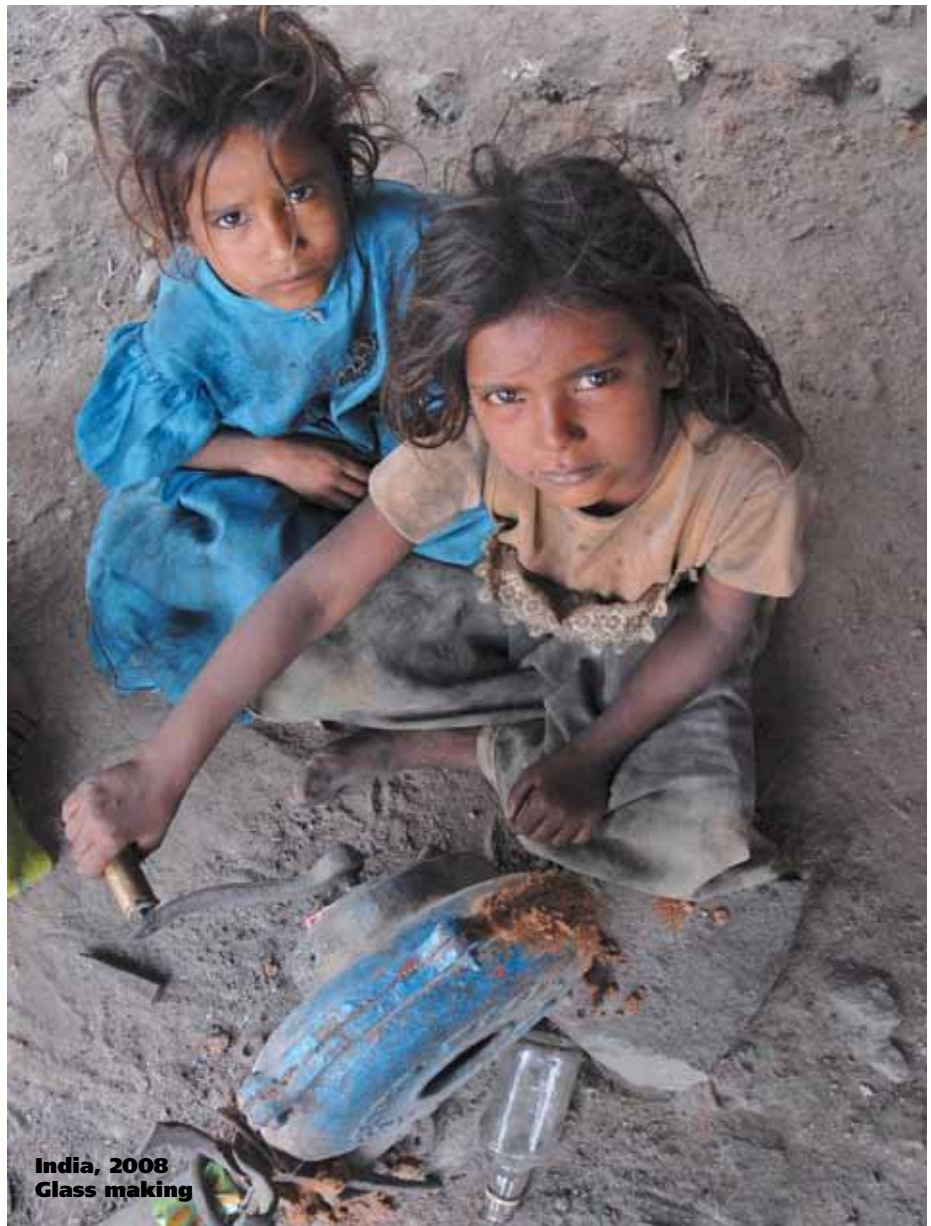
Educated women generally wait longer to become sexually active, which limits their exposure to sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS and delays the start of child bearing. This further increases survival rates for both themselves and their infants.<sup>8</sup> In summary, education conveys physical health benefits that go beyond children to include their families and communities.

Governments and nongovernmental organizations have devised many incen-





**Afghanistan, 2002**  
Metal work



**India, 2008**  
Glass making



**Burma, 2007**  
Road repair

tives to induce school attendance in place of child labor. These include cash payments to families, school-based meals, and school finance changes to assist school administrators. Let's briefly explore each of these.

### **Cash Payments**

One example of a stipend program is Mexico's 1997 Program for Education, Health, and Nutrition (PROGRESA, though later this program was called "Oportunidades"). PROGRESA is noteworthy because it was designed to attend to the integral needs of children and families living in poverty. The program focused spe-



**Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2007**  
Prostitution





**Ghana, 2006**  
Quarry work



**Ecuador, 2002**  
Gold extraction



**United States, 1997**  
Crop harvesting



**Burma, 2000**  
Soldiering

cifically on families in the lowest 20 percent of the income distribution who lived in Mexico's poorest communities, comprising some 24 million people. It aimed to integrate existing welfare programs of education, health, and nutrition.

In a significant departure from most other school incentive programs, PROGRESA established a different scale of stipends for girls and boys after they complete primary schooling (up through the

primary level, equal monetary incentives are awarded for girls and boys). Following the examples of targeted programs in Bangladesh and Guatemala, where the World Bank piloted a special subsidization of education for girls, PROGRESA specifically targeted girls' access to schooling, since they are more likely than boys not to be in school. Most poor Mexican girls who are out of school do not work for income; rather, they perform unpaid domestic chores.<sup>9</sup>

PROGRESA increased the rates of school participation, especially among girls.<sup>10</sup> It also reduced employment and domestic work among both boys and girls, with boys' labor-force participation decreasing up to 25 percent.<sup>11</sup> It remains to be seen whether the





**Nepal, 2006  
Soldiering**

increased school participation by girls and boys will lead to lasting reductions in rates of child labor, or whether, as happened with a similar program in Bangladesh, working children simply add schooling to their existing responsibilities and reduce their amount of leisure.

### **School-Based Meals**

For many children in the world, education has direct costs to parents above and beyond the opportunity costs of forgone earnings. Even when nations have pledged to make basic education free and compulsory for all, there are many hidden costs that prevent families from sending children to school, such as transportation, uniforms, necessary school supplies, and school lunches. In simple economic terms, even when families are convinced that school produces positive long-run returns on their investment (i.e., forgone earnings and direct costs), many families do not have the resources available to make this investment.

Free lunch and breakfast programs are one way to reduce the costs to families of sending children to school. While nutritional supplements provide clear benefits to children's growth and health, there is



**Cambodia, 2001  
Prostitution**

also evidence that the poorest parents respond favorably to such programs by sending children to school. For example, in Haiti, school meals (which provided 800 calories and 40 grams of protein per day) were a critically important benefit for stu-

dents in the neighborhood of St. Martin. For a household with three children in school, the dollar value of the free school meals was over half of the average monthly income of many families. According to researchers who studied the school-meal





**United States, 1997**  
**Crop harvesting**



**Chad, 2006**  
**Soldiering**



**Nicaragua, 2004**  
**Brick making**

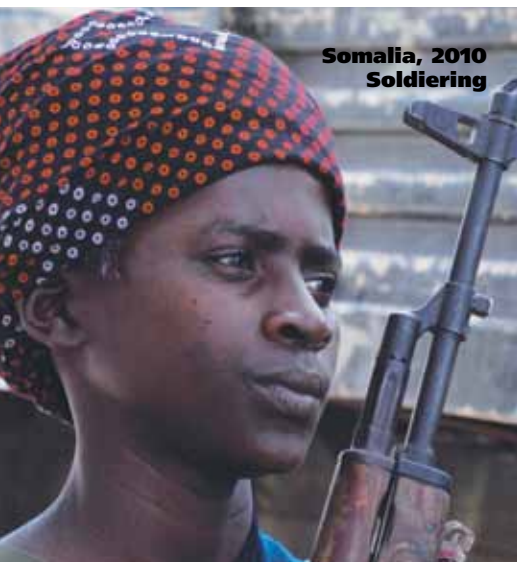
program, “a poor family would have been irrational not to send as many children to school as possible.”<sup>12</sup>

### **School Finance Reform**

School finance reform, though never undertaken specifically to assist children working in difficult circumstances, certainly has an impact on child labor. In nations where school budgets are allocated in a centralized, politicized process, and where budgets do not depend on how many children actually go to school from day to day (or, in some countries, even from year to year), there is very little incentive for schools to intervene and help working children who are out of school.

In most countries where abusive child labor is a problem, the system for financing education is quite centralized. Given that most schools are grossly underfunded, overcrowded, and understaffed, teachers face larger numbers of students than they can accommodate. There is very little reason to expect that any but the most saintly teachers and school directors will want to attract additional students or worry about students who decide to leave school. A triage mentality pervades most schools in countries where significant numbers of children are exploited and abused at work: most teachers and school directors recon-





**Somalia, 2010**  
**Soldiering**



**United States, 1997**  
**Crop harvesting**



**Bangladesh, 2007**  
**Chicken slaughtering**



**Guatemala, 2003**  
**Pyrotechnics assembly**

cile themselves to the idea that they can save only a fraction of the at-risk students who enter the system and will not be able to help many others for whom there are simply insufficient resources.

Recognizing that altruism is feeble timber for the construction of strong programs, a school finance system that makes the enrollment of working children in the school's self-interest should be considered.

**N**ational and global campaigns to provide quality education for all children can and should be used to press local governments to improve schools and, thereby, lower the incidence of harmful child labor. At the same time, those developing the campaigns should not discount the power of the local people to enact change. Where parents have discounted education as an alternative because schools are of poor quality or are not accessible, a greater awareness of the individual, family, and community health benefits of quality education could help push families to exert political pressure to improve schools and promote access for all. As schools improved, so would community and child health, making more visible the connection between the two. This feedback loop could create a virtuous cycle, ultimately diminishing the reliance on child labor even without further legal regulation by local governments. To promote this virtuous cycle, leaders in the fields of education and public health ought to publicize the quality-of-life consequences of successful schooling: lon-

*(Continued on page 39)*



# Take Action

## 1. Learn more about child labor, and teach your students about it too:

- *Child Labour: A Public Health Perspective*, the book from which David Post's article was drawn, provides a thorough, expert look at child labor around the world and its impact on child, family, and community health: [www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Medicine/PublicHealth/?view=usa&sf=toc&ci=9780199558582](http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Medicine/PublicHealth/?view=usa&sf=toc&ci=9780199558582).
- In Our Own Backyard, developed by the AFT, is an instructional website for middle and high school teachers on the hidden problem of child farm workers in the United States: [www.ourownbackyard.org](http://www.ourownbackyard.org).
- *Before Their Time: The World of Child Labor*, a book by occupational physician and photographer David L. Parker, contains 134 images of child laborers as well as brief essays that provide overviews of several types of child labor: [www.childlaborphotographs.com](http://www.childlaborphotographs.com).
- SCREAM (Supporting Children's Rights through Education, the Arts and the Media) is a program developed by the ILO that offers a variety of ways to learn about and promote human rights: [www.ilo.org/ipecc/Campaignandadvocacy/Scream/SCREAMresources/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/Campaignandadvocacy/Scream/SCREAMresources/lang--en/index.htm).
- The International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), run by the ILO, publishes data pertaining to child labor and the international laws and standards that govern it: [www.ilo.org/ipecc/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/lang--en/index.htm).
- Young Workers is a website with guidance for young workers, employers, parents, and educators in the United States: [www.osha.gov/SLTC/teenworkers/index.html](http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/teenworkers/index.html).

## 2. Tell your members of Congress to support the Education for All Act, the Children's Act for Responsible Employment (CARE Act), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- The Education for All Act of 2010 will ensure access to quality basic education for the 72 million children around the world who are now denied access to schooling: [www.unionvoice.org/campaign/education4all](http://www.unionvoice.org/campaign/education4all).
- The CARE Act will strengthen child-labor law in the United States and address the problems with child farm workers: [www.unionvoice.org/campaign/CARE101909](http://www.unionvoice.org/campaign/CARE101909).
- The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important symbolic step toward protecting all children in the world: [www.unicef.org/crc](http://www.unicef.org/crc).



South Africa, 2006  
Learning

**3. Support decent work for all adults:** Decent work for adults is essential to ending child labor. When parents make living wages and are able to support their children, they are much more likely to send their children to school. Learn about the ILO's decent work campaign here: [www.ilo.org/global/About\\_the\\_ILO/Mainpillars/WhatisDecentWork/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/Mainpillars/WhatisDecentWork/lang--en/index.htm).

**4. Be a conscientious consumer:** Ethical purchasing is another significant part of the fight against child labor. Refusing to buy goods produced by children limits the demand for their labor. Learn more on the Responsible Shopper website: [www.greenamericatoday.org/programs/sweatshops/index.cfm](http://www.greenamericatoday.org/programs/sweatshops/index.cfm).

**5. Contact your elected representatives:** Ask them to support legislation that takes a stand against child labor. Make your voice heard by contacting President Obama, Vice President Biden, members of Congress, governors, and state legislators: [www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml](http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml).

**6. Understand what safe work means for American teens:** Talking Safety is a curriculum developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; this and many other resources are available at [www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/youth](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/youth). Work Safe, Work Smart is a curriculum developed by the Minnesota Department of Health for students and teachers in rural communities: [www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpcd/cdee/occhealth/wsws.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpcd/cdee/occhealth/wsws.html).

**7. Raise awareness:** Talking with family and friends, distributing posters and pamphlets, circulating petitions, and writing to local newspapers all help to increase public knowledge about child labor and the need for all children to be in school.

—EDITORS

## Child Labor

(Continued from page 37)

geivity, maternal and infant survival, and meaningful, safe, and productive work after the completion of formal schooling. □

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## Early Literacy

(Continued from page 17)

- different group sizes (large, small, and individual) and different levels of guidance to meet the needs of individual children;
- opportunities for sustained and in-depth learning, including play; and
- a masterful orchestration of activity that supports learning and social-emotional development.

When I read *Developing Early Literacy*, I am reminded of one last missive from my mother. "Be careful what you wish for," she would remind me when I was pining for one of those popular guys in high school. Through no fault of the panel, this report could be the subject of much mischief. There will be people out there who will require teachers to apply these code-based skills like a laundry list of what they should teach. They'll demand that teachers focus exclusively on alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, phonological memory, and rapid naming of random letters and digits and colors and objects—and they will confidently argue that they are helping teachers do what is best in teaching children to read.

But they are not. With a literacy curriculum reduced to a set of narrow, largely procedural skills, children learn to please others through mimicking, reciting, and repeating. Children deserve better. In contrast to such an approach, we need to expose children to language, and to content-rich settings that can help them acquire the broad array of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that serve as a lifelong foundation for literacy. The early years are just too precious to get it wrong. □

### Endnotes

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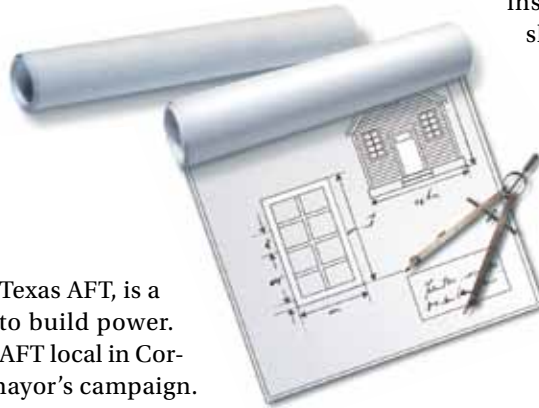


## Professional Educator

(Continued from page 29)

to be political. You must engage with power wherever it is. One mistake I've seen new local presidents make is not grasping the difference between being political and being partisan. Being political is not just about winning elections. It's about reading the newspaper every day. It's about knowing what's going on in your community. It's about listening to your members. It's about developing other leaders. It's about building webs of relationships within the organization and the community that allow you to reach out and be influential. Even in the absence of collective bargaining, good leaders can still build power.

If you are not afraid to show up and not shut up, there are few limits to what you can get done if you have organized people standing with you.



Linda Bridges, the president of the Texas AFT, is a terrific example of acting politically to build power. When she was still the president of the AFT local in Corpus Christi, she successfully ran the mayor's campaign. She was a pioneer in the field of labor-management collaboration (without the safety or structure of a collective bargaining agreement) and won the prestigious Saturn Award for her local. Among many other responsibilities, she served on the board of the local community college and was president of the Coastal Bend Labor Council. She built relationships that in turn built the union. She understood that she had power because of the people standing behind her, and she used that power to build her strength and the strength of the organization.

As a local leader, I tried to follow Linda's lead, to be political but not partisan. When the new superintendent, Meria Carstarphen, came to town last year, I threw my arms around her, in a manner of speaking. I attended all the forums for staff and the community to get to know her. The school board, with whom we had already built a relationship, brought her to our office her first day on the job. Soon thereafter, she announced plans to hold a big convocation with all 11,000 district employees. I asked to get up on stage with her and talk to the district's employees. Although she spoke for an hour and I spoke for 10 minutes, there were only three people on that stage at the event: the president of the school board, the superintendent, and the union president (me). I was there for two reasons. First, my members put me there; they built the power and the strength to enable me to make the demand to be on stage. Second, I asked to be there. I insinuated myself into that situation. Woody Allen said that 80 percent of success is showing up. Sometimes it's awkward and

uncomfortable. But if you think and behave politically, if you are able to engage power by offering something and demanding something, and if you are not afraid to show up and not shut up, there are few limits to what you can get done if you have organized people standing with you.

One way to stay focused on the political and on building a broad base of support for the union is to ask a simple question: whom am I developing? It's a question all leaders and organizers should ask themselves constantly. It is not simply a matter of succession, as in "whom am I preparing to someday take my job." Whether you're staying or going, whether you're short term or long term, whether you're a building representative or a local president, you are only as effective as the other leaders you bring with you. I wish I had figured that out much earlier because I would have achieved more and maybe not had to work quite so awfully hard.

In organizations like ours, leadership is everything. But leadership isn't the person sitting at the top. Leadership is the relationships with other people, both inside and outside the union—relationships that bring people along, develop their talents, and tie them to one another through shared interests and a common understanding of what they want to see happen and what they are willing to do to make it happen.

My union includes members who lived in Section 8 housing, who were afraid to go to their children's school because they didn't think they belonged, but who now look mayors and senators and superintendents in the eye and talk to them about their interests and needs, and their community's needs. Some of these leaders have been cultivated by me and by other union organizers. Some of them have come through Austin Interfaith's leadership training. Seeing people grow into strong leaders makes me realize that, although our society is built on the notion of egalitarianism, we don't get social equity unless we teach people how to organize and exercise power. Building power through organizing makes the ideal of egalitarianism a reality.

In our local union, we are instituting a culture among our staff and our leaders to have deliberate conversations with others, to figure out who they are and what makes them angry and what they care about. This is the heart of effective organizing. There is power in knowing other people's stories. It opens up an understanding of what people's needs are, what their interests are, and what's motivating them. A strong organization doesn't just get people to sign up for a march; it knows what brought them to the march, why they chose to march instead of spending time with their family or going fishing. All people are motivated by strong experiences that have shaped them. The union's ability to tap into that, to build relationships and get people to know each other, sets us apart from other kinds of institutions and is our key to building leaders and power. In turn, our success at cultivating new leaders and building power will be directly proportional to our success at achieving our goals as a union. □



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